

In Search of the Vanishing Sri Lankan Devil Dance II

Explorers Club Flag Number: 33

Field dates: January 4-16, 2008

Field location: Southwest quadrant of Sri Lanka

Purpose: To determine how the 2,500-year-old exorcist Devil Dance healing belief system, in serious decline in recent decades due to globalization, fared following the devastating tsunami of Boxing Day, 2007, which threatened to obliterate it.

Background:

On eight previous expeditions beginning in 1978 I studied this dramatic exorcist healing belief system, and as an ethnologist, collected, catalogued and placed major documented collections with the Smithsonian Institution, Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology (five assignments), Canada's Museum of Civilization, The Sankokan in Tenri Nara Japan and lesser collections in the Museum für Volkenkunde, Hamburg. A related Buddhist collection was also placed with the National Museum of Finland.

My article "In Search of the Vanishing Sri Lankan Devil Dance" appeared in the fall 2004 issue of *The Explorers Journal* and in the May-June issue of Canada's national *Outpost* magazine. Briefly: it outlined the steady—and in very recent years, the rapidly accelerating—decline of devil dancing from the time it encompassed the entire island over 2,000 years ago, to the situation in 2001 and 2002 (this investigation after a break of approximately fifteen years actually took two expeditions, which I folded together into the article) where it was largely reduced to a narrow band along the very southern coastline between Galle (the major city in the south) and Yala National Park. The numbers involved in the cult were a fraction of what they were twenty-five years earlier when I first came to Sri Lanka. I concluded the article by writing:

"However, six Devil Dances found in eight days of active searching indicates the devils are still alive and well in their traditional, Deep South haunt. They haven't been completely steam-rolled—just bulldozed into a corner where, in the coming decades, they will make their last stand."

Then the tsunami of December 26, 2004, struck—and slammed into this very coastline where this very fragile cult was hanging on by a thread. Many of its adherents were living directly along the coast—often within a half mile—and surely would have been hit.

It took over two anxious months to learn of the condition of my friends and contacts due to the breakdown in communications. It was finally Arthur Clarke, a friend from Colombo, who had his people at his Seafari Diving Shop in Hikkaduwa determine the well being of my mentor Ari (R. Ariyasiri) in that seaside town, my traditional HQ. Fortunately the wave had hit on a Sunday and Ari had been safely home several miles back in the jungle, though his tiny mask and antiquities shop was destroyed and its contents lost. I found a picture of it on Google Images, of a fishing "rowboat" leaning up against the front of his shop on Galle Road, the street heavily littered with debris, and the side, back

and roof completely gone. Finally reaching Ari, I was then able to learn that all my other friends and contacts had miraculously survived, though *yakkadura* (Devil Dance priest) and dancer Somasiri had his home damaged (it was originally reported as being completely destroyed), and my major *yakkadura* friend, Heenmalli (G.S. Dharmasena, Galle's most important Devil Dance figure) had suffered damage to his home in Galle, including the loss of his masks and costumes, when two feet of water flooded through. Susan Hattori, my companion, and I raised the modest sum of \$2600.00 which we dispersed (\$300 to Heenmalli, \$100 to Somasiri, and the remainder to Ari) to help them through this tragic and traumatic period.

I learned from Heenmalli (his daughter Ishanka speaks and, more importantly, writes rudimentary English) five months after the tsunami that he still had not performed a single Devil Dance to that date. My greatest fear was that the tidal wave had acted as the straw that broke the camel's back—killing not only many actively involved in operating the cult, but devastating financially its adherents to such a degree that they no longer could afford to make use of. Since it's largely the parental generation that still believes in it (as opposed to the young, being influenced by globalization), with that older generation taken out of action even temporarily, by the time it perhaps had the financial wherewithal to return to making use of the healing system, it would have shrunk considerably by natural attrition, thus weakening it more.

With impatience, I remained away three full years, believing this would be sufficient time for the belief system to stabilize—if there was a belief system left to do so. Thus the aptly named title of this expedition: “In Search of the Vanishing Sri Lankan Devil Dance II” The original unedited copy of “In Search of. . . I” appears at the end.

Summary field report:

My worst fears—that the belief system was finished—were exaggerated. . . but not by much.

