

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

DEMON QUEEN

THE QUEST FOR KUVENI,
SRI LANKA'S FIRST QUEEN



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The Quest for Kuveni, Sri Lanka's First Queen

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Published By The Ceylon Press 2025

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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR
ROYA
PAGAN, PRINCESS

“The Duchess! The Duchess! Oh my
dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers!
She’ll get me executed, as sure as
ferrets are ferrets!”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

SHADOWS

The Search for Sri Lanka's Demon Queen is the subject of this guide, which unpicks with the very earliest stories and places associated with Sri Lanka's first steps as a nation; and with two particular people: Kuveni and Vijaya.

The pair were the pin-up lovers of their generation, the Bonnie and Clyde, Tristan and Isolde, Tarzan, and Jane of 543 BCE. Only theirs was a more unorthodox passion - more akin to Dido and Aeneas, with the queen immolating herself. Or Medea plunged into full scale murder after a disastrous encounter with Jason and the Golden Fleece.

Vijaya and Kuveni are the Sri Lankan lovers whose names are most unequally recalled on the island today.

Public roads, management consultants, radio celebrities, hospitals; even bags of branded cement: it is hard to find a corner of Sri Lanka that is not branded "Vijaya," in besotted memory of the country's founding king and paterfamilias, Prince Vijaya. Much harder, indeed impossible, is to find similarly smitten organisations or people who bear the name "Kuveni," Prince Vijaya's first wife.

Coming from a nation fond of boasting the modern world's first female head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960, this seems a monumental omission. But delve a little further and it becomes exactly clear why Kuveni, the lost queen of the isle of rubies, is the queen the country is too alarmed by to properly acknowledge.

For Kuveni was not simply a wife and weaver of cloth, a mother, lover, and queen - but also a demon, a metamorphoser, an outcast, an avenging fury, suicide, traitor, murderess, ghost, and mistress of deception.

A descendant of gods, she is also a goddess to the country's still living aboriginal peoples. For anyone, still less a queen, that's more than enough baggage to weigh down one's reputation.

But the baggage need not weigh down your journey for the locations on the island where you are likely to draw close to her are few and scattered. And if taking in important sites, monuments, and attractions at a rate of (say) half a dozen a day; or perhaps just one and half a day, is an important measure of how successful a holiday or tour goes, then it would be best to abandon the search for Kuvani immediately. For she is not, thankfully, made to measure for orthodox sightseeing. The obvious eludes her. Mercifully, she is no credible candidate for Instagram. She is more like a Slender Loris or Serendib Scops Owl, rare, almost nocturnal, secretive, whose sightings are best made for the journey, not the destination.

Yet, in following her wreathlike footsteps, which are still, from time to time, just about discernible in certain parts of the island, one puts together a travel schedule like no other; unique, eccentric, authentic. It will take you into the secret heart of the country itself, past, present, future; and give the muscles of your personal imagination an opportunity to demonstrate their value.

Much of what we know about Kuvani and her husband, Vijaya, comes from two of three incomparable, paternalistic and subjective ancient chronicles (Dipavaṃsa Mahavamsa, and Culavamsa) written from the third century CE onwards.

Laying a shadowy trail of events and people through what would otherwise be a historical vacuum, they riotously mix up man, God and magic with morality, history, and myth.

Historians naturally debate their factual accuracy, in which the doings of men and kings take a poor second place to that of monks and Lord Buddha, but this is to miss the point.

No country, after all, is simply the sum total of its facts. It is also – and much more importantly - fattened up, like old style Fois gras, on all that its people believe too. And that is why the sorrowful and violent tale of Prince Vijaya, and his demon queen, so shockingly illuminates an island that, as Romesh Gunesekera put it, “everyone loves at some level inside themselves. A very special island that travellers, from Sinbad to Marco Polo, dreamed about. A place where the contours of the land itself form a kind of sinewy poetry.”

“In Sri Lanka,” notes another writer, Michael Ondaatje, “a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts;” and, in the tale of Vijaya and Kuveni, the polar opposite of what is believed, is the more likely truth. Vijaya, whose alter ego may well have most recently emerged on The Dick Van Dyke Show, was doubtless ever one to say “That ain't no lady. That's my wife.” For monster though Kuveni seems to be, one hardly needs the helpful filter of modern feminism to realise that she was in fact an iconic victim of men; and most heartening of all, a victim who bit back with unrestrained fury.

