

AN INTERVIEW WITH NALINI DE LANEROLLE ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Nalini de Lanerolle is the author of *A Reign of Ten Kings : Sri Lanka-the World-500 B. C.-1200 A. D.*

She was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on July 13, 1935.

Her father Lawrence de Silva was a land surveyor.

Until she was about twelve years old, Nalini de Lanerolle was educated at Buddhist and Christian schools--Girls High School, Kandy ; Southlands, Galle ; Holy Family Convent, Kurunegala ; Buddhist Ladies College, Mt Lavinia ; and Christ Church Girls School, Baddegama. In 1946, she entered Visakha Vidyalaya, Colombo.

In 1959 she graduated from the University of Peradeniya, where she majored in sociology.

In 1960 she married and is the mother of a girl and two boys. Her husband Asoka de Lanerolle is Chairman of Sri Lanka's Export Development Board.

From 1960 to 1972 she was a librarian in the Ministry of Planning.

From 1973 to 1975 she was an Instructor in English at the University of Colombo.

ROBINSON: Is it common for the Ceylon Tourist Board to publish history books like *A Reign of Ten Kings*?

de LANEROLLE: The Tourist Board does occasionally publish books in addition to promotional brochures. But my book was written out of interest, not with the Tourist Board in mind, and was not intended to be promotional.

Once the Tourist Board came to know of the manuscript, perhaps it appealed to them because of the coverage I give in the book to our ancient cities.

I must congratulate the Government Press for its good effort at printing *A Reign of Ten Kings*. Most of Sri Lanka's publishers are not in a position to bring out such profusely illustrated editions--except at prohibitive costs.

ROBINSON: What kind of reception has *Ten Kings* had?

de LANEROLLE: I thought the book would appeal only to a limited group interested in history. But it seems to have caught the imagination of a cross-section

of the public, here and abroad. It is selling quite well. *Ten Kings* may have to go in for a reprint soon.

A few articles, almost excerpts from chapters, were published in the Ceylon *Daily News* by Manik de Silva, its editor, and this, I think, interested readers, and probably accounts for sales. The book also had good reviews in the local press.

ROBINSON: Now, let me ask you a question I've asked other women writers in Sri Lanka : Isn't it difficult to be married and raising children and to do research and writing ?

de LANEROLLE: My husband Asoka has been interested in most of my thinking regarding history, so he has always urged me to write. I tried out the idea of parallels in history on him and my friend Lakshmi de Silva, and they felt it was a different way of writing a history of Sri Lanka.

In fact, when I was engaged in writing this book, my family did not know of it ! My husband was in Bangladesh. It was only when I completed it that I asked my family for assistance regarding the photographs, typing, line drawings--and criticism. My twenty year old daughter Manisha was always interested in history and did some line drawings. My son Kanishka--he's twenty-three--took some beautiful photographs of the Kelaniya temple murals that are in the book. And my other son Dhanusha, who's eighteen, checked all the dates in history appearing in the book. Asoka, my husband, was a very good critic !

I wrote whenever I had time, in between family chores, but didn't mind that very much as it didn't clash with family activities too much. In fact, I didn't want to cut myself off from my family. I liked going to the movies with Asoka and the children, eating out, traveling.

ROBINSON: Speaking of family, were your own parents very influential in your choice of career ?

de LANEROLLE: Not directly. When I was young, we were constantly on the move because of my father's work as a government surveyor, but we did not have setbacks to our school careers. My father always timed his surveying work to end with each school year. He used to take great pride in this !

ROBINSON: What was your father's family background ?

de LANEROLLE: My father's mother was a Catholic, I think, and his father was a Buddhist. We never met our grand-parents ; they died before we were born. Anyway, my father's early education was at St. Aloysius College, Galle, which was a Catholic school, and at Mahinda College, which was

a Buddhist school.

I remember my father always wanted me to be involved with books. He also thought I would end up a journalist !

During the war we lived in quiet country towns like Kurunegala, and I remember as a child listening to him telling stories of the Greek gods and pointing out the constellations to make those stories more vivid. We watched Orion striding across the night sky.

