

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne (reincarnation case)

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne was a Sri Lankan boy who recalled being an alcoholic bootlegger of arrack, whose personality and characteristic behaviours he displayed as a toddler. Sixteen of Sujith's statements about the previous life were recorded in writing before they were verified and many more were documented later by researcher Ian Stevenson and his field assistants. Sceptical critics nevertheless have raised questions about the case.

Sammy Fernando

Sammy was the nickname of a man born on 3 January 1919 in Gorakana, a region of western Sri Lanka situated about twenty kilometres (twelve miles) south of the capital, Colombo. A colourful personality, he was known to many as 'Gorakana Sammy'.¹

For the first part of his adult life, Sammy was employed by a bus company and then by the national railway. However, he fell in love with a woman (Maggie) whom he courted assiduously, although this meant missing so many days of work that he was terminated from his position. The couple nevertheless married and Sammy moved into Maggie's home along the main road leading to Colombo. Sammy and Maggie had one child, a daughter named Nandanie.

Unable to secure regular employment after being sacked by the railway, Sammy became an illicit distiller and purveyor of arrack, an alcoholic beverage under government monopoly. He constructed a still in the jungle behind his house and took advantage of his land bordering a river to move his product round the island. The authorities were not blind to Sammy's activities, and they regularly visited him. He was arrested and imprisoned no fewer than eight times.

Because he sampled his wares to maintain quality control, and took no other food or drink along with him on his river travels, Sammy gradually sank into a state of clinical alcoholism. His business was good for him economically, however, and he had expensive tastes in food and dress. He was also generous, giving money to the poor and to his favourite niece, Kusuma Dabare, who would cook special meals for him when he was drunk.

As with many alcoholics, Sammy had trouble controlling his temper. Maggie bore the brunt of his outbursts. On the day of his death, he came home roaring drunk and, as she often did on these occasions, she left their home to walk up the road. Sammy started after her, but stopped in a shop for cigarettes. Upon emerging, still quite inebriated, he stepped into the path of a passing lorry. He was fifty years old at the time.

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne was born on 8 August 1969, prematurely after a seven-month pregnancy, slightly over six months after Sammy was killed. His family lived in Mount Lavinia, farther up the road between Gorakana and Colombo.

Sujith's parents separated soon after he was born. His mother went to live with her mother and Sujith grew up on her home.

When Sujith was eight months old, his mother chanced to mention the word 'lorry' in his presence and he quickly drank his milk, which she had been trying in vain to get him to do. She employed the word to the same effect on subsequent occasions; it was the only way she could get him to take his milk when he resisted doing so.

As soon as he could talk in a connected way, when he was between eighteen months and two years old, Sujith began to refer to the life of Sammy Fernando. At this early stage, he often supplemented his words with nonverbal sounds and gestures, making the noise of a railway engine or miming a man walking with a cane. He held up a pair of fingers to indicate the number two.

Sujith wished to go to Gorakana and said he was Gorakana Sammy. He recalled someone becoming lame after falling off a train. This had in fact happened to Sammy's younger brother, who had injured his back in a fall from a train. He had been in a cast for a time and when he recovered, was lame. For two months, he had walked with a cane.

Sujith said that he himself had worked with trains but also that he had sold arrack. He was married to a woman named Maggie with whom he sometimes quarrelled. One day after a row he had gone to a shop for cigarettes. Upon exiting the shop, he had stepped out onto the road, been hit by a lorry, and died.

Case Investigation

Initial Phase

As it happened, the elder brother of Sujith's maternal grandmother was a Buddhist monk. He heard about Sammy and spoke to him when he visited his temple. A younger monk at the same temple took an interest in the case and interviewed Sujith in March 1972, when he was two and half years old. He recorded sixteen statements concerning his memories, then went to Gorakana in a quest to verify them.

It is noteworthy that Sujith did not tell the monk his past-life name or describe how he died, although he had previously related these things to his family. The monk wrote in Sinhalese but his notes were later translated into English for Stevenson. The sixteen statements he recorded from Sujith were:

- He was from Gorakana.
- He lived in the 'Gorakawate' section of Gorakana.
- His father was Jamis.
- Jamis had only one eye.
- He (Sammy) travelled by bus and by train.

