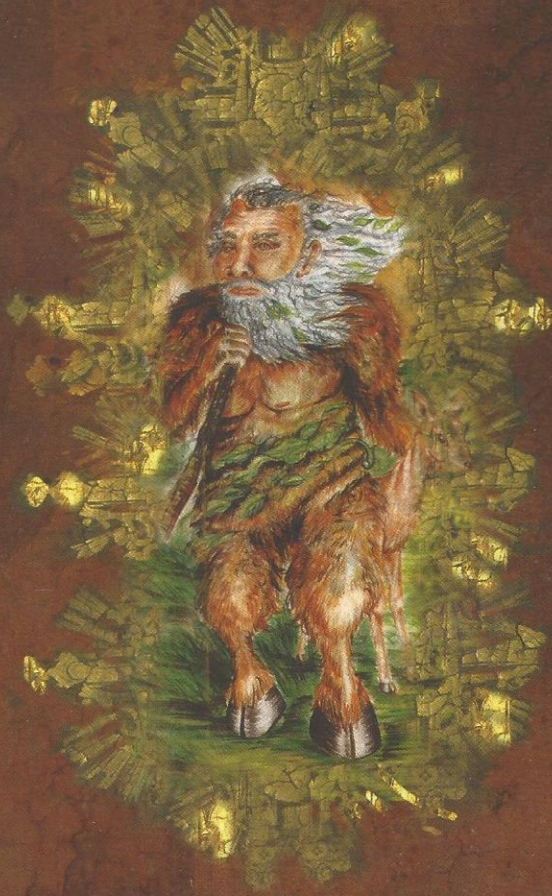


Folklore

& Legends of
Trinidad and Tobago



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Folklore and Legends
of
Trinidad and Tobago



written and collected by Gérard Besson



Papa Bois



THIS IS THE STORY OF the Ancient One who lived in the heights; who, walking through the forest, never met his like. At that same time, morning broke, bright gold—and the moon, unable to get away, stayed to look, together with a little bit of night towards the western edge of the world. The child cried as his mother's labour was done. She, through her tears, could see two great globes on either side of the sky: the sun, in gold to the east, rising, and the moon, in silver, waning to the west.

"A traveller," said the old woman. "He will walk across the world."

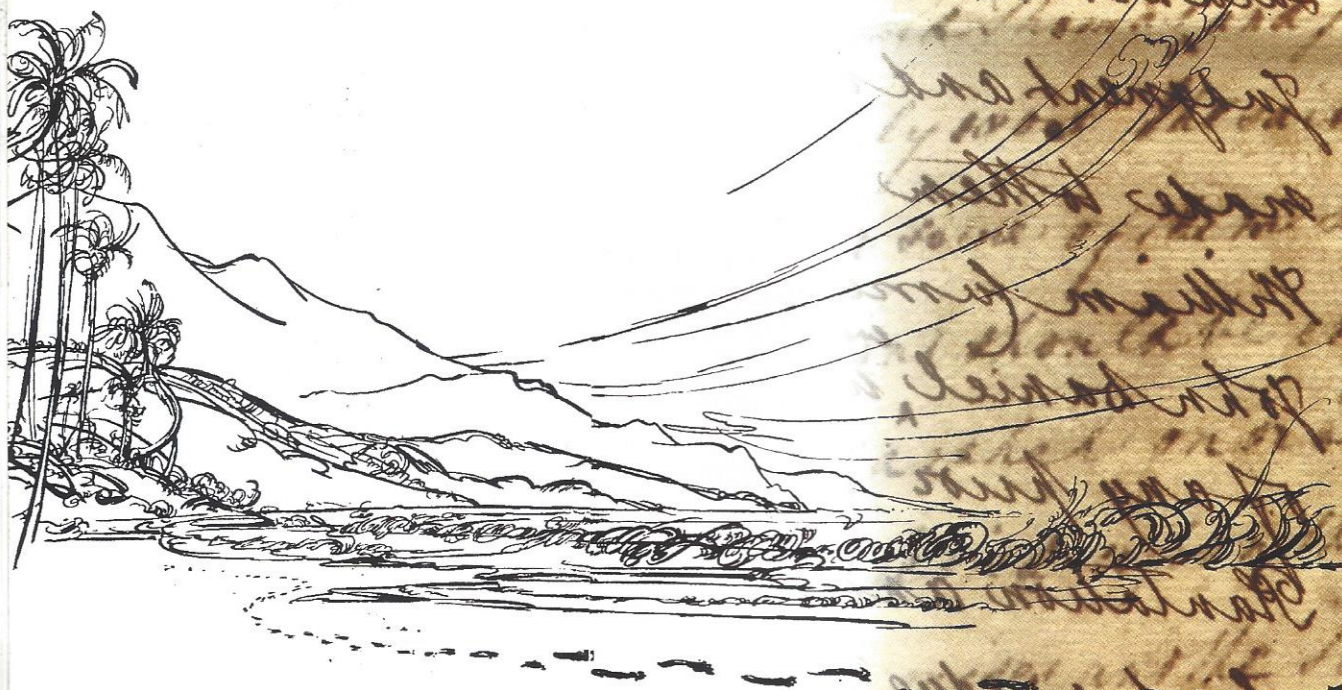
The seasons came and went. The boy grew without name. In good time, they felled a giant tree, and, with tools of stone, made a great corial, and set out for the Land of the Humming Bird, which they called Iere. Waves, like giant green horses, beat the air. Foam flicking in their hair, the men in the long canoe shot their craft like an arrow through the waves, towards the beach carved in white out of the green hillsides, ever rising into mammoth shapes beneath a blanket of deep green.