My mother, who came from a Buddhist family, also in Galle, used to read to us in Sinhala from the canonical work *The Milindapanha*, Questions of Menander. In later years I discovered that Milinda was an Indo-Greek ruler, a contemporary of our King Dutugemunu, about 150 B. C. Parallels are always interesting. I think I was a history addict. It began with stories of all those kings, King Arthur included !

Our family also traveled to ancient places here like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. And my father, being a surveyor for thirty years, had seen all those tanks and reservoirs built by our ancient kings. He talked to us about them and other remote areas he had visited in his days in the North Central Province.

My father did land surveys with the first survey teams who went to Gal Oya and other places in the North Central, Eastern and Southern Provinces. Also the Hill Country. The survey teams used to camp out in the jungles. All these were “tales” when we were young as his most strenuous travels were before he married and had a family.

ROBINSON: Would you like to say a little more about your mother ?

de LANEROLLE: As a girl my mother lived in an old ancestral house called Thistle Court, which had once been the residence of a British judge who lived in Galle at one time. It was filled with aunts, cousins and relatives who lived a genteel life of leisure and numerous family activities, such as giving alms to temples and having family gatherings reminiscent of English country life in colonial times.

I cannot remember all the details, but as children we loved the atmosphere in the old world Dutch town, Galle, and having sea baths, and just reading all those stacks of story books they seemed to have in that house.

I also had an aunt who lived in an old Dutch house in the old Fort in Galle who used to encourage me to read.

As far as schooling was concerned, our schools in our early years were mixed-Christian and Buddhist schools. My parents didn't mind as

long as we received what they thought was an “all round education”.

We were taught in English--in those days Sinhala was taught almost as a second language.

ROBINSON: Do you remember what you were reading ?

de LANEROLLE: I used to read anything on history, both European and Sri Lankan history, and historical novels. A couple come to my mind : *A Pageant of World History* by S. A. Pakeman and Dennis Clark's *Golden Island*, a story of King Dutugemunu. Then all those stories from British history. And even stories from the Bible. I also remember reading from *The Life of the Buddha* by Paul Carus, and stories from Sri Lanka's history by Marie Museus Higgins. She was the founder of Museus College in Colombo. Her stories from Sri Lankan history were first published in 1909. She awakened an interest in national themes and values among the women of that generation who were familiar with western dress and culture in their homes.

These writers like Dennis Clark and Marie Higgins kept alive the “Golden Threads”--quote our President J. R. Jayawardena--of our history for the English-educated young people in colonial Sri Lanka.

As children we also waded through all the detective stories. We devoured Agatha Christie. Movie magazines. *Life* magazine. And all those school girl stories. Later we began reading science fiction. Dickens, Thackeray, Austen, the Brontes, as well. I think everyone goes through these phases. I must have read the *Pickwick Papers* over and over again. So many times. Dickens had so much humor in that book especially.

Recently I enjoyed Richard de Soyza's readings from Dickens very much. At the British Council. The British Council here has programs, lectures, readings. Shakespeare and modern writers. Richard de Soyza's readings from Rudyard Kipling evoked a lot of enthusiasm too.

ROBINSON: What were you reading in Sinhala in your early school days ?

de LANEROLLE: I wasn't reading very much in Sinhala except the literature texts we had to study in school. But I liked reading W. A. Silva's *Vijaya Ba Kollaya* and Martin Wickramasinghe's *Rohini*, for example.

ROBINSON: What are your own children reading these days ?

de LANEROLLE: I'm glad to say my children appreciate reading in spite of competition from TV and sports. I'm glad to have been around to see my children get involved in all the works I enjoyed reading. Besides, they like Arthur C. Clarke's books. Asimov. Sagan. Astronomy and science fiction have held our imagination in a big way, what with Clarke and

Dr. Cyril Ponnampere being here, and gazing at Halley's Comet, or even seeing a globular cluster in Centaurus.

ROBINSON: Have you ever met Arthur C. Clarke?

de LANEROLLE: Yes, I've met him several times. As Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa, Engineering, he seems to be activating a lot of interest in science.

