
PETER KLOOS

Valli Kanapathipillai

One year has passed since the death of Professor Peter Kloos on 8 August 2000. For those of us who knew him well, it is still unbelievable that he is no more. The passing away of such a lively, intelligent person, makes me think of our own lives, and the purpose and point of it. We meet and come together at a moment in our lives and then we are separated forever. Such is life.

Prof. Peter Kloos, or Peter as he preferred to be called, was well known among the academic circles in the Netherlands and in Sri Lanka. He was a renowned anthropologist, and at the time of his death headed the Department of Social Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He was a prolific writer, and had an extensive list of publications to his credit. His research and interest in people of different cultures first drew him to the Amerindians in South-America, then to Sri Lanka. For over 20 years Peter, together with his wife, Prof. Joke Schrijvers, a well-known anthropologist specializing in gender issues, in their different areas of interest and specialization, researched and contributed towards academic studies on Sri Lanka.

In the late 1970s 'Peter,' and 'Joke,' together with Joke's young children, lived and worked in a remote village in the North Central Province in Sri Lanka. From conversations I had with Peter, it was clear that as a family they completely immersed themselves into village life. A life which would have been so different from what they had in their own country, the Netherlands. In this typical Dry Zone Sri Lankan village, the children attended the village school, they ate rice and 'hot' curries, and had their daily baths in the tank together with the other village people. Twenty years later Peter spoke with happiness about the children's fluency in the Sinhala language, and the trust and bond that they as a family had built with the people. The Netherlands was his country of birth, but for Peter, Sri Lanka was his adopted home.

Peter's interest in Sri Lanka was not limited to his own research and writing, but he was ever encouraging of others who wished to do the same. He was particularly interested in fostering academic research and writing on Sri Lanka, and it was in this capacity that I first got to know him, in 1993. I recall how, during my discussions with him, the depth of his knowledge on Sri Lanka never ceased to

amaze me, whether it was on politics, economics or social issues, both historical and contemporary. In order to encourage rigorous academic work on Sri Lanka, Peter set up a Sri Lanka Studies Group based in Amsterdam, which brought together students and academics from different disciplines and countries researching on issues relevant to Sri Lanka. This group continued to function for many years successfully, regularly holding seminars, and fostering and publishing research on Sri Lanka, as Peter intended. Peter also initiated the *Series Sri Lanka Studies in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* published by the VU University Press in Amsterdam, of which he was editor-in-charge.

Peter Kloos began his research interest in Sri Lanka by studying the problems of rural development in the Dry Zone. But in the last ten years of his life he shifted his interest to the civil war that has engulfed our country. In 1993 the couple again moved to Sri Lanka, this time with their two children who had been born in the early 80s. For this new research they lived as a middle-class family in Colombo, where the children attended school. While Peter concentrated on the collapse of democracy in Sri Lanka, his wife Joke carried out her research among the internally displaced people, who are one of the unfortunate consequences of civil strife. As a couple Peter and Joke each had their separate research interests, but they were connected in the concern and love they shared for Sri Lanka, the land and its people. They expressed their concern at the violence that has engulfed the country through a large selection of articles, books and publications.

In the last year of his life Peter himself suffered the violence of cancer, which finally took him away. I had the privilege of speaking to him that last month, and saying my farewell, which was a poignant moment in my life.

The years 1999 and 2000 were two unfortunate years for Sri Lanka. In 1999 we lost Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, and in 2000 we lost Prof. Peter Kloos. One a Sri Lankan and the other Dutch. Together they shared their concern for a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, towards which they contributed in their own individual capacity. We are poorer by their deaths. ■