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Revisiting Vampirism: Myth, Mystery, Science, History

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Abstract

Many legends and myths have survived through ages. They also have strong connection with reality of past and present. History, mythology, science, psychology, fiction all is entwined in such a way that it becomes difficult to segregate them from one another. In fact, all these together bring a new meaning to such a subject. True it is and true it shall be that, almost

everything that we can think of is connected to many other things. Vampirism is not an exception to that. Though it has been popularized by fictions more, it also has a bleak history, a dreary reality that comes through psychological disorder. The folk beliefs and legends that grew around vampirism is also a matter of real interest. This paper is an attempt to bring the different aspects of vampirism in a nutshell to have a compact idea on the fascinating theme.

Keywords: Desmodontinae, Upyr, Sasabonsam, Vlad III, Vampire-humans, Clinical Vampirism

The Bard of Avon in his drama Hamlet rightly says, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Perhaps, it can be said that there is a hairline difference between the supernatural world and the visible world. Something that may seem to be mysterious and uncanny may be proved as a simple scientific and logical incident in later years. The supernatural, the uncanny has always walked side by side with the much-known human world posing a doubt whether it is true or imagination. But like the traveler in the poem The Listeners, it has always met with the 'silence that surged softly backward' unexplored. This is quite true for the Vampire legends and facts.

Vampires have been a prominent legend in the human world. A close observation shows that vampires have undergone a serious transition from time immemorial. According to J. Gordon Melton, "A common dictionary definition of vampire is a reanimated corpse that rises from the grave to suck the blood of living people and thus retain a semblance of life." (Melton,1999) This statement hints at an interesting dichotomy in the character that is, being monstrous on one hand and human on the other. This dichotomy leads to a number of questions and those questions lead to multifarious explorations. Finally, the Vampire legend unleashes a number of dimensions and perspectives. The very utterance of the word 'vampire' immediately reminds us of the novel "Dracula" by Bram Stoker, published in 1896. This novel caused a real stir all over the world. The central character of the story Count Dracula is portrayed as a fearsome vampire. This book is undoubtedly a work of fiction which means it is based on imagination. But where from comes imagination? This question harks conjures up the famous saying of Pablo Picasso, "Everything you can imagine is real." Imagination comes first or reality? This question can never be answered straight. In fact, the answer lies in the belief of an individual. It would not be wrong to say that imagination paves the way to reality, considering the persistent inventions that have been happening throughout. On the other hand, we cannot nullify the fact that imagination grows from the seed of reality.

Simons in her essay 'Order Chiroptera' tells about a different species of bat (Wilson & Reed, 2005). These feed on the blood of domestic animals. The scientific name for this species is Desmodus Rotundus, more commonly known as Desmodontinae or Vampire Bats. These bats are found in South America, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, etc. They live in abandoned, dark, damp places. These bats are found in old wells, buildings, dark caves, and hollow trees. They usually drink blood by piercing their sharp teeth on the body of the victim for thirty minutes at the most. The bite with sharp teeth makes the wound on the victim's body and the

bat laps up the flowing blood. A chemical in their saliva keeps the blood from being clotted fast making the feed easy for the creature. Quite unsurprisingly this creature with such a chilling nature has got associated with the idea of Vampire. Charles Darwin was the first to document these blood-sipping bats (Darwin, 1839) which got finely associated with the novel *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897).

It is difficult to say whether reality gives birth to imagination or it is vice versa. Whatever the case may be, we find there are prominent traces in Folklore and Mythology. The idea of a vampire has always been a part of European folklore. In the vicinity of Poland and the Baltic coast, ancient people believed the existence of a demon named Upir. 'Upior', 'Upir' or 'Upyr' was believed to be a Demigod, a Vampire (Vasmer, 2006). Upir is an evil God in the Slavic folklore. In Turkey, these spirits were known as 'Ubir'. People in these regions believed that those who do not get rid of their sins before they die become vampires after death. Ordinary people believed that if there was an accidental or any sort of unnatural death, or a witch dies, their spirit would wander around with an insatiable lust. Within forty days after death, this evil spirit would attack relatives and neighbors. Later, however, the belief changed to a large extent and got associated with religious aspect. After the advent of Christianity, people thought if anyone dies before being christened his spirit becomes an Upyr. This is because the Slavs used to believe that this evil spirit, Upir, denounced Christ and thus got categorized as Satanic and Evil (Cheung, 2009). According to the Slavs, Upir was feared for his bloodthirst. Intoxicated with blood, this evil spirit ignored sunlight too. The natives believed that Upyrs went out for their hunt at any time of the day. In African folklores, a being named Sasabonsam was believed to feed on human blood. This myth prevailed in southern parts of Ghana and Western Africa. People believed that these creatures dwelt in trees and attacked the victims from above (Bunson, 1993). These humanoids shared a lot of similarity with the bats. Shtriga in Albanian Mythology, Strix, Lilith in Jewish beliefs also echoes the same traits that of a vampire though some religious politics is also associated with this idea (Bunson, 1993).