ROBINSON: To go back, how did you like university life at Peradeniya?

de LANEROLLE: As you know from speaking with Shelagh Goonawardene, the actress, Peradeniya was an exciting place in the 1950s. Students were interested in English as well as Sinhala drama. Shelagh; Lakshmi de Silva, who has done a lot of translation from Sinhala into English; Karen Breckenridge, the actor who died in a car accident; Ernest Mac Intyre, the playwright--he now lives in Australia; Bandula Jayawardene, the drama critic and now Chairman of the Sinhala Drama Panel of the Arts Council; Dayananda Gunawardene, the playwright--recently he produced *Madura Javanika*, scenes from history, in song and dance.

That was also the time when Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra staged *Maname* for the first time. In the open air theatre on the campus. That was the beginning of an era of Sarachchandra's plays. Incidentally, Asoka and I were present at the very first performance of *Maname*.

I enjoyed my university days. And not only because of meeting my husband Asoka there! Peradeniya meant much more to me than just a degree in sociology. Although I must say that lecturers like S. J. Tambiah in Sociology, I. D. S. Weerawardena in Political Theory and Economics, Gananath Obeyesekere in Anthropology, and D. L. Jayasuriya in Sociology made any topic come alive in their discussion with students.

In a way, so many activities cut us off from reality. All those plays and dramas--*Oedipus*, *Everyman*, *The Seagull*. Traveling to Kandy, seeing the *perahera* at night. Looking out from Swami Rock at Trincomalee. Listening to Schubert's "Serenade" sung by Marian Anderson in the university gym. Just talking to other students. Cooking in our rooms. Life was great!

ROBINSON: Would you briefly describe the *perahera*?

de LANEROLLE: It's a procession of Kandyan dancers, drummers, elephants, all elaborately dressed, all weaving their way through the streets of Kandy in a glittering torchlit pageant.

Its origins go back to the days of Anuradhapura when King Gajabahu is said to have commemorated a triumph over South India by

having such a procession. Later, in Kandy, the Sacred Tooth Relic took an honored position in the festival. It was carried on the back of a huge tusker elephant. The gods of the four principal temples in Kandy are also honored in the *perahera*.

ROBINSON: And what is Swami Rock ?

deLANEROLLE: It's a sheer cliff. It's also called Lover's Leap. One legend says that when her lover's ship set sail a forsaken Dutch woman hurled herself into the sea below. There are several natural hot springs in that vicinity that are attractive to many local visitors and tourists.

ROBINSON: You surprised me by saying Marian Anderson performed at the University of Peradeniya.

deLANEROLLE: Kandy is a big city. Foreign troupes and entertainers always performed there. Good British theatre companies. Russian ballet. Chinese opera. In the campus itself we had a few performers coming in. We also had distinguished academic visitors like Arnold Toynbee and Joseph Needham.

ROBINSON: To come back to you, as a historian you have been lucky to be able to travel so much after marriage.

deLANEROLLE: Yes. It was always my husband's work that took us abroad. But we took time off together to see all those places we were familiar with in history and legend. In Egypt, the Pyramids, the Sphinx. In Greece, the Acropolis, Delphi. In Rome, the Coliseum. Britain with its Arthurian heritage. Places like Stonehenge and Winchester.

As I suggested before, I have always been a "fan" of King Arthur and Roman Britain. Recently I had great pleasure in talking to a group of undergrads at the University of Colombo all about King Arthur. Camelot and its magic have rubbed off on some young people here in this day and age !

In India we traveled to Saranath, near Benares, where Buddha is said to have delivered his first sermon. We saw Mogul India at Agra and Delhi ; we saw ancient Buddhist sites at Srinagar and Kashmir.

My husband had to live in Bangladesh for five years. The children and I visited him during the summer vacations. Together we visited other old Buddhist sites in Comilla and Mainamati.

We lived for a while in Somalia, where my husband was stationed for two years. Somalia was the land of frankincense to the ancient Egyptians. Women still sell frankincense in the market places of Somalia even today.

In 1972 my husband Asoka was nominated as the Eisenhower Exchange Fellow from Sri Lanka, and he did a course at Harvard Business School. We both lived in the United States for seven months. We traveled together to those fantastic regions, the great canyon lands, the redwood forests, the mountains in Colorado. In remote desert areas we saw the cliff dwellings at Mesaverde, the homes of people who had lived in them and abandoned them during the 12th century. At that time, here in Sri Lanka, Polonnaruwa was resplendent as the island's capital.

