Mythic Vampires

The vampire legend has always been with us—from the shadows of the ancient Egyptian pyramids to the bright lights of New York City, the vampire's evil remains eternal. From the villages of Uganda and Haiti to the remote regions of the Upper Amazon, indigenous people know the vampire in its many guises. The traditional Native American medicine priests, the Arctic Eskimo shaman, the Polynesian Kahuna, all know the myth of the vampire and take precautions against those whom they believe were once human and who are now among the undead who seek blood by night to sustain their dark energies.

Every culture has its own name for the night stalker. The word with which most of us are familiar rises from the Slavonic Magyar—vam, meaning blood; Tjur, meaning monster. To cite only a few other names for the vampire from various languages, there is the older English variation, vampyre; the Latin, vampires; Serbian, vampir; Russian, vampyr; Polish, Upir; and the Greek, Bracolacas.

The physical appearance of a vampire in European folklore is grotesque, a nightmarish creature with twisted fangs and grasping talons. The cinematic depiction of the vampire in F.W. Murnau's Nosferatu (1922) presented moviegoers with an accurate depiction of the traditional vampire. In this film, which was Murnau's unauthorized version of the Count Dracula saga, we see actor Max Schreck's loathsome bloodsucker, Count Orlock, skittering about in the shadows with dark-ringed, hollowed eyes, pointed devil ears, and hideous fangs. With his long, blood-stained talons, his egg-shaped head and pasty white complexion, Schreck's Nosferatu captures the classic appearance of the undead as seen in the collective nightmares of humankind.

During many demon-haunted centuries in Europe, the dark powers of the vampire grew even stronger in the mind of the average man or woman. According to nervous admonitions, after dusk fell, the vampire's hypnotic powers were irresistible, and his strength was that of a dozen men. He could transform himself into the form of a bat, a rat, an owl, a fox, or a wolf. He was able to see in the dark and to travel on
moonbeams and mist. Sometimes, he had the power to vanish in a puff of smoke.

Desperate, frightened people sought to garland their windows with garlic or wolf bane, to obtain a vial of holy water, hang a crucifix on every wall, and say their prayers at night, but there was no certain protection from the attack of a vampire. Even a recently buried relative could have been cursed to become a vampire, and once night fell, the corpse, animated by blood lust, would claw his way out of the rot of the grave to seek unholy nourishment from his own family members. The vampire was a hideous predator that could only be killed by a stake through the heart and decapitation.

An alternate course of action against the vampire was to pry open its coffin during the daylight hours while it lay slumbering and pound a wooden stake through its heart—or, perhaps a bit safer, destroy the coffin while it was away and allow the rays of the early morning sun to scorch the monster into ashes.

Because we are so conditioned to hearing so many of the classic cinematic vampires speak with the same kind of foreign accent, some of us may be somewhat surprised when we learn that people around the world fear the nocturnal visits of the vampire.

In China, the Chiang-shíh may appear as a corpse-like being covered in green or white hair. Taking the lives of individuals traveling at night is the Chiang-shíh’s only motivation in its wretched existence. The creature is equipped with long, sharp claws, jagged fangs, and glowing red eyes.

The Chiang-shíh may also possess a human body so that it can appear as a seductive woman or a handsome man to its unsuspecting victims. In some instances, the entity reanimates a recently deceased corpse, especially that of someone who committed suicide.

In Chapter One I mentioned the seductive, blood-sucking Rakshasas of the Hindus, but this beautiful night stalker is not alone in Indian tradition. Throughout the centuries Mother India has endowed a wide variety of vampiric night stalkers.

The Bhuta haunts the wilderness and the wastelands and often signals its presence by an eerie display of glowing lights. Because these hideous beings feed on rotting corpses, the bite of the Bhuta brings illness and sometimes fatal disease.

The rapacious Brahmaparish is said to seize its victims by the head and drink their blood through a hole that it punctures in their skulls. Once it has had its fill of blood, the Brahmaparish eats the brains of those who have fallen into its clutches.
When the gory feast has been completed, the vampire engages in a bizarre dance of triumph around the corpse.

The Churel certainly extinguish the beautiful, seductive image that has been established by so many female vampires around the world. The Churel are nightmarishly ugly with wild strands of hair, sagging breasts, black tongues, and thick, rough lips. Since luring a handsome man to accompany them into the shadows is definitely out of the realm of possibility, the Churel throw seduction aside and viciously attack young men.

The aboriginal people of Australia speak of the Yara-Ma-Yha-Who, a nasty shadow dweller who uses the suckers on the ends of his fingers and toes to feast on the blood of its victims.

The Ashanti people of southern Ghana fear the Asasabonsam, vampiric entities that favor luring people into the deep forests. The Asasabonsam appear as regular humans—until they suddenly sprout hook-like legs and savage teeth to drink their victim's blood.

Another vampiric being that bothers the tribes of Africa’s Gold Coast is the Obayifo. This creature might be explained as the spirit form of a male or female practitioner of the Dark Arts that leaves the host body at night and goes in search of human blood. Sometimes the being appears as a glowing ball of light before it reaterializes as a vampire and claims its victim.