

The Soucouyant

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I grew up in suburban New Jersey, but my dreams were haunted by the soucouyant. According to the stories shared by my Trinidadian aunts, mother, and grandmothers, the soucouyant seemed to be an ordinary old woman by day. Each night, however, she shed her skin, transformed herself into a ball of fire, flew about the community, and sucked the blood of her unsuspecting neighbors. Afterward, she would return home and slip back into her skin; the repeated practice often made her human form unusually wrinkled. She would not be able to re-don her outer covering, however, if someone had discovered its secret hiding place and salted or peppered it; this would cause the soucouyant to perish in a frenzy of itching and burning, or her screams would reveal her identity to the rest of the community.

The soucouyant could also be destroyed by scattering salt or rice on the doorsteps and windowsills of one's house: the creature might be able to enter the premises to satisfy her bloodlust, but she was obligated to count each grain before leaving. At dawn, if neighbors caught her in the midst of her task, they would beat her to death or drop her into a vat of boiling tar or oil; some storytellers alleged that the rising sun would destroy the skinless incarnation of the creature. In any case, the phrase "soucouyant gon' come for you" has chilled the blood of Trinidadian children for generations—and not just those who misbehaved: anyone's blood could lure the soucouyant into their home.

As I travelled and met people from other Caribbean countries, and as I studied folklore from the U.S. South, I learned that skin-shedding, bloodsucking creatures could be found in a variety of cultures: people from Jamaica, Guyana, Suriname, Haiti, St. Lucia, and the list goes on, have stories about these skin-shedding vampiric figures. As an undergraduate, and then a doctoral student, and eventually as a professor, my curiosity about soucouyant stories intensified. What did it mean that this fearsome creature of the night was consistently female? How did a "neutral," if not sought-after, characteristic such as longevity come to be the source of suspicion and stigma for women? Were the tales meant to train young girls to be content with staying at home instead of roaming their communities at night like men? Did they teach young boys to expect and demand this domestic containment from their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters? Was the fear generated by the soucouyant's preying on her neighbors centered around the taboo act of drinking blood? Or was the idea of having one's blood unknowingly and involuntarily taken more anxiety provoking? Or was it the fact that she was unrecognizable while travelling around as a ball of flame? And what was to be made of the removable skin?

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