

# THE BOOK OF THE LAGOONS

By Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton  
Harrison

The Book of the Seven Lagoons was made in an edition of 31 copies. It is a suite of 45 hand-painted, archivally processed photographic images, divided into seven chapters or Lagoons, with a cover panel and an introductory panel, inserted into a handmade specially constructed Book that serves to hold and display the images that are not hung on the wall.

This Begins  
The Book of the  
Seven Lagoons

Who are you?  
And  
Why are you my companion?

for us it was a moment  
we didn't know it had begun until  
we were already in the middle  
Then we looked forward  
and knew how it should end  
but we didn't know how to get there  
You could as well say  
that knowing the ending  
we worked backward to what we must  
have been to begin it  
as forward to what we must become  
to end it

I said  
what would happen if I told  
the story just as it occurred  
You said  
how could you  
ever permit me recreate the past  
it is different  
I said  
then let us reinvent ourselves  
You said  
we are always doing that anyway  
I said  
let's do it publicly  
You said  
from one point or view or another  
everything is visible and public  
I said  
let us experiment with a moment  
You said  
A moment may have no existence whatsoever  
I said  
A moment may have no boundaries and  
may be expanded indefinitely  
You said  
A moment is like an atom and can be exploded  
I said  
Then let us choose a radioactive moment  
with a ten year half-life



Where are you  
in a space of my own devising  
Who are you  
a being of my own invention  
Why are you my company  
you came to live in this space  
of my own devising

Why are you my companion  
You have entered the space  
of my dreaming  
Who are you  
A being of my own creating  
where were you before  
in the space of my own dreaming  
if I am in your space  
it is no longer a space  
of your own dreaming  
I am in your space  
it can no longer be  
a space of your own  
devising

an experiment a bargain  
a transaction a port  
to discover if we are  
each other's invention

But how would you know  
as I know  
by listening to a conversation  
of another's devising  
and comparing our own understandings  
while enacting our own behaviors  
while recording each other's  
behaving

Choose any conversation  
be aware he saw a barely  
creature a crab

# The First Lagoon

THE LAGOON AT UPOUVELI



he said  
he knew a hardy creature  
a crab and supposed it  
could live under museum  
conditions

he said  
it would need warm waters  
to grow in equatorial light  
cycles and some hiding  
places further it could live  
out of water for up to five  
days yes it tasted good  
to him and was a favorite  
food among his people

he said  
it mated in small places  
and hid in the mud in  
and among the mangrove  
roots in the lagoon at  
low tides and mangroves  
it was the last to die  
when the tidal ponds  
dried up after crawling  
over land to find better  
water or burrowing in mud

he said  
he had seen this crab in  
dirty water and clean  
water in the shallows  
and much deeper in 65°  
water and 75° water and  
in almost fresh water  
and it had a strange  
relationship to the mangrove  
roots which he did not  
understand

he said  
it was a scavenger  
eating almost anything  
often its own kind and  
gave up and grew limbs  
rapidly it was easy enough  
to catch if you look  
but could bite off a finger  
if you did not

he said  
fetch us some crabs and bottom  
mud mangrove seeds and  
whatever  
I thought I could grow a crab  
I can even make a lagoon  
to grow it in  
I will be a lagoonmaker



he said  
he was from  
Sri Lanka  
where the  
lagoons are  
among the  
world and  
about the  
see them  
the estuaries  
are among the  
world and if  
lagoons you  
should go there  
and see them  
the richest in  
the world

he said  
the lagoons and the ocean are being  
fished out by foreign fishing  
fleets who send some fish to the  
world market and sell the rest  
back to the people in cans

he said  
the coconut provides most of the neces-  
sities of life yet to get western money  
they are exporting coconuts

he said  
the fishermen can no longer afford to set the  
nets that they catch because the tourist ho-  
tels pay so much for them

he said  
the 2,000 year old water systems of tanks and  
irrigation ditches is degenerating from lack of care  
and being abandoned and replaced by modern  
dams and reservoirs

he said  
that for almost 2,000 years Sri Lanka has  
practiced one of the purest forms of Buddhism  
but this is symbolized by the old flag

he said  
that Sri Lanka has always been the rich-  
est nation in southeast Asia but moderniza-  
tion is impoverishing the people while  
ruining land and water and destroying  
the rainforests

finally he said  
why I don't you go to Sri Lanka and  
see what is happening for yourself

and I thought  
I will go to Sri Lanka and visit the  
tanks and the temples and listen to  
what people say  
I will behave as a princess



