

Cambodian feral woman's past shrouded in skepticism

JEWEL ANDERSON | STAFF WRITER

On Jan. 13, Cambodian loggers were shocked to find a naked, crouched and shaking woman in the jungle. She does not speak any recognizable language, and her identity remains a mystery.

Although DNA tests have yet to be done, village police officer Sal Lou has claimed the woman as his daughter, Rochom P'ngieng, who went missing 19 years ago at the age of eight. Lou recognized her, in part, due to a scar on her left wrist.

Last seen, P'ngieng was tending buffalo on the edge of the jungle in the remote northern Rattanakiri province.

Lou and his family have taken the woman in absolutely convinced that she is their long-lost child. Lou recognized the woman as his daughter because of a scar on her wrist that he says was caused by an accident with a knife when she was a child.

"I recognize her face," said Rochom Soy, the alleged mother, to The Guardian. "Now that she

is back home I sleep better and I have regained my appetite."

Daily, crowds of curious villagers and journalists flock around the alleged family's hut to observe the woman. However, without any objective proof of the woman's identity, many remain skeptical about who she is and what she has been through.

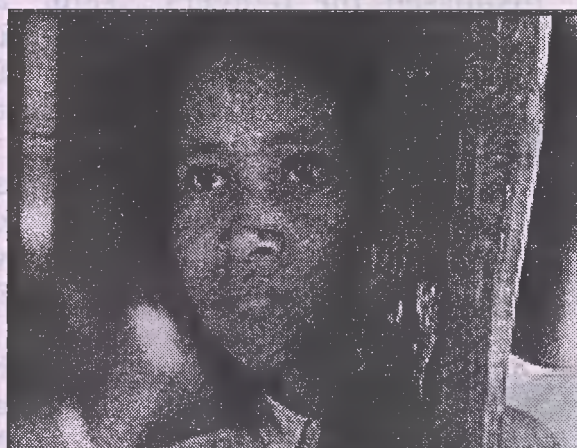
Some believe that she survived for 19 years alone in the jungle. Others believe that she suffers from some form of mental illness and simply became lost in the jungle much more recently. Some villagers think that she is an evil jungle spirit.

Kek Galabru, president of a non-governmental human rights group, said to The Washington Post, "We believe that this woman is the victim of some kind of torture, maybe sexual or physical."

The scar that Lou used to identify the woman is apparently tiny compared to deep scars circling her left wrist and ankle that may have been caused by being

bound.

First-year Mo Grumbly has her doubts about feral-child claims. Grumbly thinks that the most likely case is that the woman has



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THE GIRL FOUND IN THE FORESTS OF RATTANAKIRI PROVINCE IN CAMBODIA IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN LIVING IN THE WILD FOR 19 YEARS.

experienced severe abuse or torture.

"It sounds sketchy. How would an 8-year-old survive in the wilderness?" Grumbly said. "It's like 'The Jungle Book.'"

Although it seems unlikely that the woman disappeared as

a child and relived 'The Jungle Book' story, it is a possibility that this is a feral-child case.

Feral children are youth who grow up in isolation from human contact and who lack language and social skills. Such cases are very rare but do occur.

Supporting the feral-child claim are local police reports describing the woman as "half-animal and half-human." According to BBC News, when the woman's alleged father first saw her, she was naked and walking like a monkey. First-year Timothy Lindberg marveled at how tough a woman would have to be to survive alone in the wilderness for nearly two decades.

"If it really is her, that's amazing," said Lindberg.

There are others, like Karen Hayes, assistant professor of psychology, who are also skeptical about the woman's identity.

"We don't really know anything other than that this person appeared," Hayes said. "(However, if this is a feral-child case)

it would make sense that she would be probably presenting sounds that are like an infant. We know those kinds of sounds are universal."

The woman's alleged family hopes that with time the woman will be able to speak again and will return to school. Hayes said that with the appropriate interventions the woman might be able to regain her verbal skills and receive an education.

