

Press Release

Sri Lanka Unexplained (Are you myth-informed?)

'Beware of the moon and stick to the roads' says American Werewolf in London but this could as easily be applied to Sri Lanka on the night of the full moon, when *poya pujas* take place in temples up and down the coastline and on the strike of midnight, devil dancers come out to exorcise the local demons.

Contrary to the picture postcard brochures, Sri Lanka has always had a dark side and has been "the preferred haunt of aliens, extra-terrestrials, gods, devas, angels, sky-dwellers, demons, deities whichever way you describe them...from time immemorial", but how much of it is just mumbo jumbo? Sri Serendipity Publishers sent a psychic, scientist and archeologist on a year-long journey covering festivals and mysterious events around the world's most beautiful and inexplicable island to find out if the devil does not only dance in Sri Lanka at midnight, but also lives here. Could this in fact be hell, the entrance to Dante's Inferno? The earliest book Juliet Coombe read was *Lord of the Flies* and was compelled to go travelling as a result of reading Alex Garland's *The Beach*, not to find utopia (as she is a bit cynical about this) but to discover paradise lost.

Many people in the West have no real idea where Sri Lanka is or that it is even a 2,000 year-old island and that it has living cyborgs. Having been cut off from tourism because of its recently ended 26-year civil war and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, it lurks in the shadow of India, teeming with myths and legends, some of them borrowed from their big brother, like the story of Hanuman flying from the Himalayas with a handful of medical herbs which he dropped on a hill near Unawatuna, and others going back over 2,000 years depicted in ancient cave paintings in the north.

Juliet Coombe is married to a Sri Lankan, and knows only too well some of the island's superstitions. She is still rather concerned that he got her to marry him by slipping some love potion (à la *Midsummer Night's Dream*) into her tea. Fingernail clippings and stray hairs must be burnt, lest some witch get hold of them and cast a spell upon their owner. But in a world where scientists can identify you from a single drop of blood and babies are created in test tubes, does this seem like a completely ridiculous idea? A crow flying through a house is considered a bad omen, a sign that an inhabitant of the house will have to leave it soon. Another far-fetched notion perhaps, but it can be seen as a manifestation of the scientific fact that crows can carry disease and if a crow flies through the house and leaves bacteria or viruses behind, someone might well fall ill and be banished from the house.

In ancient times, Sri Lanka was thought of as a "topsy-turvy wonderland." Stories passed down through generations tell of hidden gateways through which yogis and siddhas, including Lord Buddha himself, were able to travel vast distances, even to other worlds. This concept of seemingly magical portals still fascinates the West, for example in television shows such as Primeval, Doctor Who and

Stargate SG1. As scientists begin to explore the possibility of parallel universes, you must wonder whether they are a few thousand years behind the Sri Lankans and if it is true then that King Solomon who people believe came to Galle (then known as Tashish) left the key to time locked in the fort and the person that finds it will have the power to move through time. Perhaps that is why Juliet spends so much time vanishing down alleyways, into tiny doors drinking tea with everyone she meets, despite her husband warning her not to. He says that a cup of tea is an ideal place to put a spell and he is probably wondering if someone will try to bewitch his wife.

All the major religions of the world are practised in Sri Lanka, all with their own legends attached. In this melting pot, Hindu gods have been incorporated into Sri Lankan Buddhism; Vishnu is believed to be one of the four deities who guard the Buddha-sasana of the island. Today these gods can even be seen in buses all over the island, their posters stuck up where in Europe there would be a no-smoking sign or an instruction not to speak to the driver. (Remember the fuss, and atheist counter-attack, when religious messages were put on buses in London?) This, combined with the island's strong oral storytelling tradition, is a good anthropological explanation for the multitude of spirits and deities said to inhabit Sri Lanka, and also a good explanation for why the apparently fanciful tales which swarm around the island should not be written off as mumbo jumbo, unless you wish to completely deny the collective wisdom of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in one fell swoop. In which case that is one sure way to find the devil.

The Yakun Natima, or 'Devil Dance', is almost exactly what someone might come up with when asked for a stereotypical 'black magic ritual'. People crowd around in a circle. Drums throb loudly and cobra torches flood the area with the potent smell of burning resin. A man in a mask backs into sight and begins an energetic, almost violent, dance with live flames. A dark figure is slumped in a corner with charcoal smeared across this face. However, this is no black magic, but an ancient healing ritual, performed by a medicine man. Although he is aiming to remove a devil from the patient, rather than bacteria, some sound science can be found behind this psycho-therapeutic ritual – its 2,000 years of successful healing for the mentally ill was proved in the tsunami when they were more successful than the Western medical teams dealing trauma. Perhaps the smell of the blazing cobra torches acts as a sort of smelling salt and stirs the patient. Perhaps the drums and shouts and dancing stimulate an adrenaline rush which improves the patient's condition for a while increasing their metabolism rate. And of course, there is the placebo effect. Sometimes when a Western patient is given sugar pills with no medicinal value, so great is their belief in the curative powers of Western medicine that their condition improves. Surely the same is true of those in the East. The patient slumped in the corner has grown up believing in this kind of ritual, and as it is performed may actually feel the devil leaving his body and believe he or she is cured. Whether the devil actually exists or not is a moot point. Even if the myths and legends are untrue, intelligent religious leaders and medicine men have harnessed them for true purposes.

The *sanni* ceremony is another healing ritual using theatrical masks. It can be likened to Greek theatre in its use of masks and dialogue. The Greeks themselves

linked theatre with religion, performing their plays at festivals dedicated to the gods. They also believed it was every citizen's duty to go to the theatre, for its educational and emotional benefits, particularly the catharsis which is a vital element of tragedy. A story is told that a man in England had a truly explosive row with his father and eventually decided to murder him. He stormed out of the house and, on his way down the street, heard voices through an open door. He went in, and discovered a performance of Shakespeare's great tragedy *Macbeth*. He stood at the back and watched the play, and when it was finished, his desire to murder his father had completely disappeared. Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* tells the true story of how British convicts deported to Australia in the 19th century were rehabilitated by their involvement in a performance of *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar. The Sri Lankans, too, may have discovered the healing powers of the theatre and how plays can be used to tell tales with a moral.

Sri Lanka is a country that has been beset by troubles – invaded by Indians, Portuguese, Dutch and British over the years, and more recently hit by the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami and worn down by the civil war with the LTTE (Tamil Tigers), which lasted from 1983 to 2009. There is a sense in which a people who have suffered so much are more in tune with their surroundings and supernatural occurrences than those who have had an easier, more peaceful history, keeping their magic under their hats helped them keep their power against the colonisers.

This is perhaps why so many myths abound here, and why the local people are so superstitious – like those who faint when they see a black dog, said to be the vehicle for the famous demon Mahasona. Whether the 'pearl of the Indian ocean' really is a magical isle, or whether its people are just supernaturally superstitious, its myths and legends undeniably hold great power, and that is what *Sri Lanka Unexplained* will explain. Perhaps.

This mysterious book will be available worldwide from Amazon.com, as well as in Barefoot Bookshops, and travel bookshops in London.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Quotations from www.lankalibrary.com

www.sriserendipity.com