All five *yakkaduras*, four drummers and nine dancers I interviewed reported that none had a single dance for the first year after the tsunami. Four of the *yakkaduras* reported the loss and/or destruction of their masks, costumes and ceremonial paraphernalia; the fifth was inland. This combination caused many to abandon the practice and to seek employment elsewhere; indeed, one famous *yakkadura* from Hikkaduwa, Peadasa, opened a tiny produce shop. Often our searches came up dry; several others had passed on due to age and natural causes; longevity isn't enjoyed to the same length there as in the West. They weren't being replaced.

Since that initial bleak year, Devil Dancing recovered somewhat for those who hung on and appears to have reached a plateau, albeit a very low one. Today *yakkaduras*, drummers and dancers unanimously and independently report 1-2 a month compared to 5-6 immediately previous to the tsunami. The number of *yakkaduras* around Matara especially have been drastically reduced (to no surprise: previously 5-6 were sharing only 12-15 dances monthly). One of the major problems in field research is gathering credible, accurate information: why these same *yakkaduras* report have had 5-6 dances per month previous to the disaster when it was closer to 2-3 is perhaps a reflection of recalling “the good old days” which weren't really all that good.) That I learned of only two dances while

in the field this season confirms that they, indeed, are way down, although I did find discarded ritual material at two sites, one fresh.

The minimum age of all the *yakkaduras* is in the mid-forties (most are into their fifties), and while two had (highly talented!) sons eager to carry on the “family business” it’s not going to prove economically viable. Most had grown sons who had already moved on to other fields, often to Colombo seeking employment. These existing *yakkaduras* have perhaps twenty years left of active service and few are being replaced.

Speeding the bulldozer that is obliterating Devil Dancing is, paradoxically, a mini-boom caused by international largesse due to the tsunami. Millions in infrastructure dollars have flooded into the coastal area from generous nations: for a brand new, state-of-the-art Galle Road running from Colombo all the way around to Yala National Park in the southeast (Japanese) and other transportation—bridges and particularly to repair the terribly damaged railway tracks and to replace engines and cars with modern rolling stock. Modern communications have been established. A huge modern sports facility including a cricket field has been erected on the central Galle plaza—the site of buses rolling in flooding water with men atop played over and over on international television at the time. Even playgrounds have been erected along Galle Road in towns along the coast. Towns all along the coast have a fresh, modern, upmarket look to them—as do the people.

International generosity reached down to the individual level: everyone who lost a home to the tsunami has been given a brand new house in track communities built well back of the coast (which still displays devastation, particularly in the ten kilometers between Hikkaduwa and Ambalangoda where the train was hit and over a thousand perished; that train, looking like a tin can kicked and stomped on by a giant, sits at a siding in Hikkaduwa). One track community of 160 homes put up by the mainland Chinese was *furnished down to television sets!* Here we visited *yakkadura* and dancer Somasiri, whose original simple home on the coast was damaged, and who was one of the beneficiaries of our modest aid, as well as that of the Chinese. He’s living in unimagined, to him, luxury, although his means of support are extremely thin due dances being way down.

This flood of money for housing came with an equally large flood of international AID workers, NGOs and international government representatives—all bringing their attractive foreign lifestyles with them. Whereas ten years ago, a sarong and sandals on men was standard issue, today it is rarely seen in Galle. In their place are blue jeans or slacks, shoes and baseball caps turned backwards (causing the newly fashion conscious to squint even more here in the tropics than their equally shortsighted mentors do in the West). The latest craze and status symbol in Asia—cell phones—are ubiquitous.

My mentor Ari, whose tiny Hikkaduwa shop dealing in masks was destroyed leaving him utterly destitute, received the largest share of money raised by ourselves. With additional financial help from three European friends he was able not only to rebuild his shop—and on two stories—but to brightly furnish his once dark, barren home. Heenmalli also faired well, besides from us; when we stayed with him, we roomed in a new second story wing of his house that even sported a computer. Always resourceful, he’s been able to survive by providing healing rituals at an individual level.

