

The Animistic Vampire in New England

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The American Anthropologist, Vol. IX, No. 1, January, 1896

The belief in the vampire and the whole family of demons has its origin in the animism, spiritism, or personification of the barbarian, who, unable to distinguish the objective from the subjective, ascribes good and evil influences and all natural phenomena to good and evil spirits.

Mr. Conway remarks of this vampire belief that "it is, perhaps, the most formidable survival of demonic superstition now existing in the world."

Under the names of vampire, were-wolf, man-wolf, night-mare, night-demon--in the Illyrian tongue *oupires*, or leeches; in modern Greek *broucolagues*, and in our common tongue ghosts, each country having its own peculiar designation--the superstitious of the ancient and modern world, of Chaldea and Babylon, Persia, Egypt, and Syria, of Illyria, Poland, Turkey, Servia, Germany, England, Central Africa, New England, and the islands of the Malay and Polynesian archipelagoes, designate the spirits which leave the tomb, generally in the night, to torment the living.

The character, purpose, and manner of the vampire manifestations depend, like its designation, upon environment and the plane of culture.

All primitive peoples have believed in the existence of good and evil spirits holding a middle place between men and gods. Calmet lays down in most explicit terms, as he was bound to do by the canons of his church, the doctrine of angels and demons as a matter of dogmatic theology.

The early Christians were possessed, or obsessed, by demons, and the so-called demoniacal possession of idiots, lunatics, and hysterical persons is still common in Japan, China, India, and Africa, and instances are noted in Western Europe, all yielding to the methods of Christian and pagan exorcists as practiced in New Testament times.

The Hebrew synonym of demon was serpent; the Greek, *diabolus*, a calumniator, or impure spirit. The Rabbins were divided in opinion, some believing they were entirely spiritual, others that they were corporeal, capable of generation and subject to death.

As before suggested, it was the general belief that the vampire is a spirit which leaves its dead body in the grave to visit and torment the living.

The modern Greeks are persuaded that the bodies of the excommunicated do not putrefy in their tombs, but appear in the night as in the day, and that to encounter them is dangerous.

Instances are cited by Calmet, in Christian antiquity, of excommunicated persons visibly arising from their tombs and leaving the churches when the deacon commanded the excommunicated and those who did not partake of the communion to retire. The same writer states that "it was an opinion widely circulated in Germany that certain dead ate in their tombs and devoured all they could find around them, including their own flesh, accompanied by a certain piercing shriek and a sound of munching and groaning."

A German author has thought it worth while to write a work entitled "*De Masticatione mortuorum in tumulis*." In many parts of England a person who is ill is said to be "wisht" or "overlooked." The superstition of the "evil eye" originated and exists in the same degree of culture; the evil eye "which kills snakes, scares wolves, hatches ostrich eggs, and breeds leprosy." The Polynesians believed that the vampires were the departed souls, which quitted the grave, and grave idols, to creep by night into the houses and devour the heart and entrails of the sleepers, who afterward died.¹

The *Karems* tell of the *Kephu*, which devours the souls of men who die. The *mintira* of the Malay peninsula have their water demon, who sucks blood from men's toes and thumbs.

"The first theory of the vampire superstitions," remarks Tyler², "is that the soul of the living man, often a sorcerer, leaves its

proper body asleep and goes forth, perhaps in visible form of a straw or a fluff of down, slips through the keyhole, and attacks a living victim. Some say these *Mauri* come by night to men, sit upon their breasts, and suck their blood, while others think children alone are attacked, while to men they are nightmares.

"The second theory is that the soul of a dead man goes out from its buried body and sucks the blood of living men; the victim becomes thin, languid, bloodless, and, falling into a rapid decline, dies."

The belief in the *Obi* of Jamaica and the Vaudoux or Vodun of the West African coast, Jamaica and Haiti is essentially the same as that of the vampire, and its worship and superstitions, which in Africa include child-murder, still survive in these parts, as well as in several districts among the negro population of our southern states. The negro laid under the ban of the *Obi* or who is vaudouxed or, in the vernacular, "hoodooed" slowly pines to death.

In New England the vampire superstition is unknown by its proper name. It is there believed that consumption is not a physical but a spiritual disease, obsession, or visitation; that as long as the body of a dead consumptive relative has blood in its heart it is proof that an occult influence steals from it for death and is at work draining the blood of the living into the heart of the dead and causing his rapid decline.