Had a man behaved like her, it would have generated awe-stuck changing room chatter, eager to understand, sympathise with, even emulate. But not a woman. Kuveni was to confound and challenge all ancient ideas of womanhood; and go on challenging them to this day.

TWO

IN THE
BEGINNING

Keep this in mind as you set out to first encounter Vijaya, recreating a moment that happened well over two thousand five hundred years ago. The path, though gossamer thin, still sustains a few sites, frail as spider's web.

The first of these is some 180 kilometres from Colombo. A gentle curving cape juts out from a mountain range in the Wilpattu National Park and into the northern entrance to the Puttalam Lagoon. If you were a ship approaching it from the Laccadive Sea you would slide towards it as if it were a lighthouse pointing your tiny, tired vessel into the vast, safe, shallow waters of the lagoon. This is Kudiramalai, said to have been the original site of Tambapanni, the ancient kingdom and port founded by Prince Vijaya.

Given all that was to come, this unremarkable shore enjoys a myth of mocking irony. A warrior queen, Alli Rani, and her Amazonian army, were said to have lived here exploiting and exporting its pearls until a great flood buried her palace under the waves and turned the enclosed lake into a lagoon.

And this is what Prince Vijaya found, pulling his boats onto a beach of reddish-brown sand – "Tamba" meaning Copper; or as it was soon and later known: Tambapanni. It was the perfect spot for a settlement, commanding access to a great natural harbour opening into the Gulf of Mannar and an almost inexhaustible supply of pearl oysters.

For centuries it was a key strategic port for island arrivals, even later welcoming Annius Placamus, one of the Roman Emperor Claudius' tax collectors. Pliny refers to the place, naming it as the "Hipporus" harbour with a related town on a nearby hill - presumably Kudiramalai Mountain, patrolled, and still patrolled by white-bellied sea eagles.

“Horse Mountain,” is another alternative name for Kudiramalai and for centuries, amidst the ruins of an ancient temple, the ruins of a massive horse and man statue stood on the cliffs.

Made of brick, stone, and coral, it is estimated to have been at least 35 feet high, its front legs raised, its rider clinging to reins, bearing a lantern to guide ships into the port. Locals still point to some modest ruins, all that remains, they say of the horse and rider. And continually, raked by high waves and surf, broken bricks, pottery, and building materials, wash up on the shore, the priceless debris perhaps of the island’s first kingdom.

This, then, is all that remains of Sri Lanka’s earliest recorded kingdom, the modest, hard-fought-for settlement that became the nucleus of the Sinhala nation. It was also to become the kingdom forever denied to Kuveni.

Along with its neighbors – for all along the coast, encouraged by their leader, Vijiya’s lieutenants set up allied settlements - although all that remains are their names in the Chronicles: Upatissagama, Ujjeni, Uruvela, Vijita, towns or cities that once floated erratically on maps of the northeast of the island, ephemeral as clouds in a blue tropical sky.

History is of course written by the winners, and few could compete with Vijaya. But it is unlikely that he was the only migrant leader to arrive in Sri Lanka from India. It is much more probable that he was but one (albeit the most successful one) of a number of immigrants.

Colonising the island from the north and west, moving inland along the banks of the Malvata Oya, other

settlers undoubtedly arrived on the east coast and followed the Mahaweli River inland. Still others would have landed in the south, following other rivers inland to make settlements within Ruhana. The Vijayan progress would have forced the preexisting tribes - the Rakkhaka, Yakkha, Naga and Deva - to retreat inland – and accept a new and marginal status imposed on them by these migrants from the subcontinent, who brought with them a steely view on caste.

Hold those preexisting inhabitants in your head as you now picture this.

A girl, albeit a princess, sits trapped at in her modest palace, a pawn in her father's political armoury. She is, naturally, no ordinary princess.

Descending from King Ravana, the ten-headed evil demon king who fatally kidnapped the wife of the Supreme Being – her bloodline offers up a clue, if ever one was needed, to a family proclivity for prolific violence, chaos, and injustice.

