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SPECIAL REPORT

Feb 27, 2005  
URBAN LEGENDS

## Have you heard the one where...

Urban legends, true or false, reveal our unspoken hopes, fears and concerns

By Sandra Leong

PSST! Did you hear the story about the taxi driver who picked up a mother and child along Upper Thomson Road, only to have them disappear from the back seat midway through the journey? Or the one where a leading fast food chain here accidentally served fried rat instead of fried chicken?

Well, it happened to a friend of a friend of a friend, and so it must be true.

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[Have you heard the one where...](#)

If you've made similar claims before, chances are that you've played a part in propagating an urban legend.

Name game

An urban what?

Marry him, Fann

Website Urban Legends And Folklore ([urbanlegends.about.com](http://urbanlegends.about.com)) defines urban legends as 'popular stories alleged to be true and transmitted from person to person via oral or written communication'.

They typically comprise 'outlandish, humiliating, humorous, terrifying, or supernatural events' that almost always happened to someone else. While most are fabricated tales, others preserve elements of truth that survive numerous retellings across different cultures.

All are, nonetheless, fascinating, and have been the subjects of campfire sittings, movies like Urban Legend (1998) and Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000), and websites like Urban Legends And Folklore and the Urban Legends Reference Pages ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)).

But apart from making good storytelling fodder, do urban legends serve a larger, sociological purpose?

Mr David Emery, a former journalist and founder of the Urban Legends And Folklore website, tells LifeStyle via e-mail that 'urban legends do tend to reveal a certain kind of truth when you think about them, namely our unspoken hopes, fears and concerns'.

'By studying the stories we tell, we come to know ourselves a little better,' he says.

NewsRadio 93.8 FM psychologist Mel Gill, who was also the voice of reason on Channel 5's recent paranormal scare-fest Incredible Tales, notes that many urban legends - which prey on the human fear of the unknown - are really tales invented to keep people within accepted behavioural norms.

The pontianak, for example, is a folkloric Malay woman who dies in childbirth or from being abused by a man and returns as an undead creature. 'Mothers invent these things,' says Dr Gill, who will be releasing a book discussing the science behind paranormal phenomena in June. 'What it is, really, is a cautionary measure to prevent men from abusing women.'

## Gotcha!

MANY of these age-old lores have been revived by the Internet as e-mail, chatrooms and forums make the rapid dissemination of ghost sightings, freakish discoveries and inexplicable events easier.

Granted, many of them, especially those bearing wild claims and faux photos, are products of virtual hucksters who get a kick out of hoodwinking the masses. These are especially common after large-scale disasters like the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and last year's Dec 26 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Dr Gill says: 'People try to create laughter as a way of dealing with the stress and nervousness of the situation.'

So, why do people buy urban legends?

Associate Professor Kwok Kian Woon, head of the division of sociology at Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, has this explanation: 'Much of life in the contemporary world is organised along very rational lines of science and bureaucracy. Hence, elements of the uncanny and extraordinary may hold some fascination for some people.'

As X-Files character Fox Mulder would put it, we want to believe.

Even in 21st century Singapore, people are 'primed to believe in things like ghosts', says Dr Gill. 'When our boys go to Tekong, they are faced with so many legends of dead soldiers haunting boys. Not surprising because this is a country which celebrates events like the seventh month Hungry Ghost Festival.'

Incidentally, in a branch of science called para-psychology, 'ghosts' can be briefly explained as electro-magnetic signatures that the deceased leave behind in this world, he adds.

Still, while modern science has been able to explain many phenomena, there are other conundrums which simply defy logic. Dr Gill says: 'Just because it can't be explained doesn't mean it doesn't exist.'

This week, LifeStyle launches a new series called Urban Legends as writers recount their journey in trying to get to the bottom of some of the weirdest of stories floating around.

• **Heard of an urban legend and want us to solve it for you? Send your comments to [stlife@sph.com.sg](mailto:stlife@sph.com.sg)**

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## Mermaid or Man-made?

**A dead mermaid was washed onto a Chennai beach after the Dec 26 tsunami. True or false?**

THE plight of desperate sailors must have been a terrible one. Legend has it that in the 17th and 18th centuries, seamen on long and treacherous voyages became so sex-starved that they started seeing beautiful half-human, half-fish creatures that beckoned amid the sea spray.



**SOMETHING FISHY GOING ON:**  
Two scientists consulted had differing opinions about the origins of this strange creature.

These mermaids or mermen - depending on their gender - were also documented by 17th century naturalists like Dutchman Georg Eberhard Rumphius in books like The Curiosity Cabinet Of Amboina.

Among his factual drawings of the flora and fauna of Indonesia - Rumphius' pet region - was a comely mermaid who was said to have lived a few days in a tub of seawater, mewling like a kitten.

So, when a widely circulating e-mail titled 'Mermaid Found in Marina Beach, Chennai' arrived in LifeStyle's inbox last week, we expected to see attached photos of a gorgeous, topless nymph - much like actress Daryl Hannah in the 1984 movie Splash - languishing on a sandy beach.

Instead, they showed a frightening, dessicated sea creature with a monkey-like head and fish-like body. Equally disturbing were its protruding ribs, scales, claws and very dry white hair.

'Believe it or not,' read the undated and unsigned text. 'Below are pictures of a mermaid found at Marina Beach in Chennai, India, last Saturday. The body is preserved in the Egmore Museum under tight security.'