It is a common belief in primitive races of low culture that disease is caused by the revengeful spirits of man or other animals--notably among the tribes of North American Indians as well as of African negroes.

Russian superstition supposes nine sisters who plague mankind with fever. They lie chained up in caverns, and when let loose pounce upon man without pity.³

As in the financial and political, the psychologic world has its periods of exultation and depression, of confidence and alarm. In the eighteenth century a vampire panic beginning in Servia and Hungary spread thence into northern and western Europe, acquiring its new life and impetus from the horrors attending the prevalence of the plague and other distressing epidemics in an age of great public moral depravity and illiteracy. Calmet, a learned Benedictine monk and abbé of S nones, seized this opportunity to write a popular treatise on the vampire, which in a short time passed through many editions. It was my good fortune not long since to find in the Boston Athenaeum library an original copy of his work. Its title page reads as follows: "Traite sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires ou les revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, etc. Par le R. P. Dom Augustine Calmet, abb  de S nones. Nouvelle edition, r vis e, corrig e, et augment e par l'auteur, avec une lettre de Mons le Marquis Maffei, sur le magie. A Paris; Chez debure l'aine quay des Augustins   l'image S. Paul. MDCCLI. Avec approb et priv du roi."

Calmet was born in Lorraine, near Commercy, in 1672, and his chief works were a commentary and history of the Bible. He died as the abb  de S nones, in the department of the Vosges.

This curious treatise has evidently proved a mine of wealth to all modern encyclopedists and demonologists. It impresses one as the work of a man whose mental convictions do not entirely conform to the traditions and dogmas of his church, and his style at times appears somewhat apologetic. Calmet declares his belief to be that the vampires of Europe and the broucolaques of Greece are the excommunicated which the grave rejects. They are the dead of a longer or shorter time who leave their tombs to torment the living, sucking their blood and announcing their appearance by rattling of doors and windows. The name vampire, or *d'oupires*, signifies in the Slavonic tongue a bloodsucker. He formulates the three theories then existing as to the cause of these appearances:

First: That the persons were buried alive and naturally leave their tombs.

Second: That they are dead, but that by God's permission or particular command they return to their bodies for a time, as when they are exhumed their bodies are found entire, the blood red and fluid, and their members soft and pliable.

Third: That it is the devil who makes these apparitions appear and by their means causes all the evil done to men and animals.

In some places the spectre appears as in the flesh, walks, talks, infests villages, ill uses both men and beasts, sucks the blood of their near relations, makes them ill, and finally causes their death.

The late Monsieur de Vassimont, counselor of the chamber of the courts of Bar, was informed by public report in Monravia that it was common enough in that country to see men who had died some time before "present themselves at a party and sit down to table with persons of their acquaintance without saying a word and nodding to one of the party, the one indicated would infallibly die some days after."⁴

About 1735 on the frontier of Hungary a dead person appeared after ten years' burial and caused the death of his father. In 1730 in Turkish Servia it was believed that those who had been passive vampires during life became active after death; in

Russia, that the vampire does not stop his unwelcome visits at a single member of a family, but extends his visits to the last member, which is the Rhode Island belief.

The captain of grenadiers in the Regiment of Monsieur le Baron Trenck, cited by Calmet, declares "that it is only in their family and among their own relations that the vampires delight in destroying their own species."

The inhabitants of the island of Chio do not answer unless called twice, being persuaded that the broucolaques do not call but once, and when so called the vampire disappears, and the person called dies in a few days. The classic writers from Socrates to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to our own time have recognized the superstition.

Mr. Conway quotes from the legend of Ishtar descending to Hades to seek some beloved one. She threatens if the door is not opened--

"I will raise the dead to be devourers of the living;
Upon the living shall the dead prey."⁵

Singularly, in his discourse on modern superstitions De Quincey, to whom crude superstitions clung and who had faith in dreams as portents, does not allude to the vampire; but his contemporary, Lord Byron, in his lines on the opening of the royal tomb at Windsor, recognizes this belief in the transformation of the dead:

"Justice and death have mixed their dust in vain,
Each royal vampire wakes to life again."