But suddenly, she spots a way to escape the prison of her family in the sudden arrival of an Indian Prince.

Vijay, a shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls "evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds," was expelled by his appalled Indian father, thrust onto a ship with seven hundred dependent followers and ordered to stay away on pain of death.

An opportunist with a reputation that might today excite both Interpol and the Society for the Scientific Study of Psychopathy, Vijaya was a man in need of friends. Friends, land, food: in fact, at the time he arrived on Sri Lanka's shore, he was a man in need of pretty much everything.

And in Kuvani he found just about everything. Overcoming some immediate disagreements in which she almost eats him and imprisons his entire band of feckless followers, she performed a faultless volte-face, gives them food and clothing and, according to The Mahavamsa, beaming with broad indulgence, if Chronicles can be said to beam, "assumed the lovely form of a sixteen-year-old maiden."

THREE

HOMEMAKING

The palace where some of this may have happened is hard to reach. A small road, the B379, follows the coastline up the northern stretch of the Puttalam Lagoon, heading north from Kibulwala and a wildlife lookout called Malai Villu Viewpoint, before looping back into the forest to an ancient site known as Kuveni Maligawa.

Standing there amongst the jungle trees are ancient rough pillars and slabs of stone, some fallen, others long since buried, some still standing, albeit at audacious angles.

A little further off is an ancient tank called Kali, a basin of usually clear water. And this is what is said to be Kuveni's Palace, deep inside Wilpattu National Park. It is almost all folklore and hearsay of course; the hard-pressed Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka claims to have hundreds more urgent calls upon their time than excavating and validating this; but it remains all the same, the place to start if you are in serious search of Kuveni.

Better still to have come here, before she was ever quantified, proved, and served up in approved museum-fashion, then to come later, with all the others, long after historians have bestowed their frosty authentication, and moved on to their next doubtful quandary. For in this sense, Sri Lanka is still waiting to be discovered.

This therefore is less a tour of what is known, than a discovery of what might be.

Although marriage was what Vijaya and Kuveni agreed on, so too did they execute a plan to annihilate her Yakka tribe: her father, family, the whole rootin' tootin' shootin' shebang of her island heritage.

They married in a wave of blood. If this was a rather Lady MacBeth-like way to ensure freedom and foreclose on reprisals, it was no less monstrous of Vijaya who more than fulfilled his homicidal role in eliminating all nearby native chieftains.

But much good any of this did her. In using Vijaya, she had, in turn, been even more devastatingly used by him. Soon after inaugurating his new kingdom at Tambapanni, and bearing two children, Vijaya abandoned her, sending to India for a more respectable princess, one who was drawing-room perfect, and banishing his native wife to the wilderness.

Rejected by both husband and the people she came from and had betrayed and killed, Kuveni climbed or was forced to the top of a mountain and hurled down, cursing her disloyal husband as she died.

She held, recalled one chronicler, a tiger cub to her chest and cried "May the curse of the Tiger befall all those of Vijaya's race." Although tigers went extinct on the island much earlier (sometime around 16,000 BCE), whatever it was that she held to her chest sealed the deal. Her husband was to die without heirs. His successor, Panduvasudeva, was struck down by a (presumably related) disease, and his entire children made demented by bloodshed, civil war, and familicide.

Her children, a son named Jivahata, and a daughter named Disala, fled to Adam's Peak and tuned their attention to raising an immense and incestuously begotten line of offspring, destined to disappear into the enveloping jungle and merge with the Vedda descendants of the Sri Lanka's original 3 tribes, the Naga, Dewa and Yaksha. History was to show what an incidental irrelevance was their fathering by Vijaya.

In every way that really mattered, these two were their mother's children, as demonstrably fecund as their father was not; and it is self-evident how Kuvani effortlessly emerges as the silent avenging mother of the nation; a Gaia figure or Earth Mother, born of its original bloodline, impetus for new tribes who would inhabit what became the island's most sacred site: Adam's Peak. Small wonder then that Sri Lanka, in not knowing what to really make of the mother of the Nation, chooses to push her deep into one of its many locked closets.

