



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2019

Kieran Shafritz de Zoysa

Junior Runner-up

Age 11

Sri Lanka

My Cultural Connections

TEACHER'S NOTE: Tragically, Kieran was killed in the suicide bomb that exploded in the Cinnamon Grand hotel, Colombo, on Easter Sunday. He only finished typing this up the night before and, because he was so proud of it - having obtained the top mark in his class - his mum was very keen that we submit this posthumously on his behalf.

The tropical sun burns bright. On my way to school, red and black buses full of office workers, tuk-tuks of all colors, Porsches, Land Rovers, and BMWs crowd the roads. There are few road rules. I pass a speeding blur of white colonial buildings, ancient banyan trees, old elegant homes behind high walls, short ladies pushing trash carts, small kadeys selling cream crackers and sodas, and road-side hawkers offering freshly plucked red rambutans, golden yellow mangoes, young orange coconuts. Steel and glass office towers stand high over small houses. Cranes rise above expensive new apartment buildings. Occasionally I see a Buddhist monk in orange robes. Lonely, stray dogs roam the streets and sidewalks scavenging for food, near tourists who turn bright lobster red taking selfies in front of thousand-year-old temples.

My cultural connections are why I am here in Colombo, Sri Lanka. My mother and I moved here to help my Ammama (grandma) move back home after nearly fifty years in the U.S. This move was great for her, because her connection to Sri Lanka is strong. She loves the weather that is perfect for a slow walk, the fruit and vegetables that she grew up with, and the friendly people who don't mind when she starts up a conversation with any passing stranger asking, "Do I know you?" She is rarely certain whether she is in Colombo or Washington D.C., who she is with, or sometimes even who she is. Dementia has faded her memories so that they run together like watercolors, an impressionist painting of houses, gardens, people she has known for over eighty years, and sometimes the people closest to her, like me and my mother.

My move to Colombo has helped deepen my connections to my family's culture. I am learning how to read, write, and - thanks to my grandmother's maid - speak a little bit of Sinhala, the language of the majority of the population here. I also play a little bit of cricket, the national sport, which is similar to baseball (though I am terrible at both!). I am getting to know many of my distant aunts, uncles, and cousins, many of whom I have not met before. I may forget their names, but not their kindness. I like that strangers call me "putha" ("son" in Sinhala) before telling me to tie my shoelaces. It makes me feel like the entire community has my back.

I feel like I belong in Sri Lanka. I now have a dark brown tan and my mother says that she cannot pick me out of a crowd of my friends walking out of school, laughing and messing each other's hair. I have made a lot of friends who are kind, smart, hardworking, and funny after just one year here. It feels like I have been here much longer. No one can tell just by looking at me that I was born ten thousand miles away, that I spent the first 10 years of my life in the U.S., or that I am biracial.

Racially, my cultural connections are diverse. I am one-quarter Sinhalese, one-quarter Tamil, three-eighths Russian, and one-eighth German. My family is Buddhist, Christian, Quaker, and Jewish. We celebrate peraharas and poya days, Christmas, and Hanukkah. My ancestors include great uncles knighted by the King of England, high court justices, and Russian farmers. These were all different people from different places and different cultures who understood the same values of curiosity, adventure, education, and hard work.

I am what they call in Sri Lanka a real “achcharu”, or pickle, made up of many different ingredients and spices. I am connected to many cultures, a result of an exotic brew of many civilisations. I am stronger because I belong to them all. But, right now in Colombo, I am #sosrilankan.