ROBINSON: Would you mind giving us some information about your husband's career?

de LANEROLLE: I'd like to. Asoka had his high school education at Royal College, Colombo. As I said before, he graduated from the University of Peradeniya with an Honors degree in Economics. He then became an Assistant Lecturer in Economics. Then he joined the Sri Lankan Foreign Service as a diplomat. Next he was Marketing Manager at Lever Brothers Ceylon Ltd. Then he took up an assignment with the United Nations International Trade Center in Geneva and worked in Somalia and Bangladesh and Nigeria.

Right now he's the Chairman of the Export Development Board of Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Thank you. Now, to get back to aspects of culture in Sri Lanka, what are the central myths in the history of Sri Lanka?

de LANEROLLE: Our most important legends and myths in our early folk consciousness are linked to visits of the Buddha to several sites in the island and to the coming of Vijaya, the founding father of the Sinhala race, so to speak, around the end of the 5th century B. C. These legends are the central themes of the *Mahavamsa*, written about the 6th century A. D.

The most important later historical themes are the coming here of Mahinda, a Theravada Buddhist monk who was the son of the Indian emperor Asoka, and his introduction of Buddhism here around 250 B. C. And the story of King Dutugemunu. He unified the country after a long period of Chola occupation and civil strife. And the building of great irrigation systems by kings such as Mahasena, who was later deified by the agricultural peasants. Incidentally, my father named my younger brother after King Mahasena, which was unusual in those days. Somehow unique! Part of a search for our roots. And in the *Chulavamsa*, which continues the *Mahavamsa*, the story of Parakrama Bahu I, who brought the petty kingdoms together and unified them under one monar-

chy. He built the great sea of Porakrama in Polonnaruwa. He is said to have stated : "Let not a single drop of rain that falls on the island flow into the ocean without first serving humanity."

I have to say this about the *Mahavamsa*. Just as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are important to India's cultural origins, we Sri Lankans have always looked upon the *Mahavamsa* as important to our historical origins. Rhys Davids says that the *Mahavamsa* is in fact important as a historical source not only to Sri Lankans but also to the peoples of the whole of South East Asia.

ROBINSON: As a historian, how do you interpret the legend of Vijaya, who is the offspring of a princess and a lion?

de LANEROLLE: The story of Vijaya may be a legend, but I think he personifies the migratory movement of the people taking place during those early centuries around the Indian Ocean regions. As I mention in *Ten Kings*, this was parallel to what was taking place in the Mediterranean region too, where Greek colonists established their rule over earlier civilizations.

Anyway, there are a few intriguing facts to reinforce the Vijaya legend. In Ajanta, Cave XVII illustrates the story of a prince named Simhala who is consecrated as king of this island kingdom once its demon inhabitants are overthrown. The paintings at Ajanta are linked to the Valahassa Jataka.

ROBINSON: Weren't those so-called demons native peoples conquered by Vijaya and his men?

de LANEROLLE: Yes. The inhabitants of the island in those early days may have been tribal groups who worshipped demons.

ROBINSON: You have referred to the Sinhala race. When you say Sri Lankan do you include the Tamil people?

de LANEROLLE: The difference lies mainly in language. Sinhala is derived from Sanskrit and its more demotic forms from Prakrits. Tamil has borrowed a lot of words from Sanskrit but is basically a Dravidian language and its principles and origins are not related to Sanskrit.

I have always thought of the Tamils as being Sri Lankans, as well as the Muslims and Burghers, too. It is not right or fair of any community to say that the country should be divided into linguistic areas. This kind of thinking is encouraged by South Indian politicians who seem intent on looking on the Tamils here as separate from the rest of the island's communities and a part of the South Indian scheme of

things.