FOUR

THE GODDESS

But Kuveni is not entirely forgotten. She has survived amongst the descendant Vedda, the last remaining aboriginals of the island, no mere ghost but the Maha Loku Kiriammelaththo.

"We may be forest haunters," said a Vedda leader recently, "but Kuveni our goddess."

And it is this immortality, together with her curse, and her challenging life, which haunts the country still.

"The curse," wrote an observer, "was not only on Vijaya but the descendants of Hela People (Singhala) as a whole." In memoir after memoir; in civil war stories or chilling recollections of JVP village massacres; wherever there is death and misery in Sri Lanka, it never takes the storyteller long to cast his tragic tale back to the curse of Kuveni.

"It has," remarked one mournful raconteur, "overflowed to each and every nook and corner of Sri Lanka and enwrapped her people over the centuries."

Bloodshed is one of the most remarkable features of the island's ruling caste; almost half its kings were murdered by the other half; whilst over one hundred leaders including both a president and a prime minister were to die violently since independence.

Yak Dessagala Mountain, a little north of Kurunegala, is one of two sites that claim to be the hapless place where Kuveni died – by suicide, by murder – the Chronicles cannot agree.

Indeed, for the detail of what follows, the historical record is entirely indebted to local folklore, and accounts written down many hundreds of years later.

The Queen, it is said, made for Thonigala, on the present-day main road from Puttalam to Kurunegala; and to a rock named Lathonigala, meaning "the rock of lamentation." Six hundred years later this rock would be marked by some of the earliest and largest rock inscriptions ever discovered in Sri Lanka. Dating back to the first century CE, and written in early Brahmi script, they describe land grants made to a nearby monastery in Parama Kanda.

But this was all still to come. For Kuveni, it was where she lamented her fate and rejection, before heading on for Gonagala, where it seems, many of her closer surviving relatives still lived.

On route, it is said she stopped at Ibbagala near Adagala just outside present day Kurunegala, where a later temple, the Vilbawa Rajamaha, marks (but is careful not to mention), her visit. Pausing in this place, she vented her fury at her husband, cursing not just him but everything around her. This included a goat, a tortoise, a beetle, and an elephant, all of which were turned into stone, shapes that discerning eyes can, it is said, make out.

Moving on towards Gonagala, her disorientated footsteps can still be followed for the district she was to head for next still exists - located off the main Galagedera – Mawathagama road. She left her two children at Bambawa, today a small village located north of here, off the main Dambulla - Kurunegala high road.

She then climbed to the top of Yakdessagala mountain, cursed her disloyal husband, and plunged to death. Or was chased there by relatives furious by her earlier attempts with Vijaya to annihilate them and forced off the rocks.

FIVE

TRACES OF
TRACES

All that is left, all these many centuries on, is a quest for lost Sepulchres.

Although the tropical climate is ruthlessly focused on ceaseless decluttering, the Sri Lankan countryside, its jungles, mountains, valleys; the dry scrub of the Wannu and the cloud forest of its mountains, nevertheless seems to hoard and from time to time liberate an inexhaustible treasury of lost and largely forgotten luminaries.

Astonishingly, it is better than a one-in-two bet that the tomb of Sri Lanka's first king, Vijaya, still exists.

It is said to be located on Medagama Hill in Paduwasnuwara, halfway between Kurunegala and Puttalam. Certainly, the unmistakable shape of a very ancient stupa can be made out.

And astonishingly too, ashes found in its heart during conservation work were tested by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and found to be at least 2,500 – 2,600 years old, placing them well within touching distance of the first king.

Across the entire island a lonesome scrap of haunting folklore offers a hint as to the final tomb of Queen Kuveni.

There is nothing to verify it except the curious behavior of the local people.

Visitors to the village are welcomed to its little temple, the Maligatenna Raja Maha Viharaya, but not permitted to walk to the top of the little hill above it, where the queen's crypt is said to lie. Permits have to be applied for; and these are only ever issued on Poya days; and most typically, not even then.

Over two thousand years later, perhaps inspired by his Ceylon-obsessed friend, John Bailley, the poet John Keats was to write *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a poem strikingly close to much of Queen Kuvēni's less happy moments:

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!'

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

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