



"Yuh vampire, yuh soucouyant, yuh blood sucker, yuh dracula...Miss lady where seh mi bite you" - Prince Unique: Ouch

Nightly Transformations: Unveiling the Soucouyant's Sexuality and its Significance in Redefining Women's Agency and Empowerment in the Caribbean

How is the sexuality of the Soucouyant portrayed in relation to women's agency and autonomy, and how does this contribute to discussions around female empowerment in the Caribbean?

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Prince Unique's song 'ouch' has been the catalyst to this thinkpiece bringing me full circle to finally giving time to explore my many thoughts on the Soucouyant.

According to a lot of "ole talk" i'd heard growing up a soucouyant is an old and wise but terrifying woman who has the capacity to change into a ball of fire as a result of coming out of her skin. Word has it that to come out of her skin she has to go to a graveyard at midnight when there is a new moon, and with a black penny dig out the liver of a freshly buried corpse. With that she makes oil. And it is with the use of the oil that she is able to emerge out of her skin, turning into a ball of fire. Leave the skin in a mortar and fly through the night looking for somebody to suck out their blood.

The soucouyant was an incredibly important control factor in what I would call 'village society.' The word 'Soucouyant' itself comes from the word 'succubus'-- derivative of the term derives from Late Latin succuba "paramour" from succubare "to lie beneath" (sub- "under" and cubare "to lie"), used to describe this being's implied sexual position relative to the sleeper's position. Nevertheless, within the context of the Caribbean folklore, the Soucouyant character is said to suck the blood from sleeping humans, targeting areas like their arms, necks, legs, and other soft regions, resulting in the appearance of black and blue marks on the body the next morning. There is a belief that if the soucouyant extracts an excessive amount of blood, the victim may face two outcomes: either succumb to death and transform into a soucouyant, or perish entirely, allowing the assailant to adopt their skin. There is a theory that the vampire tradition was brought to Trinidad by some old French families and these people who brought a vampire tradition to Trinidad lived extremely closely with African people, enslaved people who also had a vampire tradition. The latter also possessed a tradition of changing into a creature that could draw the blood out from someone; and it is out of this interface of cultures, a syncretic event, that birthed the Soucouyant.

Many narratives depict the sexuality of the Soucouyant as a harbinger of fear and danger. The character is often portrayed as a malevolent force that preys on unsuspecting individuals using her sexuality. In such narratives, the sexuality of the Soucouyant is associated with the fear of the unknown and the dangers that lurk in the darkness. The act of shedding her skin and flying as a ball of fire can be seen as a manifestation of the supernatural, heightening the fear surrounding her sexual nature.

Tales say the soucouyant does not like a lot of light, hence why you find more of them in the rural and country areas. Hence why you don't get them much in the city where there are too many bright lights. Speaking with some of the older people in my family and others I know, it was always said that a Soucouyant would leave a round blue-black mark on your skin from where she has sucked your blood. When a member of the household woke up with this mark everyone would traditionally be on high alert looking to figure out who it is. Typically they would look for elders. In a cruel legend that demonises old age, this "witch hunt" targets old women who may be suffering from Alzheimer's, dottish or have a 'peculiar' way of behaving characteristic of the elderly.

We must be careful with witch stories. Women tend to outlive men - sometimes by several decades - and women tend to inherit property and wealth. A woman in a village could be in her nineties, maybe a little infirm but with a sound mind and owns the house she lives in and several acres around the place. To represent her as a Soucouyant or La diablesse is to dispute her sovereign body and mind—her capacity to steward property or impart wisdom.

Wielded in the wrong hands, the soucouyant cuts its warnings against the generational wisdom of women elders. A woman may be condemned for offering advice to the youth or her knowledge of herbal preparations and remedies. The negative connotations of "obeah" or the occult make it easy to commit this woman to a 'madhouse' or to burn down her house—sentencing her to a physical or social death. In this gendered practice of enclosure, the village would then inherit her land.

There are also many tales of people catching a soucouyant, how they caught her skin with a mortar pestle and put salt in it and she couldn't put her skin back on because of the amount of pepper and salt. The town of Mayaro in "deep south" is one place where many claim to have caught a soucouyant. People have shared the different methods of trying to catch one. Some say if you turn the broom in your house she will not be able to leave. Others place plenty rice on the step before she could leave.