He looked around and saw that he was alone in the plunging sea. Boat, old woman, men, mother, bags of yam, a lappe, all gone. Great breakers tossed him onto the sand. He saw no one. He walked all day, and rested. Rising early, the sun to his back, he followed the coast quite alone. Sometimes as he strode across a sandy beach, just keeping pace with his shadow, he would say: "It is I," and so 'I' became his name.

I made his home in the steep valley that fell away from the bosom of Aripo, dropping to the sea, a place of very great trees, shy deer, many little animals, a host of birds, creatures great and small. I knew no difference between himself and all that lived about him, and there was no difference. He would lie upon his back and gaze up into the sky. Sometimes he would see a star blaze in the blue; and at night, from the branches of a big silk cotton tree, in his dreams he would fly, catching glimpses of himself in other times, and in strange places.

Once, between midnight and dawn, he dreamed a cool wind blew about his head, and he saw before him a big macajuel, its forked tongue slipping silently in and out of its mouth.

"Take it easy," said the snake. "I have come to tell you this: once, long ago when the moon was new, it sent a message to its children, the Aruacs, to say that in the same way it died and was renewed, so too the people of this world would die and be renewed. But by the time I reached here and started to tell the people, I really forgot the whole message—and the people themselves, they are so stupid, up to now they think it is only the moon that is renewed, and for living things—when you dead you done."





"The power in seeing is believing," said I.

"So true," said the snake.

"Did you tell some and not others?" asked I.

"Yes," said the snake.

"Is that why you have a forked tongue?"

"Yes," said the macajuel. "That is the damn thing self."

The days had become dry, so hot that the rivers and pools grew small. The trees with few leaves became gaunt with a heat that felt like it would explode. It did. Huge fires bellowed through the forest, driving all but the trees before it. In the terror of their inferno, they stood rooted to the spot, flaming branches tossing in the wind, tongues of flame. I felt their pain as keenly as he had marvelled at their majesty and great age. He ran screaming into the sea. In fright, he spent the night at the water's edge, but, as day dawned, he thought to himself: "Why should I be afraid? Is it not all the same, and I not one with everything, both the fire and the inflamed?"

After that, I would catch a glimpse of a form reflected in the mountain pools, among the stones and leaves that lay on the bottom. Sometimes, in the sky, or mixed between trees, sky, a darting bird, a cloud, he would glimpse a passing shape.

He was not afraid, he knew that all was I—endless reflections of himself upon the earth and in the sky.

Birds, animals and trees enjoyed the interest that I took in them, and,

as the years went by, I became their guardian and friend—mending wings and broken bones, standing godfather for the many young creatures who found themselves orphaned, creating a lasting bond between mankind and the children of the Earth. And the more he stretched his hands in kindness to the creatures, the more he became blessed. Fortune and wisdom were his constant companions, and I forged a link between Heaven above and the Earth beneath.

Wisest and swiftest of creatures on this island was the Humming Bird—bright, flighty jewel of the forest. The bird, she became I's eyes and ears. And I, I became a Humming Bird. Morning would find him flying, a bright arc through the forest, stopping here and now, swiftly hovering, piercing flowers, absorbing juices, sparkling sugars, giving with his beauty and flight to all creation what he took in sweet energy from it.