Indeed, such is the inflow of money that the tsunami has become known as the “Golden Water” and a saying I heard repeatedly (in hushed, embarrassed tones) was: “It made the rich, poor, and the poor, rich.” And that was my observation. It was immensely heartening, of course, from a personal point of view—seeing our former destitute friends

recovered so well and being so prosperous for the first time—*but* those televisions, cell phones and Western values are rapidly accelerating the demise of the cult.

The bulldozer is clanking dangerously close.

Jason Schoonover

Bangkok, January 22, 2008

Flag Photo: L-R: 90-year-old ex-dancer Martin Amarisingha, protector of the extremely rare, 170-piece, century-old Kolam mask collection in rural Mirissa; my Devil Dance mentor of thirty years Ari (R. Ariyasiri); and myself, Jason Schoonover FI'86.

The pre-edited article:

In Search of the Vanishing Sri Lankan Devil Dance II

The mask of night is on my face.

Romeo and Juliet III, ii, 5

A blood-curdling scream at 5:00 A.M. announced the climax to the all-night exorcism. The demon-possessed patient sprang to his bare feet, grasped the bound rooster and violently chewed through the hapless bird's neck. Thrusting the flapping body above his head, he drank the blood that spurted down over his face. He screamed again, collapsed into convulsions, then unconsciousness.

The demon had accepted the offering and had vacated the body. The patient would be cured.

The year was 1982 and was just one—albeit the most spell-binding—of innumerable Tovils, or Devil Dance exorcisms, I witnessed along Sri Lanka's indelibly beautiful south-west coast. I had been on assignment for the Smithsonian Institution and Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology collecting the cult's dramatic masks, costumes and ceremonial paraphernalia, as well as shooting photographs and taking sound recordings. Our common goal was to preserve and document their fascinating belief system before the steam-rolling twentieth—and now twenty-first—century flattened them.

Between 1978-1984 I had undertaken six expeditions to the Resplendent Isle. Now—twenty years later—I returned to revisit my demonic friends and see how they had fared. I feared the worst: that they had been crushed by the more powerful gods of globalization.

What is Devil Dancing? It's one of six interwoven folk traditions on the island, four of which incorporate masks. Sri Lanka possesses Asia's greatest mask culture—equaled in complexity, style and variety only by the “transformation” mask tradition of Meso-America.

Perahera, performed annually in Kandy and Colombo, is the centerpiece of Sinhalese culture. Previously this all-night parade featured over one hundred decorated

elephants and an equal number of Kandy dancers and some masked dancers; today, due to the two-decade old Civil War and the danger of Tamil suicide bombers, it has been drastically reduced to a handful of pachyderms and a contained, heavily guarded day side ritual.

Kandy dancing—classical dancing featuring synchronized troupes - is centered in the central highland city of Kandy. In choreography, costuming and drumming, it is an offspring of Devil Dancing.

Kandy dancers play a small role in the lowland folk art dramatization of Kolam. Several standardized skits representing recognizable village figures, mystical creatures and demons—all masked—are staged. Similar in nature to Christian morality plays, though often bawdy and satirical, they are performed purely for entertainment purposes. Today, performances are held annually in April in Ambalangoda, and are mostly staged for tourists.

Virtually all the masked Kolam vignettes are repeated in puppetry, also confined to the lowlands. Highland based Sokara was a masked theatrical performance with a classical love story. Unlike Kolam which hangs on by its fingertips, both puppetry and Sokara slipped over the edge into oblivion before the Civil War.

Devil Dancing is a healing ritual. To believers, chronic illnesses are the result of demon possession; the rest are caused by planetary deities or, in some cases, the gods, not always benevolent. The illnesses can be anything from hallucinations to smallpox to even excessive flatulence—each is represented by a particular agency. Diagnosis as to which is responsible is determined by a *yakkadura*, or demon priest, by studying the patient's horoscope.

Because gods are usually responsible for larger catastrophes, such as crop failures; and because the Bali ceremony to propitiate the planetary influences are extremely expensive, by far the most common ceremonies prescribed are those involving demons. A Devil Dance is recommended, and an auspicious date set.