It is this vernacular tradition that Prince Unique calls upon in 'Ouch'. Despite the casual nature of his reference to the soucouyant in this upbeat, soca song, 'Ouch' comments on the positionality of women in Caribbean society as a battleground over gendered and sexual autonomy.

Wielded by Caribbean women themselves, the Soucouyant may be framed as a source of empowerment for Caribbean women in pursuit of autonomy. The Soucouyant may use her sexual allure to seduce and manipulate individuals (who are typically men). The ability to transform and move freely at night, especially in a society with gendered norms and restrictions on women enacted through normalised patriarchal terror, may be portrayed as a form of liberation. Her sexuality becomes a tool for agency and control, allowing her to navigate the world on her terms.

The intersection of sexuality and monstrosity is a common theme in narratives featuring supernatural beings like the Soucouyant. Her sexual nature may be depicted as monstrous, blurring the lines between desire and danger. This can contribute to the stigmatisation of sexuality and the reinscription of societal fears and taboos surrounding female sexuality. Her sexuality is both empowering and dangerous, depending on who wields her powers. The themes of sexuality and monstrosity in the Soucouyant's character arguably could be explored as a narrative strategy to highlight the perceived threat of female agency. By portraying the Soucouyant as both alluring and monstrous, narratives may be commenting on the societal ambivalence toward women who assert their independence and challenge conventional gender roles. Thus the exploration of dualities within the Soucouyant's character can be seen as an effort to humanise and complicate her representation. This nuanced approach allows for a more profound examination of the character's motivations, blurring the lines between good and evil. It prompts readers and audiences to question simplistic stereotypes and encourages a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of female identity and agency.

As mentioned prior the legend of this character is heavily based on the demonisation of the older or aged female archetype that has been made synonymous with destruction and witchcraft.

The Soucouyant is deeply embedded in Caribbean culture, reflecting the region's history of colonisation, the influence of African and indigenous beliefs, and the complexities of identity. In examining the character's portrayal, scholars may explore how the Soucouyant serves as a cultural symbol, embodying fears, desires, and societal tensions specific to the Caribbean context. Her sexuality can also be analysed through the lens of colonial legacies. In many Caribbean societies, historical norms and values, often influenced by European colonial powers, imposed restrictions on female sexuality. Her ability to defy these norms by freely navigating the night and using her sexuality for empowerment may be interpreted as a

commentary on the resilience and resistance of Caribbean women against colonial constraints.

The association of the Soucouyant's sexuality with fear and danger can be examined as a form of "othering." In societies with deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, the sexually empowered Soucouyant becomes an entity that challenges established power dynamics. The fear she instils may be rooted in societal discomfort with women who defy traditional roles, thereby becoming a manifestation of broader anxieties surrounding female autonomy.

Her ability to transform and shed her skin in Caribbean folklore can be analysed as a multifaceted metaphor that can be interpreted in various ways, reflecting both agency and potential malevolence. The act of shedding her skin and transforming may be seen as a metaphor for female empowerment and liberation.. In societies with patriarchal restrictions on women, the Soucouyant's ability to discard her outer layer and assume a different form at night symbolises a freedom from societal constraints. This metamorphosis allows her to move freely and independently, unencumbered by the limitations imposed on her during the day. The ability to transform becomes a powerful symbol of agency, enabling the Soucouyant to navigate the world on her own terms, subverting societal expectations.

The metaphorical significance of the Soucouyant's transformation might also embrace duality and ambiguity. The dual nature of her existence, where she can appear as an ordinary woman during the day and transform into a supernatural being at night, contributes to a complex portrayal. This duality can be seen as a reflection of the multifaceted nature of women in society. It challenges simplistic categorizations of female characters as either entirely good or evil, emphasising the nuanced and sometimes contradictory aspects of female identity. The act of transformation can be viewed as a form of resistance and subversion. By embracing her ability to change, the Soucouyant challenges societal norms and expectations, particularly those limiting women's agency. Thus the very act of shedding her skin becomes a metaphorical rejection of societal constraints, allowing her to resist predetermined roles and assert her autonomy.