From the National Heritage Trust

I thought of him as speaker for the flag  
He said  
Once I was a wealthy playboy and sportsman and I traveled  
the world in search of pleasure. One night in the Copacabana  
night club in the city of New York I was struck by a vision of the old  
flag of my country. It was a revelation. It pushed a tent of Buddhist  
teachings from that moment on my life took a different turn and I  
have spent it explaining the meaning of the flag to teachers, priests  
and villagers alike that we may live according to its principles.

He said  
We Sinhalese are the people of the lion. Our old flag represents us.  
Every part, every line, has a meaning. Look at the color of the  
flag. It is red and yellow. Yellow is symbolic of wisdom and it  
derives its symbolism from the color of the Buddha's robe. The Buddha  
when he had obtained enlightenment wrapped himself in the cloth  
that had covered the bodies of the dead. The bodies in those days  
may have been bathed in saffron which was used as a disinfectant.  
He saffron dye stained the cloth the Buddha wore and it became  
yellow. The yellow cloth became identified with the Buddha and  
with his wisdom which encompasses both life and death.  
So yellow became the color of wisdom while red became the color of  
life, red for our blood, our energy, our hate, our passion, our love,  
our revolutions, our desires.

He said  
The red ground within the yellow border represents man's in-  
stincts contained within the frame of wisdom. The four yellow  
banners for the tree under which the Buddha sat as he ob-  
tained enlightenment represent the four symbols of enlighten-  
ment: respect for life, compassionate action, altruistic love, and  
the gravity of that sublime state of mind as you contain within  
your the discipline of wisdom.

He said  
The lion represents society and the sword is the instrument  
of protection of society.

He said  
The sword has three sections: the first, the hilt or handle stands  
for the basis of society; the second, the handguard stands for the  
guidance of society; the third, the blade stands for the protection  
of society.

He said  
Look at the hilt, the basis of society, the three points on the

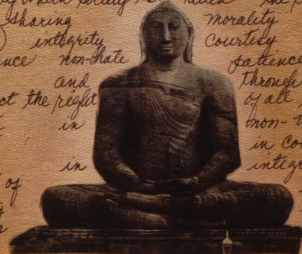


bottom stand for the law of dependent origin: birth,  
life and death. The four petals extending from the hilt  
represent the fact that every living thing has a form  
and a name. The four petals for land, water, fire  
and death represent man's birthright: just as he  
being living has a form and a name, so he has the right  
to land, to water, to birth and to death, and no one  
may deprive man of these.

He said  
The handguard represents the guidance of society, the avoidance  
of extremes, either of ownership or of profit, based on the  
knowledge of trusteeship.

He said  
All that you own is your body, all that you own is your  
knowledge and experience.

He said  
This is the basis of the ten royal codes of conduct, the in-  
strument by which society is ruled. The code for the  
rulers: integrity, morality, recognition  
(of talents), non-violence, non-hate, courtesy, restraint,  
non-revenge, and non-jealousy. Through non-jealousy  
we protect the rights of all to exist in  
non-hate, in non-violence, in  
restraint, in integrity, in recog-  
nition (of talents), in  
morality, in sharing the burden  
of existence.  
This is the sovereignty for any society of human beings.  
I have had my rebellions. Conquering them is my life.



And I said  
In my world we find reason to manipulate both  
birth and death and do not hold anyone's  
right to land or to water as sacred. Instead we  
value life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

And you said  
Nor do we value non-revenge, but rather the  
right to exact it through the instrumentality  
of the law.