William of Malmsbury says that "in England they believed that the wicked came back after death by the will of the devil," and it was not an unusual belief that those whose death had been caused in this manner, at their death pursued the same evil calling. Naturally under such an uncomfortable and inconvenient infliction some avenue of escape must, if possible, be found. It was first necessary to locate the vampire. If on opening the grave of a "suspect" the body was found to be of a rose color, the beard, hair and nails renewed, and the veins filled, the evidence of its being the abode of a vampire was conclusive. A voyager in the Levant in the seventeenth century is quoted as relating that an excommunicated person was exhumed and the body found full, healthy, and well disposed and the veins filled with the blood the vampire had taken from the living. In a certain Turkish village, of forty persons exhumed seventeen gave evidence of vampirism. In Hungary, one dead thirty years was found in a natural state. In 1727 the bodies of five *religieuse* were discovered in a tomb near the hospital of Quebec, that had been buried twenty years, covered with flesh and suffused with blood.⁶

The methods of relief from or disposition of the vampire's dwelling place are not numerous, but extremely sanguinary and ghastly.

In Servia a relief is found in eating of the earth of his grave and rubbing the person with his blood. This prescription, was, however, valueless if after forty days the body was exhumed and all the evidences of an archvampire were not found. A more common and almost universal method of relief, especially in the Turkish provinces and in the Greek islands, was to burn the body and scatter the ashes to the winds. Some old writers are of the opinion that the souls of the dead cannot be quiet until the entire body has been consumed. Exceptions are noted in the Levant, where the body is cut in pieces and boiled in wine, and where, according to Voltaire, the heart is torn out and burned.

In Hungary and Servia, to destroy the demon it was considered necessary to exhume the body, insert in the heart and other parts of the defunct, or pierce it through with a sharp instrument, as in the case of suicides, upon which it utters a dreadful cry, as if alive; it is then decapitated and the body burned. In New England the body is exhumed, the heart burned, and the ashes scattered. The discovery of the vampire's resting-place was itself an art.

In Hungary and in Russia they choose a boy young enough to be certain that he is innocent of any impurity, put him on the back of a horse which has never stumbled and is absolutely black, and make him ride over all the graves in the cemetery. The grave over which the horse refuses to pass is reputed to be that of a vampire.

Gilbert Stuart, the distinguished American painter, when asked by a London friend where he was born, replied: "Six miles from Pottawoone, ten miles from Poppasquash, four miles from Conanicut, and not far from the spot where the famous battle with the warlike Pequots was fought." In plainer language, Stuart was born in the old snuff mill belonging to his father and Dr. Moffat, at the head of the Petaquamscott pond, six miles from Newport, across the bay, and about the same distance from Narragansett Pier, in the state of Rhode Island.

By some mysterious survival, occult transmission, or remarkable atavism, this region, including within its radius the towns of Exeter, Foster, Kingstown, East Greenwich, and others, with their scattered hamlets and more pretentious villages, is distinguished by the prevalence of this remarkable superstition--a survival of the days of Sardanapalus, of Nebuchadnezzar, and of New Testament history in the closing years of what we are pleased to call the enlightened nineteenth century. It is an

extraordinary instance of a barbaric superstition outcropping in and coexisting with a high general culture, of which Max Müller and others have spoken, and which is not so uncommon, if rarely so extremely aggravated, crude, and painful.

The region referred to, where agriculture is in a depressed condition and abandoned farms are numerous, is the tramping ground of the book agent, the chromo peddler, the patent-medicine man and the home of the erotic and neurotic modern novel. The social isolation away from the larger villages is as complete as a century and a half ago, when the boy Gilbert Stuart tramped the woods, fished the streams, and was developing and absorbing his artistic inspirations, while the agricultural and economic conditions are very much worse.⁷

Farm houses deserted and ruinous are frequent, and the once productive lands, neglected and overgrown with scrubby oak, speak forcefully and mournfully of the migration of the youthful farmers from country to town. In short, the region furnishes an object-lesson in the decline of wealth consequent upon the prevalence of a too common heresy in the district that land will take care of itself, or that it can be robbed from generation to generation without injury, and suggests the almost criminal neglect of the conservators of public education to give instruction to our farming youth in a more scientific and more practical agriculture. It has well been said by a banker of well-known name in an agricultural district in the midlands of England that "the depression of agriculture is a depression of brains." Naturally, in such isolated conditions the superstitions of a much lower culture have maintained their place and are likely to keep it and perpetuate it, despite the church, the public school, and the weekly newspaper. Here Cotton Mather, Justice Sewall, and the host of medical, clerical and lay believers in the uncanny superstitions of bygone centuries could still hold high carnival.

The first visit in this farming community of native-born New Englanders was made to -----, a small seashore village possessing a summer hotel and a few cottages of summer residents not far from Newport--that Mecca of wealth, fashion, and nineteenth-century culture. The ----- family is among its well-to-do and most intelligent inhabitants. One member of this family had some years since lost children by consumption, and by common report claimed to have saved those surviving by exhumation and cremation of the dead.