Although millions of savage demons skulk the region, exorcisms focus on six major devils:

Maha-Kola-Sanni is an all-powerful demon who comes in eighteen apparitions, or sanni, each of which causes a specific malady; his dramatic two-foot-high mask features his demonic self with “wings,” each displaying nine small demonic faces. Each often provides clues as to the condition they inflict. Thus, one petite mask will have sightless eyes (Kona Sanni) while another has its mouth open and tongue out, depicting vomiting (Gulma Sanni).

Maha Sohon is the “Great Cemetery Demon” and waits in graveyards for fresh burials and the people who bury them. His form is that of a bear. With an army of 50,000 demons at his command, he inflicts a huge range of maladies. As portrayed by his human-size clay effigy at most Tovils, he is so huge he rips heads off elephants and eats them, though his favorite food is putrid human flesh washed down with blood.

Kalu Kumara—“The Black Prince”—along with his female form— Mohini Yakkhini—plagues one with sexual problems. The first causes infertility, menstrual and pregnancy related disorders, as well as erotic dreams among young women; the latter drives young men to nocturnal emissions, and married men to distraction.

Riri Yakka with his fanged monkey face is the “Blood Demon.” He digs up fresh graves to devour bodies or suck their blood and causes conditions associated with blood.

Suniyam Yakka is the fifth, paralyzing victims. Ahimana Yakka frightens people and causes mental problems.

You're likely more familiar with Sinhalese masks than you think. In Third Rock From The Sun, behind Mary's desk in the wall cabinet on the right, rests a small tourist mask with a flaring cobra hood above a red demon face; that's Naga Raksha, the Snake Demon. Above the fireplace on the left is a yellow Kolam mask of a man's face with a handlebar mustache; meet Muduli, a chief citizen noted for arrogance. Likewise, on the set of Ripley's Believe It Or Not, frequently appear large Sri Lankan masks. Unbeknownst to casts and crews, to display Tovil masks in rooms other than kitchens is to invite possession.

. . .

Demons also haunt empty buildings, lonely stretches of road and their junctions, wells, the seashore, jungles, open plains, fields and streams. Virtually the only refuge is in a Buddhist temple or at home—and the latter is not always safe. One is most likely to be possessed at four times of the day: twilight, dusk, noon and midnight. Eating meat, even an egg, is an invitation to allow an invisible, lurking demon to piggy-back that meal into your body.

During a typical Tovil, incense offerings sting nostrils while betel-chewing drummers beat frantic rhythms, whistles trill, cymbals ding, and jangles and bells worn by frenzied dancers rustle and ring. All are enticements to the demons to leave their dark, jungled haunts and step forth to enjoy the music, dancing and offerings. Complex methods are then employed by the *yakkadura* to identify, then cajole, command, trick and bribe the demon to leave the body of the possessed. The patient invariably falls into trances, swoons or convulsions, shrieks, runs amok and speaks gibberish. Tovils reach their climax after three a.m. when masked dancers - for whom the audience has patiently waited—make their electrifying appearances.

The massive entertainment function is not accidental. This is a culture historically bereft of television, movies, even radios. The entire village is present, the responsibility for providing refreshments resting on the thin wallets of the hosting family. Not infrequently, the audience—gripped by a particularly intense moment—will instantly be reduced to tears of laughter by a randy remark from a devil dancer—for demons are a foul-mouthed bunch.

The finale begins with a succession of Paliya, or benevolent demons, leaping into the Dancing Circle to 'cleanse' the area of evil influences. Flash powder explodes against torches, coconut water is sprinkled, a scarf is symbolically offered. Following on their bare heels is a succession of dancers masquerading as disease-causing apparitions of Maha-Kola-Sanni, each with its own personality and dance.

Eventually the devil dancer imitating the demon responsible for possessing the patient makes his appearance—and the demon within the patient recognizes himself on-stage and calls out, often in a shriek. The demon having been brought to the surface, the *yakkadura* seizes the opportunity to barter directly on the cost by which the devil will vacate the possessed patient. King coconut, flowers, rice, betel-nut, money, even ganja will be offered—but the demon, speaking through the patient, wants none of them. His preference—above all else—is a human sacrifice he can sink his fangs into.

Just before dawn the demon, beaten down by the superior powers called forth by the *yakkadura*, and pressured by the hour (demons—like vampires—are allowed by Buddha to work only the graveyard shift, disintegrating in the searing light of day)

relents, agrees to vacate, and accepts a compromise—a cock—though normally only a few drops of blood from the comb are spilled.