Her sexuality and her ability to operate independently during the night can be examined as elements that both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles in Caribbean societies. The analysis involves considering how her character interacts with societal expectations regarding women's behaviour, mobility, and autonomy. In

many societies, women historically faced restrictions on nighttime activities, and the Soucouyant's nocturnal independence disrupts these norms, portraying a woman who defies societal limitations

The use of her sexuality to seduce and manipulate individuals challenges traditional gender roles that prescribe passive or submissive roles for women. Her sexual agency becomes a tool for empowerment, allowing her to exert control and agency over her actions.

The characters portrayal in folklore may also reflect societal tensions and negotiations around gender roles in the Caribbean. The character could be seen as a manifestation of both resistance to and compliance with traditional norms, providing a lens through which societal attitudes toward gender roles can be examined.

Her actions and choices, particularly in the context of her sexuality, can be examined in relation to broader discussions around female autonomy in Caribbean folklore.

Her character presents a complex interplay of challenging and conforming to societal norms regarding women's control over their bodies and desires. The use of her sexuality to seduce and manipulate individuals challenges societal norms that may restrict or dictate women's sexual agency. By actively using her desires as a means of agency, she disrupts traditional expectations of passive femininity.

The fear instilled by the Soucouyant's sexuality can be seen as a reflection of deeply ingrained societal norms and fears surrounding female desire. This fear often stems from traditional expectations and norms that dictate how women should express their sexuality. The character becomes a manifestation of the anxieties associated with women who challenge or deviate from these norms. The character's sexuality, framed as a source of fear, can be interpreted as a symbolic threat to patriarchal structures. By actively using her sexuality to manipulate and assert agency, she challenges the established power dynamics and societal expectations, embodying a potential subversion of traditional gender roles.

The dichotomy in the Soucouyant's sexuality, juxtaposing fear and potential liberation, contributes to discussions about women's experiences and struggles for autonomy. The character arguably becomes a lens through which to explore societal attitudes, challenges to traditional norms, and the complex interplay of fear and empowerment within the context of female sexuality in the Caribbean.

The intersectionality of the Soucouyant's sexuality with other aspects of her identity, such as age, race, and social status, adds layers of complexity to her character and influences how she experiences empowerment or constraint in Caribbean folklore.

Referring back to her ability to shed her skin and transform may render her ageless or at least challenge the conventional ageing process. This timelessness could be interpreted as a source of empowerment, freeing her from societal expectations and constraints associated with ageing women. The character's agelessness allows her to maintain a perpetual allure and agency, transcending the limitations often imposed on women as they age.

The character's race and cultural context are integral to her identity. The character is often situated within the specific cultural and racial dynamics of the Caribbean. The portrayal of her sexuality may be influenced by cultural perceptions of femininity, beauty standards, and racialized notions of danger or allure. The intersections of race and sexuality may contribute to a complex and nuanced representation that resonates with cultural specificities.

The Soucouyant's character reflects the struggles women face in negotiating autonomy within societal structures. While her sexuality may be a source of empowerment, the fear it instils in others highlights the vulnerability women may experience when asserting their autonomy. The character embodies the tension between the desire for freedom and the potential consequences of challenging societal norms.

The dual nature of the Soucouyant's sexuality serves as a commentary on cultural dynamics and negotiations surrounding female autonomy. The character becomes a symbolic representation of the ongoing struggle for women to navigate societal expectations while asserting their agency in the context of Caribbean culture.

Furthermore her character serves as a reflection of broader societal dynamics around female autonomy in the Caribbean. The tensions in her portrayal could symbolise the struggles and negotiations that women face in asserting control over their bodies and desires within the cultural context.

Conclusion

The Soucouyant's character, with its intersections of age, race, social status, and sexuality, contributes to a multifaceted identity. The duality and ambiguity inherent in

these intersections allow for a nuanced exploration of how various aspects of her identity simultaneously empower and constrain her within the cultural context.