## Hook, line...

THE message was convincing enough for LifeStyle reader Alex, who forwarded us the e-mail after receiving it from his friends. Declining to reveal his full name, he said: 'The way the whole thing was phrased sounded pretty serious. The pictures also looked real enough.'

Separate postings on Internet user forums confirmed the news of the mermaid or 'Kadal Kanni' in Tamil, believed to have been washed ashore after the Dec 26 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Similarly, the Egmore Museum - officially known as the Government Museum, Chennai - is real. Founded in 1851, it boasts an array of art, archaeological and bronze works, and is one of the city's most respected establishments.

To get to the bottom of the watery mystery, we sent the images to marine biologist Bella Galil from the National Institute of Oceanography in Israel. Currently a visiting researcher at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, she has written several papers about mythical sea creatures.



The existence of mermaids, she said, is an enduring myth that has survived many centuries. 'Fish were viewed since earliest times as symbols of fertility because of the number of their offspring.'

The Phoenicians, an ancient people who lived on the Mediterranean coast from 1200 to 800 BC, worshipped a moon goddess named Atergatis who was personified as half woman, half fish.

But all mermaids 'found' so far have been fakes, says Dr Galil. When Westerners began exploring the Far East around the 15th century, they began bringing home exotic creatures that resembled the mythological ones - but were uglier.

'The people in the East recognised the opportunity to make fakes and sell them to the gullible Westerners. But they did not have the expertise to make them look like the conventional representations of the mermaid,' she explained.

Many fakes were actually displayed in European museums until modern science exposed the ruse.

## ... and sinker

DR GALIL'S colleague, Associate Professor Peter Ng, director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, scrutinised the Chennai mermaid and described it as 'a classic put-together animal'.



First, the creature looks dried and taxidermised instead of soggy and rotten, as one would expect of an animal washed up by the sea.

Second, it is in varying states of decay. While the scales on the fish-like body seem intact, its ribs are wasted.

Third, it would be mechanically impossible for the creature to use its arms, considering the awkward way they have been attached to

its ribcage.

'My feeling,' said Prof Ng, 'is that it's a medium-sized fish glued to a small monkey. This thing cannot survive in the water.'

Computer experts, however, had their own theories. Dr Terence Sim, an assistant professor with the School of Computing at NUS, said the photos were doctored. In the full-length shot of the mermaid, its tail casts a visible shadow on the white background. The same cannot be said for its arms - which suggests that the body parts came from different photographs.

But since e-mail messages are theoretically traceable, could we then track the origins of the allegedly doctored images?

'I was hoping to look at the header of the e-mail to see if I could get any clues, but unfortunately not,' said Dr Sim.

The route an e-mail has taken is encoded in its headers, normally suppressed by mail programmes. While certain mail programmes have options to view these headers in ordinary text, others like LifeStyle's Lotus Notes programme may have been configured to cut the headers off - effectively

severing the digital trail.

And unless it is an issue of security, internet service providers (ISPs) do not track or monitor e-mail messages sent or received through their networks.

Ms Cassie Fong, StarHub's assistant corporate communications manager, said: 'As chain e-mail are forwarded from person to person who may not even know one another or reside in the same country, it can be difficult for any single ISP to trace the origin of such e-mail messages.'

Which left just one more avenue to be explored in our search for the truth: The Government Museum in Chennai.

Its education officer, Mr Mathavai Mohan, drove the final nail into the mermaid's coffin. Sounding astonished, he said over the phone: 'We don't have this incredible mermaid museum exhibit. I don't know anything about it.'

What about the claim that it was being held under tight security? Could the museum be keeping it under wraps?

'No. I'm in charge of education. And if we had such an exhibit, I would be looking for publicity,' he said.

But for those who at times like to indulge in a little bit of fantasy, Dr Galil has a parting shot: 'Somewhere deep in us, we all want to believe in monsters. When it's no longer conceivable to believe in monsters of land, the last place on earth still unexplored is the sea.

'To this day, we really don't know what lives in the sea. But it seems to be a good place for monsters.' -- Sandra Leong

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## REMEMBER THESE?

### TOURIST'S LAST PHOTO

**The e-mail:** A camera was found in the rubble of the Sept 11 2001 terrorist attacks on New York's Twin Towers. One of the photos that was subsequently developed shows a tourist standing atop the World Trade Centre Tower, with an aeroplane poised to strike the building beneath him.



-- INTERNET

**The truth:** There are too many inconsistencies in this photo for it to be true, says Mr Emery on his website. But the two main points of contention are: First, why isn't the plane blurry since it had been moving at such a fast speed?

Second, why is the tourist dressed for winter in September?

The real disaster here is a bad digital imaging job.

### BABIES ARE YUMMY



-- INTERNET

**The e-mail:** Hospitals in Taiwan are selling dead babies to restaurants, which in turn grill and barbecue them for food. One of the most gruesome photos of the series, which documents how the babies are prepared, shows a Chinese man devouring a baby's thigh, with its decapitated head and half-eaten torso on a plate in front of him.

**The truth:** Shanghai-based artist Zhu Yu, in a performance called Man-Eater, purportedly sank his teeth into a six-month-old dead baby for the sake of art in 2001. The pictures are of him, and not of a happy customer at a Taiwanese restaurant.

We don't know which is stranger - fact or fiction.

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