Brightly balanced above a shining, streaming mountain pool, the sun turning his speeding wings from red to green and back to red again, I saw below a wondrous sight. Basking, beautiful she lay—her upper body as finely made as I's, and from her waist she had a fish's shape long and slight. Swift as light, I landed and turned to mortal form. Startled, the creature dove into the pool. I followed, and, much to his delight, found many others of her kind. Strange, beautiful, always swift and silent, they swam just out of his grasp, elusive as a half-remembered daydream, a smell of flowers, or a mountain pool.

Time and time again, I would find himself in this river of the ladies, the Madames, as he called them—the Ladies of the Bay, ever-singing silent songs on still afternoons, sitting on the water's edge in the sunlight, lingering for a golden moment, a flash of green—gone! Nothing but a big morne bleu rising in the sunbeams.

"Did you see a fish jump?"

"Yes, but it did not go back in again!"

The world went by. I, the only dreamer on the scene, was sharply etched against all horizons. I became all things. I called many things by their names—Tucuche and Tarcarib, so to be known ever after. I walked across mountains and savannahs, north, south, east, west, and wherever he went, made a name for himself. Some of these names still remain.

Once I became a tree, a great immortelle towering into the sky. "Papa Bois," he called the wood. A big rise!

"What is the most precious, the most fragile?" he asked the bird buzzing in his vermilion branches.

"Ti Marie, Ti Marie," the Humming Bird replied.

And, as morning broke, the pouis shocked into yellow, and a rolling stone came to a halt. For Papa Bois had come to Iere, a great immortelle in full bloom, standing on the top of E Tucuche. I cried: "Ti Marie, where is she?"

"What he say?" said the bird, busy with her nests. "What he say?"

"Ti Marie, which part she living?" said I, as he bellowed through his branches. But she flew away.

"The wind," she thought. "Willy-nilly, blowing."

"Stop so!" said I as he hurried on his way, and to this day "Qu'est-ce qu'il dit?" says the kiskidee.

A La Diabliesse stepped from a great mahogany.

"Hoy," she said in a Bajan accent. "Like you step so fine, which parts you going, brodde mine?"

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"I looking for T'Marie," said I, starting about him. The forest had grown cold, evening drawing near.

"Like you going far—sit down nuh, take a five!" Now she sounded as though she was from George Street in Port of Spain.

He looked about him and saw a play of energy, a pale grey form, two burning eyes, rising breasts, desire. "Who you?" he asked.

"I am the pain of future years," she answered, quite plainly, in a man's voice, stepping out with her cloven hoof from behind the mahogany, the sound of a chain mingling with the rustle of her petticoats.

"Then you go back where you come from!" I shouted.

"You lucky you get away," answered the La Diablesse. "I looking for a tree to climb."

With the wind in his branches, Papa Bois hurried through the night. As morning soared across the sky, he found her—shy and fragile, a pink puff, leaves closing at his touch, the dew sparkling on her thorn. And they grew together side by side; and ever after have blossomed in the same season.

This beautiful Iere, land of plenty, rivers and mountains—fresh and unspoiled, land of creatures—monkey, lion, fish, serpent and dove, huge butterfly and giant boa constrictor—yellow pousis and silk cotton trees. Sometimes a hawk stopped still, as if painted in the blue sky. Swift humming birds, little Ti Marie, palmiste palms reaching from the forest floor through the tops of tall, thick-canopied trees, to stand out like isolated masts, their branches trailing long streaming yellow-tail-birds' nests in the wind. All around us were pressed our many seas. We like a junction of the world—the source of many a distant shore.