In the same village resides Mr. -----, an intelligent man, by trade a mason, who is a living witness of the superstition and of the efficacy of the treatment of the dead which it prescribes. He informed me that he had lost two brothers by consumption. Upon the attack of the second brother his father was advised by Mr. -----, the head of the family before mentioned, to take up the first body and burn its heart, but the brother attacked objected to the sacrilege and in consequence subsequently died. When he was attacked by the disease in his turn, -----'s advice prevailed, and the body of the brother last dead was exhumed, and "living" blood being found in the heart and in circulation, it was cremated, and the sufferer began immediately to mend and stood before me and hale, hearty, and vigorous man of fifty years. When questioned as to his understanding of the miraculous influence, he could suggest nothing and did not recognize the superstition even by name. He remembered that the doctors did not believe in its efficacy, but he and many others did. His father saw the brother's body and the arterial blood. The attitude of several other persons in regard to the practice was agnostic, either from fear of public opinion or other reasons, and their replies to my inquiries were in the same temper of mind as that of the blind man in the Gospel of Saint John (9:25), who did not dare to express his belief, but "answered and said, Whether he was a sinner or no, I know not; one thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see."

At -----, a small isolated village of scattered houses in a farming population, distant fifteen or twenty miles from Newport and eight or ten from Stuart's birthplace, there have been made within fifty years a half dozen or more exhumations. The most recent was made within two years, in the family of -----. The mother and four children had already succumbed to consumption, and the child most recently deceased (within six months) was, in obedience to the superstition, exhumed and the heart burned. Dr. -----, who made the autopsy, stated that he found the body in the usual condition after an interment of that length of time. I learned that others of the family have since died, and one is now very low with the dreaded disease. The doctor remarked that he consented to the autopsy only after the pressing solicitation of the surviving children, who were patients of his, the father first objecting, but finally, under continued pressure, yielding. Dr. ----- declares the superstition to be prevalent in all the isolated districts of southern Rhode Island, and that many instances of its survival can be found in the large centers of population. In the village now being considered known exhumations have been made in five families, and in two adjoining villages in two families. In 1875 an instance was reported in Chicago, and in a New York journal of recent date I read the following: "At Peukuhl, a small village in Prussia, a farmer died last March. Since then one of his sons has been sickly, and believing that the dead man would not rest until he had drawn to himself the nine surviving members of the family, the sickly son, armed with a spade, exhumed his father and cut off his head." It does not by any means absolutely follow that this barbarous superstition has a stronger hold in Rhode Island than in any other part of the country. Peculiar conditions have caused its manifestation and survival there, and similar ones are likely to produce it elsewhere. The singular feature is that it should appear and flourish in a native population which from its infancy has had the ordinary New England educational advantages; in a State having a larger population to the square mile than any in the Union, and in an environment of remarkable literacy and culture when compared to some other sections of the country. It is

perhaps fortunate that the isolation of which this is probably the product, an isolation common in sparsely settled regions, where thought stagnates and insanity and superstition are prevalent, has produced nothing worse.

In neighboring Connecticut, within a few miles of its university town of New Haven, there are rural farming populations, fairly prosperous, of average intelligence, and furnished with churches and schools, which have made themselves notorious by murder, suicides, and numerous instances of melancholia and insanity.

Other abundant evidence is at hand pointing to the conclusion that the vampire superstition still retains its hold in its original habitat--an illustration of the remarkable tenacity and continuity of a superstition through centuries of intellectual progress from a lower to a higher culture, and of the impotency of the latter to entirely eradicate from itself the traditional beliefs, customs, habits, observances, and impressions of the former.

It is apparent that our increased and increasing culture, our appreciation of the principles of natural, mental, and moral philosophy and knowledge of natural laws has no complete correlation in the decline of primitive and crude superstitions or increased control of the emotions or the imagination, and that to force a higher culture upon a lower, or to metamorphose or to perfectly control its emotional nature through education of the intellect, is equally impossible. The two cultures may, however, coexist, intermingling and in a limited degree absorbing from and retroacting favorably or unfavorably upon each other--trifling aberrations in the inexorable law which binds each to its own place.