Despite the family's warmth towards their alleged daughter, Lou and Soy have told reporters that the woman has tried to escape, presumably to return to the jungle, and that they must guard her at night.

The woman's alleged father has agreed to have DNA tests done to prove that the woman is his daughter. Yet Lou has been reluctant for a test to be performed, according to The Guardian.

Since the woman cannot speak and is almost entirely non-communicative, her true story remains undiscovered.

Muslim educator suspended for refusing to remove veil

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Muslim teaching assistant Ms. Aishah Azmi, 23, was suspended for refusing to take off her veil in the classroom by the Headfield Church of England Junior School, in Dewsbury, U.K.

Some school officials believe that Azmi's black veil, which reveals only her eyes, is a communication barrier that alienates her from her students.

Azmi argues that she had agreed to remove the veil in the classroom, as long as it was not in front of her male colleagues.

Local government minister Mr. Phil Woolas said to Al-Jazeera: "(Azmi) should be sacked. She put herself in a position where she can't do her job."

Ms. Azmi's lawyer, Nick Whittingham, called for Woolas to withdraw his comments, since they might influence Azmi's employment tribunal.

Azmi told BBC that the veil has never before been a barrier between her and the children.

"The children are aware of my body language, my eye expressions, the way I'm saying things," Azmi said. "If people think it is a problem, what about blind children? They can't see anything but they have a brilliant education, so I don't think my wearing the veil affects the children at all."

"Ms. Azmi is very well able to carry out her role as a teaching assistant providing support to pupils who speak English as a second language," Whittingham said to a BBC reporter. "She has demonstrated in a number of interviews that she can communicate effectively while wearing the veil."

"My own position would be to

agree with (Azmi)," said Assistant Professor of religious studies and women's studies Jane Redmont. "I gather from the story that the students don't feel the veil is a barrier, and the primary concern in a school

a veil during her live job interview, which was conducted by both a female and a male.

Azmi justified her not wearing the veil in front of a male governor of the school to a BBC reporter.



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RESTRICTION MAY POINT TO POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

should be the total well being of the students."

Associate Professor of Education Studies David Hildreth highlighted the importance of considering the ages of the students Azmi taught as part of deciding whether the veil is a distraction.

"Children this age really want to try to be accepted, and if some students make a big deal about the veil then it might become a focal point for other students," said Hildreth.

Azmi did not volunteer to the school administration the fact that she wears a veil, and she did not wear

"Yes, there was a male, but (my veil was off) for only about five minutes, and there was a female in the room," said Azmi.

"I'm not sure whether the veil causes a barrier in communication," said Hildreth, "because you have to look at every situation in context and examine the culture of the school."

Azmi said, "I didn't realize that the veil would be perceived as a problem because this is a mainly Muslim school and the female parents wear it ... if I had known it would be a problem I would have said something."

"If the majority of the students

were familiar with (the veil) then it is very possible that the veil was not a distraction," said Hildreth.

Even though school officials insisted that Azmi's suspension was not motivated by anti-Islamic sentiments, Al-Jazeera reported that senior British politicians and the country's media have been accused of causing and encouraging anti-Islamic feelings towards the wearing of veils by Muslims in the United Kingdom.

"The body integrity and the religious and cultural integrity of the teacher are very important," said Redmont. "As long as the children's learning and level of comfort does not suffer, (Azmi) should be allowed to wear the veil."

Muslim Hussam Dakkak, a London college student, said in a telephone interview: "It is very disrespectful towards Islam for people to underestimate the meaning of the veil. Just because some Westerners do not identify with it, does not give them the right to discriminate against women who wear it."

"The U.K. is struggling with what it means to be a multi-faceted cultural and religious country," said Redmont. "You really have to look at the symbolic power of wearing a full veil because currently there is an issue with Islam and an issue with Arabic cultures in the West."

"One of the jobs of educators is to teach students to be open-minded and be accepting of other cultures," said Hildreth. "This could have been a situation for the school to teach the students about different cultures and that there are things that make us all unique and we should celebrate them."