Cultural attitudes towards female sexuality in the Caribbean are reflected and complexly woven into the Soucouyant folklore. The folklore provides a lens through which one can investigate how these attitudes shape perceptions of empowerment or vulnerability for women in the region. The fear associated with the Soucouyant's sexuality in Caribbean folklore may reflect broader societal anxieties about female sexuality. This fear can contribute to the stigmatisation of women who express their desires and autonomy, reinforcing the notion that sexually empowered women are dangerous or threatening.

Historical colonial influences in the Caribbean have shaped cultural attitudes towards sexuality. The Soucouyant's portrayal may incorporate elements influenced by colonial perceptions of female sexuality, contributing to a complex tapestry of how women's desires are perceived and interpreted in the region. This particular folklore may symbolise broader cultural debates and negotiations around female sexuality. The character's actions and choices may be seen as a symbolic representation of the struggles and agency of women within the cultural context of the Caribbean.

Despite elements of empowerment, the Soucouyant's folklore may also depict vulnerability. The character's use of her sexuality may lead to her being perceived as a threat, making her susceptible to societal backlash or exploitation. This reflects a tension between empowerment and vulnerability in the portrayal of sexually empowered women.

The portrayal of the Soucouyant's sexuality in different versions of the folklore or over time can reveal shifts in cultural attitudes and narratives. Examining these changes can provide insights into how discussions around female empowerment in the Caribbean have evolved and whether the character aligns with or challenges these evolving perspectives.

Traditional versions of the Soucouyant folklore may adhere to more conservative views on gender roles, depicting the character in a way that aligns with historical norms. Contemporary versions, on the other hand, might introduce modifications to reflect changing attitudes towards female empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations.

In more contemporary retellings, there may be a deliberate effort to portray the Soucouyant's sexuality as a source of empowerment. This could align with modern discussions around female empowerment, emphasising the character's agency, autonomy, and the right to express desires free from societal constraints.

Changes in the portrayal of the Soucouyant's potentially malevolent actions may reflect shifting perceptions of female sexuality. If contemporary versions downplay the malevolence associated with her sexuality, it could signal a move towards destigmatizing and normalising expressions of female desire.

Modern versions of the folklore may incorporate intersectionality, exploring how the Soucouyant's sexuality intersects with various aspects of her identity. This may align with evolving discussions around inclusivity, recognizing the diverse experiences of women in the Caribbean, and addressing issues of race, age, and social status in a more nuanced manner.

Evolving discussions around consent and agency might be reflected in how the Soucouyant's sexual encounters are portrayed. A contemporary retelling might emphasise the importance of agency and mutual consent, challenging narratives that depict the character's sexuality as purely malevolent or predatory.

Changes in the portrayal of the Soucouyant's sexuality could mirror broader societal changes in the Caribbean. If there is a more positive or nuanced representation of female sexuality, it may indicate progress in challenging traditional norms and embracing a more inclusive and empowering narrative.

The portrayal of the Soucouyant in contemporary media, literature, or popular culture could contribute to shifts in how her sexuality is depicted. Cultural productions may play a role in either reinforcing traditional narratives or challenging them, impacting discussions around female empowerment.

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jumbie griot, recommended further reading

Dundes, Alan. "The Vampire: A Casebook." University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Mintz, Sidney W. "Caribbean Transformations." Columbia University Press, 1989.

Alleyne, Mervyn C. "Roots of Jamaican Culture." Transaction Publishers, 1988.

Scherman, Katharine T. "Folktales from the West Indies." Pantheon Books, 1985.

Tell Me a Story, Papa Chaguan" by Joanne Gail Johnson

Caribbean Folktales and Fantasies" by Donald Hill

Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in Trinidad and Tobago" by
Selwyn R. Cudjoe

While not focused on the Soucouyant, this book provides cultural context that can aid in understanding folklore in the Caribbean.

Caribbean Ghostwriting" by Jeannine Murray-Román

Trickster and Ambivalence in Caribbean Women's Narrative" by Paula Burnett

Caribbean Folklore: A Handbook" by Donald Hill

The Polished Hoe" by Austin Clarke

A novel that touches on Caribbean folklore and culture, providing a broader understanding of the region's storytelling traditions.