The patient is healed.

Does it work? “*Yakkaduras* perform genuinely therapeutic services. . . ,” observed Dr. Michael Ames, a Harvard-trained anthropologist. For cases which Westerners diagnose as psychosomatic, the cure rate is astonishing - and instantaneous. For more serious cases which involve chronic disease to the body, it appears, in most cases, to relieve the severity of the symptoms, if not the disease itself. But I no longer scoff at television evangelists laying on hands; the power of belief is something to behold.

The question I am most frequently asked is this: And they allow you to witness these ceremonies. . . ? As a foreign guest, I have always been treated with the greatest hospitality, given a chair front and center and served tea and cookies. (I never fail to bring a kilo of sugar or cookies as gifts.)

How old and large is the cult?

Every culture has struggled through a teething period when fear of demons prevailed “. . . in some form or other, yet we do not think there is any, in which it has developed itself in such gigantic proportions, or such hideous forms, as in this beautiful island.” Thus quilled—accurately—Dandris De Silva Gooneratne, a brilliant native observer in 1865 in his authoritative *On Demonology and Witchcraft in Ceylon*.

Indeed, one should not be surprised Sri Lanka is more crowded with them than anywhere else in the world. In the *Ramayana*, the ancient epic of Asia, did not the Demon King Ravana make his home here? Even the *Pali Mahavansu*—the *Ceylon Chronicles* begun in the sixth century BC—makes numerous references to *yakkas*. So entrenched were they 2,500 years ago when Buddha visited that the philosophy He left behind was able only to compromise the cult’s beliefs: the demons, although desiring human sacrifice above all else, were forced to settle for no more than a rooster. Scholars believe the demons established their present character between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries.

In 1681, Robert Knox, in his remarkable *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*, reported that demonic exorcisms were firmly entrenched in the central highlands. He should know. An astute observer, he wrote his best-selling book about the almost twenty years he was held in open custody by the tyrannical Kandyian King Raja Singa II. His hair-raising escape reads like an adventure in the *Papillon* mold.

Knox didn’t doubt demon existence: “This for certain I can affirm, That oftentimes the Devil doth cry with an audible Voice in the Night; ‘tis very shrill almost like the barking of a Dog.”

As late as 1865 Gooneratne, referring to *yakkaduras*, reported that “. . . there is scarcely a single village in the Island, which does not boast of at least one.”

Today, devils no longer howl in the highlands or in the dry, sparsely populated north. By the early twentieth century, they had descended to the crowded, rural lowlands of the south-west corner. During my studies twenty years ago, I determined they prowled in a crescent beginning south of Colombo, extending 150 kilometers around the golden-sand coast to Yala National Park’s wall of jungle on the island’s south-east corner. In depth, they reached the ramparts of the central highlands seventy kilometers inland—but their greatest concentration was along the coast, largely because fishermen, a superstitious lot everywhere, are solid believers.

Dr. Ames explains the reasons for the contraction: “. . .the frequency . . . has declined during the last century. Denounced as idolatrous superstition by Christian missionaries and Western rationalists who dominated the development of modern education in Sri Lanka, Tovil has faced increasingly stiff competition from ayurvedic, homeopathic, and allopathic medical systems; Buddhist reform movements; and the growing popularity of the Hindu god Kataragama.”

Add to this the powerful influence of tourism introducing Western ideas. Because this magnificent coast also hosts Serendib’s major tourist facilities (the war takes place on the opposite, northeast, side), it is here that Tovil also faces its greatest modern challenge. Add further the recent appearance of television aerials atop jungle huts. By the time I fell in love with Sri Lanka and its kind, hospitable people, the resort village of Hikkaduwa was the beginning of the core Tovil area. Sadly, this is no longer true.

It was there I looked up my dear old friend R. “Ari” Ariyasiri at his tiny Art 69 shop. A cherubic Buddha who radiates light and laughter, Ari is the country’s foremost mask dealer, one whose understanding of—and belief in—the subterranean world is implicit. Once armies of demonic masks glared down from his stucco walls. Now there are only several.