- Someone had fallen and become lame.
- In Gorakana, he had attended ‘the dilapidated school’.
- Francis was his teacher.
- He gave money to Kusuma.
- Kusuma prepared string hoppers (a food) for him.
- He donated money to the Kale Pansala (a Buddhist temple).
- There were two monks at the Kale Pansala.
- One of these monks was called Amitha.
- He bathed in cool water.
- The washroom was alongside his property boundary.
- His house was white-washed.

In Gorakana, the monk made contact with Kusuma Debare and told her some of what Sujith had said. She did not immediately connect these things to her family, perhaps because she was unfamiliar with the name Gorakawate, which was an older term for the area in which Sammy had lived. But after thinking the matter over, the following day she went to Mt Lavinia to see the monk, confirmed some of Sujith’s statements as applicable to her uncle Sammy Fernando, and asked to meet the boy.

The monk asked Kusuma to wait for this meeting until he had completed his investigations. He returned to Gorakana and on this occasion succeeded in verifying nearly all the statements he had recorded. The news spread rapidly round Gorakana and members of that community went to Mt Lavinia to meet Sujith.

The monk managed these contacts, but with difficulty. When Kusuma first went to meet Sujith, she took along ten other persons, overwhelming him. When Kusuma returned with only four other persons, Sujith recognized her by name. He also recognized one of those accompanying her, a nephew of Sammy.

After this, the monk took Sujith to Gorakana for the first time. There he made some additional statements and recognitions. His story came to the attention of the press and the first articles about the case were published on 23 April, both in Sinhalese and in English.

Ian Stevenson

The 23 April news articles were noticed by a field assistant of researcher [Ian Stevenson](#), who began enquiries on his behalf. He obtained the monk’s list of Sujith’s statements, along with a report that Sujith’s grand-uncle had made about their interactions with him. He translated these for Stevenson and interviewed Sujith, his mother, and several other members of his family who had heard him talking about Sammy.

Stevenson became directly involved in the case when he went to Sri Lanka in March and October 1973. He interviewed Sammy and his family and also several persons in Gorakana. His list of persons interviewed show that he spoke with thirteen people in Mt Lavinia and 21 people in Gorakana, as well as a few elsewhere. His Sri Lankan assistants followed up with some witnesses he was unable to meet on his trips. Stevenson also visited places referred to by Sujith, among them the Kale Pansala temple.

Stevenson paid special attention to the possibility of contacts between Sujith and members of his family and the family of Sammy Fernando. Although Gorakana and Mt Lavinia are close together, he was unable to identify any direct contacts between the families and satisfied himself that Sujith's family were unacquainted with Sammy's story before Sujith began talking about Sammy.

Additional Statements and Recognitions

Stevenson and his assistants recorded twenty additional statements imputed to Sammy by other witnesses before meeting Kusuma and first visiting Gorakana.² These items included:

- His name was Sammy (sometimes Gorakana Sammy).
- Kusuma was his younger sister's daughter.
- Kusuma was in Gorakana.
- Kusuma's hair was very long and thick.
- His wife was called Maggie.
- He had a daughter called Nandanie.
- He lived in a house with a tiled roof.
- He bathed in the well.
- There was a king coconut tree near the well at his house.
- The well and the tree were behind his house.
- He could approach his house along a jungle footpath.
- He ate bread and fish curry for breakfast.
- He worked for the railways.
- He transported arrack in a boat.
- Once the boat sank in a river and the arrack was lost.
- Afterward he traded in arrack again.
- One day he quarrelled with Maggie after drinking.
- He went to a shop for cigarettes.
- A lorry ran over him while he was crossing a road.
- He died immediately.

All except the last were correct for Sammy Fernando. Sammy had not died immediately after the accident, but in hospital, one or two hours after admission.

Stevenson also documented twenty reports of Sujith's recognitions of people and places known to Sammy, after his case became known.³

Personality and Behaviours

Sujith's personation of Sammy was striking to all who met him; his personality and habitual behaviours form an important part of this case.

- Sujith had a pronounced fear of trucks as a young child.
- Sammy had been a good singer and dancer and Sujith enjoyed these activities.
- Both Sammy and Sujith were generous to others.