From the government offices at Nawala

As in any bureaucracy it took time to find out how to get the information I wanted but after a time of searching I met people who would speak freely

One water department official said the tanks can be found all over the country many of them have been neglected and are in disrepair. The largest is 10 miles long by about 4 miles wide they were built on the principle of upstream storage and were spaced to the contours of existing depressions in the land. He was saying that his department was repairing this system and attempting to replace it with modern dams and reservoirs

My guide said

The tanks are natural catchment basins really just depressions in the land walled off at one end. The water makes earth may be 90 feet thick at the base and up to 60 feet high with sluice gates to let out the water as needed. It took the cooperative effort of most of the population to keep them in repair. But the materials were free and the growing of rice depended on the water.

An historical legend says

In the 5th Century A.D. when King Datusena was overthrown by his son Kassapa the son demanded that he be given the king all of the royal treasure. The king took his son to the treasury and it was empty. So then took his son to the great tank outside the capital the tank at Anuradhapura and waded into it and killed his hands with water. Turning to his son the king said "This is my wealth my treasure and the wealth and treasure of us all. The son disbelieving had his father killed.

Another official said

In the 1st Century A.D. King Vashaba built eleven large tanks but many others had existed for hundreds of years before that. No one knows just when the first tanks were built or who engineered them and our old libraries are gone burnt down during the colonial conquest.

A friend said

Everybody has such respect for "foreign experts" here they will even bring them in to solve our new water system. No one really looks to see the long term solution and the other problems that these experts using western technology had produced in their own countries and the ways they have made of their own water systems.



He said follow the river and the rains which had



to the great tanks in the highlands and



then through channels and canals with



locks and bumps to successively



smaller tanks and finally to the paddies



from the houses of friends

An advisor to the president said we don't have enough money to fund all the basic research that we need.

Another advisor to the president said

I suppose we will have to acquire nuclear technology to keep up but I don't know how we can fund it.

An American pediatrician said

The medical schools in Kandy used to be first rate but something has gone wrong and you can't trust the training of recent graduates.

A leftist said

Tourists bring alot of money into the country but most of it is spent in the internationally owned hotels and shops and goes right out again.

A friend said

This is the only real city in Sri Lanka although the resort hotels start to behave like small ones. It's as if new towns are being built all over to support a tourist industry.

Another friend said

When the French German and Dutch tourists started coming on chartered tours busload after busload would bring coins at the quiet children to watch them scramble for money. Now our children have become conditioned to beg from foreigners.

I noticed

a well dressed grandfather clutch as he said I'm sorry when his three or four year old grand-son ran towards me with outstretched hands.

A friend said

When the tourist hotels serve fish or crab no one else can get any.

Another friend said

Tourism is saving our country. We need it.

Another journalist said

Tourism is ruining the country. We need to discourage it.

An old Buddhist monk told me

I am afraid the next big war will be a jihad between the Muslims and the rest of the world.

A senior advisor to the President asked

How much tourism is really good for the country and what can we do about it now anyway.



From the hotel in Colombo

It was hot. Although the street scenes were exotic the hotel was airconditioned, international in style as well as in name. The beds were narrow wooden cots low to the floor and there was no television set. Otherwise, once inside the hotel, there was little to inform me that I was halfway around the world. I began to sort my impressions and list what people had told me.

A merchant said  
This is not India

You won't see many starving people



A taxi driver, passing a cart pulled by two white bullocks. In his forty year old Morris Minor said

There wasn't any smog here forty years ago - at twenty or when ten. But today you can see the haze settle over the city.

A stranger remarked during a downpour  
Don't worry about the monsoon rains. No matter how wet you get. Minutes after they stop you'll be dry.

A wealthy friend said  
I still use fanning fans rather than air conditioning. New isn't always better.



A young student said  
The words called Sri Lanka Serendib's main-  
ing fortuitous encounter and that's where the word Serendipity comes from.

A second student added  
Also the word Lanka means replenished land.



His mother said  
Men lead their lives here and women lead theirs. The lives are very different.

A diplomat added  
Unlike your western countries young lovers do not display affection in public.

A traditional dancer said  
There is no European dancing here except in clubs for foreigners. People who dance that way here are considered unmodest.