The traces of Vampire can be found in the pages of History as well. The story dates back in the fifteenth century. The fictional character *Dracula* is thought to be framed over an historical character Vlad III who ruled Ottoman Empire during the mid-fifteenth century. Vlad Dracul, the voivode of Wallachia had to send his sons Vlad III and Radu to the Ottoman Empire in the year 1442 as hostages to ensure his loyalty towards the Ottoman Emperor. But after a few years, Vlad Dracul and his elder brother Mircae were killed after Wallachia was invaded by Hungary. This was done by the nobles of Wallachia who were backed by Sultan Mehmed, the emperor of the Ottoman Empire (Macnally, 1991). This infuriated Vlad III. With the sudden death of his father Vlad Dracula in 1448, Vlad III broke the treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Romania. He returned to Romania and claimed his right on Wallachia. He was notorious for being a very oppressive king. He continued to enhance his power by occupying the surrounding kingdoms. He was feared for his ceaseless and arbitrary killings. He killed millions of people by hanging them alive and impaling them (Miller, 2005). Rumours went that he drank human blood. Vlad III also known as Vlad the Impaler declared himself as Vlad Dracula meaning the son of Vlad II Dracul. However, stories and legends of his atrocities,

assassinations, became widespread and he was listed as one of the most fearsome leader in history (Florescu & MacNally, 1989). The legends of his mass killing wove the stories of Vlad III being vampires that has been associated with humans since the middle of the fifteenth century. This historical terror fascinated Bram Stoker so much so that he created the most remarkable gothic literary character Count Dracula as the central character of his novel 'Dracula'.

Moreover, that is not the end of it. Mark Twain rightly said, "Truth is stranger than fiction". Thus, such mind-boggling truths emerge from the different corners of the known world that holds us in thrall. Can Vampires be true? Do they really exist? Well, the existence of vampires in the real world cannot be denied. Surprisingly, it is true that vampires with flesh and blood do exist. Vampire-humans do live like us. Julia Keples, a mother of two kids, who is a resident of Pennsylvania, reports that she drinks two litres of human blood per month. She cut opens the blood donor's body with a long ancient knife that she has and drinks fresh blood from the wound. Interviews with a couple Lia Benninghoff and Aro Draven that was telecasted on National Geographic Channel petrified many viewers. They claimed that they drink each other's blood at specific intervals. Draven's blood thirst was already there. After meeting Lia, who is fifteen years younger to him, he confessed about his thirst for blood and the former realizes the same attraction that was dormant in her. The couple claims that that they get deep satisfaction in sucking each other's blood.

Being a vampire, the intoxication of drinking blood is also known in medicine. This psychosis is somewhat rare but not uncommon. In medical science it is called Renfield Syndrome or Clinical Vampirism. This rogue originated in childhood or adolescence by cutting or making trouble somewhere in his body, and being satisfied with it in some way. This disease is caused by extreme trauma, accident or torture. However, in very few cases it is seen to increase. In most cases the disease is not severe.

This is a strange world. No matter how much we wonder at the twists and turns of the imagination, there are many things left in the realm of reality that outgrow our acquired knowledge, consciousness, and thoughts. The vampire cult is old enough, and even today 'vampirism' has kept us its fade existence. So, it is difficult to say which came first. Was it the psychological disease that made humans to churn stories, or that few people became influenced by the ancient folklores that have survived through ages? Most likely, it is the reality that has shaped these legends as it is an irrefutable fact that truth surpasses human imagination in all ways.

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