The most enlightened and philosophic have, either apparent or secreted in their innermost consciousness, superstitious weaknesses--negative, involuntary, more or less barbaric, and under greater or lesser control in correspondence with their education, their present environment, and the degree of their development--in the control of the imagination and emotions. These in various degrees predominate over the understanding where reason is silent or its authority weakens.

Sónya Kovalévsky (1850-1890), one of the most brilliant mathematicians of the century, who obtained the Prix-Bordin from the French academy, "the greatest scientific honor ever gained by a woman," "whose love for mathematical and psychological problems amounted to a passion," and whose intellect would accept no proposition incapable of a mathematical demonstration, all her life maintained a firm belief in apparitions and in dreams as portents. She was so influenced by disagreeable dreams and the apparition of a demon as to be for some time thereafter obviously depressed and low-spirited.

A well-known and highly cultured American mathematician recently said to me that his servant had seven years ago nailed a horseshoe over a house door, and that he had never had the courage to remove it.

There is in the Chemnitzer-Rocken Philosophie, cited by Grimm, a register of eleven or twelve hundred crude superstitions surviving in highly educated Germany. Buckle declared that "superstition was the curse of Scotland," and in this regard neither Germany nor Scotland are singular.

Of the origin of this superstition in Rhode Island or in other parts of the United States we are ignorant; it is in all probability an exotic like ourselves, originating in the mythographic period of the Aryan and Semitic peoples, although legends and superstitions of a somewhat similar character may be found among the American Indians.

The Ojibwas have, it is said, a legend of a ghostly man-eater. Mr. Mooney, in a personal note, says he has not met with any close parallel of the vampire myth among the tribes with which he is familiar. The Cherokees have, however, something analogous. There are in that tribe quite a number of old witches and wizards who thrive and fatten upon the livers of murdered victims. When some one is dangerously sick these witches gather invisibly about his bedside and torment him, even lifting him up and dashing him down again upon the ground until life is extinct. After he is buried they dig up his body and take out the liver to feast upon. They thus lengthen their own lives by as many days as they have taken from his. In this way they get to be very aged, which renders them objects of suspicion. It is not, therefore, well to grow old among the Cherokees. If discovered and recognized during the feast, when they are again visible, they die within seven days.

I have personal experience of a case in which a reputed medicine-man was left to die alone because his friends were afraid to come into the house on account of the presence of invisible witches.

Jacob Grimm⁸ defines superstition as a persistence of individual men in views which the common sense or culture of the majority has caused them to abandon, a definition which, while within its limits sufficiently accurate, does not recognize or take account of the subtle, universal, ineradicable fear of or reverence for the supernatural, the mysterious, and unknown.

De Quincey has more comprehensively remarked that "superstition or sympathy with the invisible is the great test of man's nature as an earthly combining with a celestial. In superstition is the possibility of religion, and though superstition is often injurious, degrading and demoralizing, it is so, not as a form of corruption or degradation, but as a form of non-development."

In reviewing these cases of psychologic pre-Raphaelitism they seem, from an economic point of view, to form one of the strongest as well as the weirdest arguments in favor of a general cremation of the dead that it is possible to present. They also remind us of the *boutade* of the Saturday Review, "that to be really Medieval, one should have no body; to be really modern, one should have no soul;" and it will be well to remember that if we do not quite accept these demonic apparitions we shall subject ourselves to the criticism of the modern mystic, Dr. Carl du Prel, who thus speaks of those who deny the miraculousness of stigmatization: "For these gentleman the bounds of possibility coincide with the limits of their niggardly horizon; that which they cannot grasp either does not exist or is only the work of illusion and deception."

NOTES:

¹Foster's Observations During a Voyage Around the World.

²Primitive Culture.

³Cited from Götze's Russ., Volks., p 62.

⁴Cited by Calmet.

⁵Tablet K 162, in British Museum.

⁶Cited by Calmet.

⁷Rhode Island has the largest population to the square mile of any State in the Union. The town of *Exeter*, before mentioned, incorporated in 1742-'43, had but 17 persons to the square mile in 1890, and in 1893 had 63 abandoned farms, or one fifth of the whole number within its limits. *Foster*, incorporated in 1781 and taken from Scituate (which was settled by Massachuettts emigrants in 1710), had in 1890 a population of 1,252, and in 1893 had eight abandoned farms, Scituate having forty-five. *North Kingston* had 76 persons to the square mile in 1890. Mr. Arnold, in his history of the State, says that "South Kingston was in 1780 by far the wealthiest town in the State." It had a special provision made for the "maintenance of religion and education."

⁸Teutonic Mythology.