“It’s a good thing you collected when you did,” he said ruefully after ordering tea. “There are few old masks left. Most went individually as souvenirs, though there are a few private collectors. What’s left is very dear. Most shops now sell new masks. Some are made to look old—though they’ll say they’re fifty, sixty years old.

“Before, there were five devil dancers around Hikkaduwa; now there is only one. The rest died and their sons got different jobs. You will remember before, there were about twenty Devil Dances a month? Today, only two or three—if any. There’s not much money because of the problems in the north, but also people are seeing doctors.”

It was a mantra I heard chanted repetitively as we roamed south along Galle Road, paralleling the coconut tree lined coast from Colombo to Yala, in search of the retreating demons. Ari introduced me to his contacts still following the family business. Twenty years ago Galle, whose fortified city is a world heritage site, had seven Devil Dance troupes; now there are only two. Before, they danced everyday except for Poya, the monthly Full Moon holiday; today, there are only 10-12 exorcisms a month.

What Moscow is to ballet, Matara is to Devil Dancing. It was in somewhat better condition than Galle: five or six troupes are left of the nine in ’82, but with only twelve or fifteen Tovils a month for everyone, times are hard. Inland at the hilly gem capital of Ratnapura, there hadn’t been a dance in a dozen years.

Of the nine *yakkaduras*, fifteen drummers and nineteen devil dancers I interviewed, estimates of the number of dancers twenty years ago in Sri Lanka varied from 1000-1500. And today? 100-140. All unanimously agreed that in thirty years . . . or less . . . there would be no more. This, for a belief system reckoned to be 3,000 years old. . . .

Still, we were encouraged to witness several brilliant Devil Dances— a Mohinee for a wayward husband, a Kalu Kumara for a distraught, barren wife, a Ahimana Yakka for an eighty-eight year old woman whose symptoms were reoccurring and were an insatiable urge to dance (her twenty-fourth since she was a teenager of nineteen in 1931; if she had been born into a culture that didn’t disdain dancing among women, might she have followed her natural desires—and become a diva?).

Most encouraging was witnessing a huge Gara Madu to propitiate the gods at a fishing village. Like elsewhere in the world, fish stocks are depleting due to overfishing. Unlike elsewhere, local fishermen ascribe the crisis to the supernatural. The fishermen collectively chipped in 65,000 rupees, or \$930US, to hire ten dancers and eight drummers. That the average Devil Dance costs up to 25,000 rupees, or \$360, and features two drummers and three dancers—the huge cost of the Gara Madu gives one perspective on this Cecil B. DeMille production. And this in a country where our gentlemanly driver earned 7,000 rupees, or \$100, monthly to support his small family.

There were other happy stories. Like the Phoenix, its mythical Sinhalese counterpart the Gurulu is rising from the ashes. Indeed, Gurulu now spreads its wings on the 20-rupee note. Twenty years ago, Devil Dancing was considered a national embarrassment among urban gentry. Today—largely because of the fascination the cult holds for moneyed tourists—it is celebrated on postage stamps, postcards and tourism advertising.

Paradoxically, tourism is at once the cause of its imminent demise—and its reincarnation. Many devil dancers, finding their traditional callings evaporating, concentrate their considerable creative talents on another of their traditional occupations—mask making. Ambalangoda is the mask-making center, but innumerable shops along Galle Road do burgeoning business selling souvenir masks. It's a rare boutique which doesn't display brightly-colored—often fanciful—inexpensive masks with traditional glaring eyes and fanged teeth. It's also a rare five-star hotel which doesn't program Devil Dance demonstrations for tourists. T-shirts and batiks with Tovil themes are everywhere. Devil Dancing has become a tourist industry.

Also in Ambalangoda is the small but impressive Mask Museum. Down the coast at Koggala is found the Martin Wickramasingh Folk Museum with an excellent collection of 100-year-old masks. Colombo's National Museum displays a brilliant array of rare old masks.

Unfortunately there's no Devil Dance which can exorcise the demise of this most flamboyant of endangered species. However, six Devil Dances found in eight days of active searching indicates the devils are still alive and well in their traditional, Deep South haunt. They haven't been completely steam-rolled—just bulldozed into a corner where, in the coming decades, they will make their last stand.