- Sujith and Sammy had similar tastes in clothing and styles of dress. Sammy liked expensive Terylene shirts, as did Sujith. Many Sri Lankan men tie their sarongs above the navel, but Sammy and Sujith positioned the sarong below the navel, and they both formed a large knot with the material at the top of the garment. When Sujith was asked why he tied a knot in this way, he explained that this is where he carried his money, a practice of Sammy's.
- Sammy had been a smoker who preferred the Four Aces brand of cigarettes and Sujith would request these be purchased for him.
- Sujith was fond of the same foods as Sammy. Both liked spicy dishes such as hot curries.
- Sujith would ask for arrack and when given an alternative (such as carbonated water) would sit with his legs drawn up in the posture assumed by Sammy when drinking and afterwards would belch, wipe his mouth, and wander round as if he were tipsy. He requested foods favoured by regular arrack drinkers.
- Sujith, like Sammy, had a tendency to hit and kick other persons when he was frustrated. He had something of Sammy's temper and was quick to violence. On one occasion he pummelled his mother with his fists, explaining that that is how police conduct interrogations. He often hid when he saw officers.
- When he described how Sammy had died, Sujith would lie supine with his arm spread out, in the posture in which Sammy's body had been recovered from the road.

Xenoglossy

[Xenoglossy](#) is the use of language unlearned in the present life; in reincarnation cases, it is typically one spoken by the previous person and carried over from the previous life.

Sujith and Sammy spoke the same language, Sinhalese, but even as a toddler, Sujith would lace his speech with obscenities. Sammy, similarly, had had the habit of swearing and shouting obscenities, especially when drunk.

Although not strictly xenoglossy, Stevenson argues that Sujith's extensive vocabulary of vulgar words amounted to such, because there was no one from whom he could have learned them. His mother and grandmother did not speak in this way and his father, who might have, was absent.⁴

Stevenson's Analysis

Stevenson regarded Sujith's cases as one of the strongest he had studied, due to the monk's having recorded in writing some of his memories before he set about their verification. But he notes that other early records were also made of the case, reducing the possibility of memory errors by informants. In addition, Sujith's personation of Sammy was extraordinarily strong:

I doubt that any child has shown as vividly as he has the several types of behavior that characterize the conduct of alcoholics. That he could have learned such behavior from the people immediately around him seems unthinkable. That he exhibited it so fully seems to me to add both to the authenticity of the case and to its evidence of paranormal processes.

Sceptical Critiques

Philosopher Brooke Noel Moore critiqued Stevenson's report on Sujith in a book published in 1981.⁵ Building on a series of hypothetical assumptions, he tried to show how social construction could account for the case.

The child might possibly have merely repeated a few names and phrases he had heard, directly or indirectly, from a neighbour, and this might have been sufficient to excite a possibly bored or idle grandmother who did not recall having heard the same names or phrases herself. ...

Thus began a snowballing accumulation of further "evidence," of innocent gestures and inarticulate babbles being taken as possible signs of recognition; of possible signs of recognition then being remembered and described to others as iron-clad recognitions; then finally of the "history" of the case being revised unconsciously to conform to what at that point had begun to be regarded as certainties.⁶

Paul Edwards embraced Moore's arguments and drew attention to the fact, noted by Moore, that Sujith had been born only six months after Sammy's death. Even allowing for his premature birth, it is clear that Sujith's body would have been in gestation when Sammy died, and this Moore and Edwards find concerning. Edwards says,

We therefore know that at one point Sujith was definitely not Sammy Fernando. If he later became Sammy, Moore asks, "what became of the individual who earlier was not Sammy; was he too reincarnated?"⁷

However, as pointed out by reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#), this objection

reveals the commitment to an a priori assumption about reincarnation (that it must come at conception) and lacks familiarity with Stevenson's case data. Cases with intermissions of under nine months are not uncommon Only if reincarnation necessarily occurs at conception would the possibility of a spirit ouster arise in such cases, and even if that did occur, it is not clear why it should imperil a reincarnation interpretation.⁸

James G Matlock

Literature

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Matlock, J.G. (2023). Reincarnation and past-life memory. In *Probing Parapsychology: Essays on a Controversial Science*, ed. by G.R. Shafer, 78-94. Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland.

Moore, B.N. (1981). *The Philosophical Possibilities Beyond Death*. Springfield, Illinois, USA: Charles C Thomas.

Stevenson, I. (1977). *Cases of the Reincarnation Type. Volume II: Ten Cases in Sri Lanka*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). This account of Sujith's case is drawn from the report in Stevenson (1977).
- [2](#). See list of Sujith's statements in Stevenson (1977), 248-56.
- [3](#). See Stevenson (1977), 257-66.
- [4](#). Stevenson (1977), 274.
- [5](#). Moore (1981), 167-78.
- [6](#). Moore (1981), 177.
- [7](#). Edwards (1996), 258-59.
- [8](#). Matlock (2023).