An actor said  
Our stories center around family conflicts or even  
troubles with demons. A triangle might involve  
husband, wife and mother.

I noticed  
The fruits and vegetables were wonderful and varied and always fresh. But the heat of the food was so hot as the weather. Ten hard coconuts. The hot excess of fried fish & chillies - eaten with fingers - 10 hot chillies to 1 little fish.



And I saw that outside of the city life in Sri Lanka was all about animals.



and oxen and wagons and



carts and all about heads pushing and pulling and beating



and weaving and digging and not much about machines.



From the temple on the rock and the village nearby

Always I felt out of scale. The people appeared to be either very tiny or very tall and slender. Water buffalo and oxen seemed shoulder high. Elephants not much larger. Dogs never came above my calves.

A friend said  
This temple is built upon a rock to pave arable land for farming and for grazing.



Our guide added  
The villages, the tanks and the temples were once a mutually supportive coherent system with all the people working part of the year to maintain the tanks and all thereby entitled to a share of the water and a share of the output of the land. In those days no one went hungry.

Another friend continued  
Even though our population has doubled in these last years we've had twice this many people before in our history and there was always enough food.

A doctor chimed in  
It isn't that there's a shortage of food even now, particularly in the country where so much fruit grows wild. But there is a shortage of protein since fish has become so expensive and the villages no longer grow enough rice.

Our guide said  
There is a trust that is working to reestablish the village system and it has three thousand or more villages and temples that have returned to our traditional ways using the tanks and wallows that served so well in the past.

The people of the trust say  
A step back into our past is a thousand steps into the future.

And I wondered  
How far back. No one ever mentions the aboriginal peoples who were here before the conquest and still exist in the jungle in small numbers.

A friend of the trust informed us  
Once every village used its lowest ground as a wallow for its water buffalo, who supplied protein in the form of milk, as well as labor for tending and plowing. They reproduced at no cost and wandered freely eating off the land. Their urine and dung in turn would fertilize the fields when not collected for fuel. The wallow itself provided a spawning home for several species of edible fish and worms eating snakes and lizards.



The doctor added  
When the tractors were imported the wallows were left to dry up and the fish died. This would be followed by an outbreak of malaria. To pursue the fish in the wallows not only supplied hundreds of pounds of protein yearly, they also feasted on mosquito larvae.



He said  
If you want to know about the crab go north to the lagoon at Reguabo and



ask the fishermen there some may trade and some just  
show the shallows. After that go to the east coast to the  
lagoon at Sineo mela and speak to the fishermen there above



all He said go to the lagoon at Uawweli go to the first  
bridge north of Uawweli and look for the fishermen  
who remain there Ask down from the bridge over



the flat place you will see pockets of mangrove large  
and small and even some pools drying up



So if you can find the old fishermen there he know  
how they are done



The fisherman although puzzled answered  
questions as best he could after finding  
but we didn't want to buy crabs

Yes he said  
He had caught crabs and prawns here  
all his life and the nets hanging from the  
bridge were his He didn't need a boat  
since the deepest water were only waist high  
there were fewer crabs than there used to be  
but he got more money for them and  
what else could he do?

So said  
he caught the bigger ones in the middle  
of the lagoon those in the shallows  
were smaller and often disappeared  
into the mud

He said  
he had occasionally seen them nesting  
after the monsoon most often  
the rocks under the bridge or hidden  
amongst the mangrove knots

He said  
why would you ask such a question?

And yes  
the the biggest crab he had ever caught  
was about five pounds and somewhat fatter  
fish was the best last and the lagoons  
dried up each year before the monsoon  
came again but he continued to  
catch some in the small ponds that  
remained

And yes  
the best time to catch them was early  
morning or late in the afternoon since  
they hid most of the day and he had  
found them in ponds as small as  
four by five paces or even less

So I thought  
I can make a tampa four paces by  
five paces and waist high  
I can make a light cycle and  
time it to equatorial light  
and keep it at equatorial temperatures  
I can make a bottom filter that  
changes the water as the tides

and I thought  
how will a crab know it's not a  
lagoon