ROBINSON: Would you explain this a little more ?

de LANEROLLE: *The Illustrated Weekly of India, India Today*, and other magazines have published several articles in which actual proof of Indian influence in Sri Lankan affairs was highlighted. Tamil terrorist leaders were interviewed by Indian journalists on Indian soil. That's why I think India's holier than thou attitude about world terrorism is unbelievable. They have allowed terrorists to operate from Indian bases. And I think, finally, this is India's way of controlling its Indian Ocean neighbors--using the Tamil terrorists here as a tool to break down a small country.

You know, this kind of situation is not new to Sri Lanka. For over 2000 years raiders from South India have been invading our shores. Whenever the local rulers were weak, the Cholas and other South Indian groups made inroads and tried to make this island an extension of their Empire, as as during the revival of Saivite Hinduism in South India from the 7th century on.

ROBINSON: Some Western journalist has referred to the *Mahavamsa* mentality prevalent among Sinhalese. Any comments ?

de LANEROLLE: I don't see why we Sri Lankans have to feel apologetic about the *Mahavamsa* or our history and legends to please Western journalists influenced by South Indian propaganda. Right now I can think of Colombo-based Western reporters who seem to be oblivious to the travails of Tamils in labor camps in Tamil Nadu where "contract" labor is carried on in almost slave labor conditions. This was highlighted in a recent issue of *Illustrated Weekly of India*.

As for the *Mahavamsa*, the Indians feel proud about the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the British about King Arthur and their later *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the French about Charlemagne and the *Song of Roland*, and the Greeks about Homer's epic poems, and the Iraqis about the epic of Gilgamesh.

The *Mahavamsa* had its beginnings during the reign of King Dhatusena in the middle of the 5th century A. D. when the Buddhist monks who wrote it felt they had to exhort the future kings of this island to emulate the great kings of Anuradhapura who took adequate measures to supply irrigation and kept the people from hunger. Some established hospitals and other services for the monasteries and the people. Some were great builders of temples, which have lasted as monuments till now.

Even later scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy have not diminished the importance of our kings such as Dutugemunu, who remains the *Mahavamsa's* greatest king. Coomaraswamy said: "King Dutugemunu's spirit lived on and manifested itself continually in the religious and architectural activity of successive kings to the very beginning of the 19th century."

ROBINSON: Manel Ratnatunga ends her *Folk Tales of Sri Lanka* with the story of "Saliya and Asokamala". Saliya, King Dutugemunu's son, fails to get his father's acceptance of his marriage to a Rodiya outcaste woman. Is this a folk tale recommending social justice, the breakdown of the caste system upheld by King Dutugemunu?

de LANEROLLE: Folktales like "Saliya and Asokamala" would have been derived from the Buddhist ideals of the unimportance of caste--when a girl born low in society could aspire to marry the son of a king. "Saliya and Asokamala" may have referred to an historical occurrence. The Buddhist priests who recorded the tale of Asokamala mention her piety and kindness.

ROBINSON: Does this folk tale take away from the king?

de LANEROLLE: No, the tale doesn't take away from the king as Dutugemunu appears to have treated his daughter-in-law with kindness.

ROBINSON: Manel Ratnatunga's final comment is that Prince Saliya's romantic attempt is considered only a beautiful folk tale by the people of Sri Lanka who remain bound in a caste system even in the 20th century.

de LANEROLLE: I don't agree with this point. In these days caste barriers are not so strong. There is intermarriage, and a man does not lose his caste by association with a woman of lower caste. The child's caste is determined by the father's. This is in the South. The caste system in the North is more rigid.

Anyway, I always have been against the idea of geographic division according to language or race. It only creates some problems, especially for a small island like Sri Lanka. It is primitive to think on these lines when people are talking of "one earth". I think more people should read Arthur C. Clarke and Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov, and look at ourselves from the distance of space!

When we were in the university we had Tamil friends as well as friends from all other communities and religions, and we never felt we were superior to them or that they were superior to us due to their proximity to fifty million Tamils in South India. In fact, we just lived

together without thinking of ethnic divisions.

ROBINSON: Do you still have Tamil friends ?

de LANEROLLE: Of course, we do, and also a few relatives married to Tamils, as practically everyone here does have. At every level there are undisturbed bonds of personal friendship between Sinhalese and Tamils. These bonds are being eroded by those who demand political separation.

ROBINSON: What about religious differences ?

de LANEROLLE: Even now, Hindu beliefs are a part of our folk culture. But to Buddhists, the Buddha's teachings, which moved away from ritual, animal sacrifice and rigid divisions in caste, take precedence over Hindu gods and beliefs, while respecting them in many other way.

Buddhists and Sinhalese have always visited the holy Hindu temple at Kataragama in the South which is equally venerated by the Tamil Hindus, the Sinhala Buddhists--and the Muslims, who believe Kataragama is a famous saint. Similarly, with the sacred foot print on Adam's Peak that to the Buddhists is the footprint of the Buddha, to the Hindus the footprint of a god, to the Muslims the footprint of Adam. They all meet and worship quite amicably in these shrines.

ROBINSON: But among the Buddhist Revival leaders weren't some of them, like the Anagarika Dharmapala, racists? Didn't he use expressions like "infidels of degraded race" to refer to Tamils and other non-Sinhalese ?

de LANEROLLE: I am not familiar with such statements by the Anagarika. The Buddhist Revival leaders were certainly not racists. They were anti-colonial, as were all the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders at that time. The Sinhalese and Tamil leaders united against colonialism. My father always emphasized the Anagarika's anti-colonial stand. The Anagarika revived an interest in Buddhist culture which was lost and forgotten even in India, the land of its origin. I have been to Saranath, where he died in 1933, where he is still honored, and Sri Lanka is well thought of by the people in that area even now.

ROBINSON: How do you feel about the present ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka ?

de LANEROLLE: This is not an ethnic situation. It is simply a terrorist problem now being exploited by South Indian politicians and some Tamil political figures living abroad. The ordinary Tamil citizen who lives among the Sinhalese is against all this chaos and disruption of their lives, in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

The Western media have been made use of by Tamil expatriate groups living abroad who seldom see the reality of the situation. Right

now so many Tamils are living and working in our midst without any harrassment. It is only in the terrorist-dominated regions that there are problems.

ROBINSON: Are there no internal reasons for the current crisis?

de LANEROLLE: Young people in both Sinhalese Southern areas and the Northern Tamil regions have been anxious about jobs. The older generation among both Tamils and Sinhalese had access to government jobs, for example. Proportionally, it was the Tamils who had more white-collar job opportunities then due to their English education. This may have changed with the emphasis on Sinhala education later on, in 1956, and the Tamil youth felt that their economic avenues were blocked. This factor was exploited by Tamil politicians who encouraged violence to gain their ends.

Terrorism, though, whether it is in the South or North, is not a way to achieve your goals. Economic pressures are felt by both Sinhalese and Tamil young people. Population pressures have reduced opportunities. This is a feature in most developing countries.

ROBINSON: You say Tamils are living and working here without any harassment. What about the events of July 1983?

de LANEROLLE: The events of July '83 were unfortunate. Most Sinhalese were shocked and horrified by them. Later events showed that the terrorists try to provoke similar Sinhalese backlash by killing innocent villagers even in places sacred to the Sinhalese like Anuradhapura.

July '83 was not typical of the Sinhalese people and was carried out deliberately by a particular group. Later massacres by the terrorists have not unleashed similar violence or a backlash, and Tamils live among Sinhalese in many parts of the island. There were many instances of help and support extended to the victims at that time and after by Sinhalese.

ROBINSON: Do the terrorists in the North and East get no backing from local Tamils? Do the terrorists dominate the local people?

de LANEROLLE: The sad thing is that the terrorists dominate the life of the ordinary people who live in Jaffna, say. Recently a school principal was shot dead in the East for participating in a welcoming program for a Tamil Cabinet Minister. Many other Tamils have been killed by Tamil terrorists merely for their friendship towards Sinhalese. There are many instances of these terrorist groups forcing ordinary Tamils to give them money.

It is rather a complicated situation in the North. There are two sorts of terrorists. One is "acceptable" to the upper caste groups while the others are not. There are so many social distinctions involved which are not given much publicity by the so-called freedom fighters. A Tamil woman told me that she had faced this problem when looking after refugees in a camp, due to the class and caste distinctions among individuals. This is why I cannot think of how these people could survive in a terrorist-dominated environment.