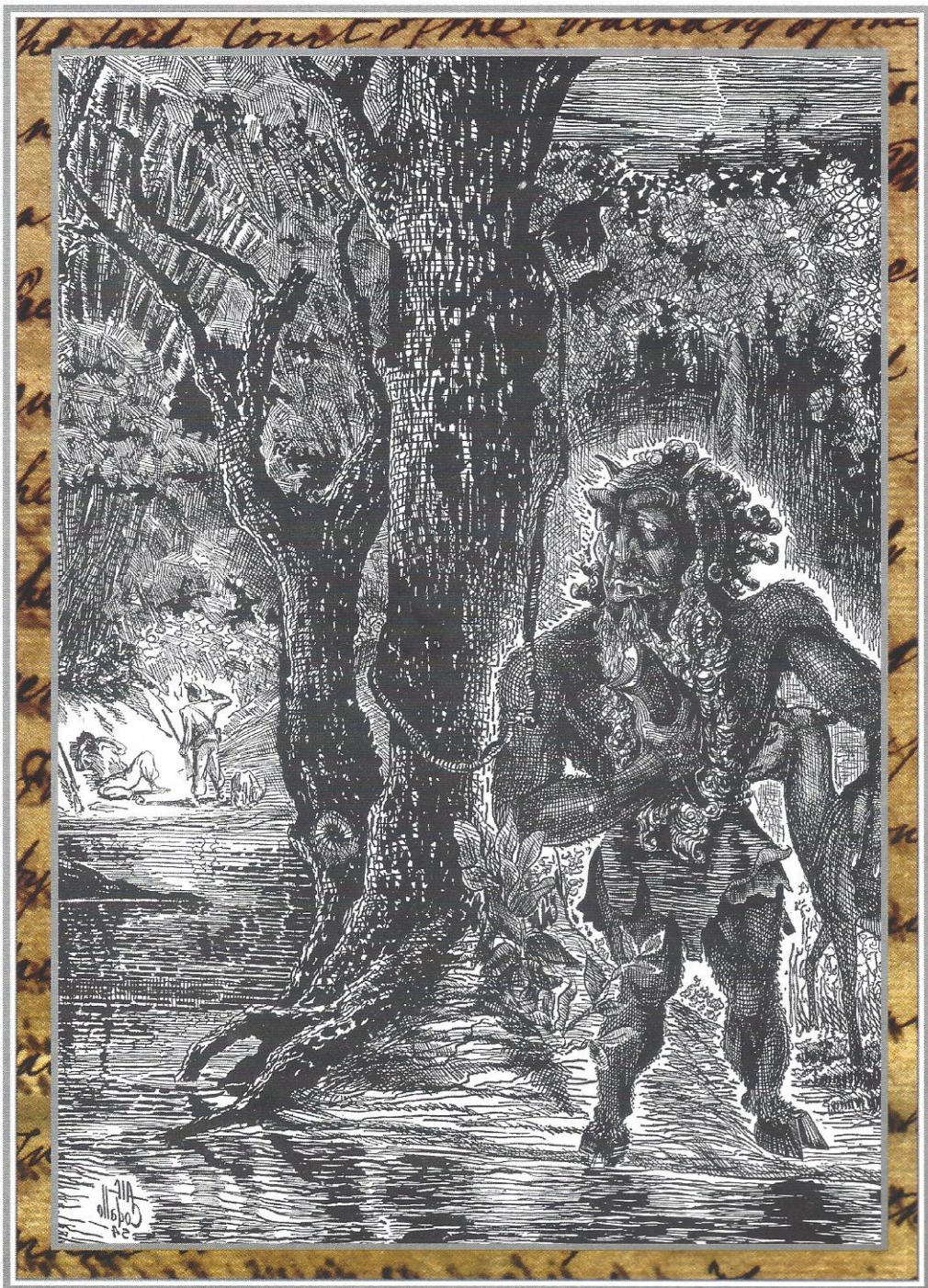
Above and below, I reflected in the sea and sky, smiling, sparkling through the leaves on a windy day. There in river water running, the cloudy mountain tops standing like great trees, was this land. Until one day not even I knew when he was not there anymore.

PAPA BOIS IS THE MOST WIDELY KNOWN of all our folklore characters. He is the old man of the forest and is known by many names, including "Maître Bois" (master of the woods) and "Daddy Bouchon" (hairy man).

Papa Bois appears in many different forms, sometimes as a deer, or in old ragged clothes, sometimes hairy, and though very old, extremely strong and muscular, with cloven hoofs and leaves growing out of his beard. As the guardian of the animals and the custodian of the trees, he is known to sound a cow's horn to warn his friends of the approach of hunters. He doesn't tolerate killing for killing's sake, or the wanton destruction of the forest.

There are many stories of Papa Bois appearing to hunters. Sometimes he turns into a deer that leads the men into the deep forest and then suddenly resumes his true shape, to issue a stern warning before vanishing, leaving the hunters lost, or perhaps compelling them to pay a fine of some sort, such as to marry "Mama Dlo".

If you should meet with Papa Bois be very polite. "Bon jour, vieux Papa," or "Bon Matin Maître," should be your greeting. If he pauses to pass the time with you, stay cool, and do not look at his feet.





B "Bon jour, Papa Bois. How come you know my name?" asked Mi-Jean.

"But everyone knows you very well, my friend. High and low, from the cloudy mountain-tops to the villages among the smoke and rum, hasn't everyone heard of Mi-Jean the jurist, the intellectual? Come, sit. Do not be modest. You are among equals."

"I see you have a cow foot, ain't that so?" said Mi-Jean, pointing.

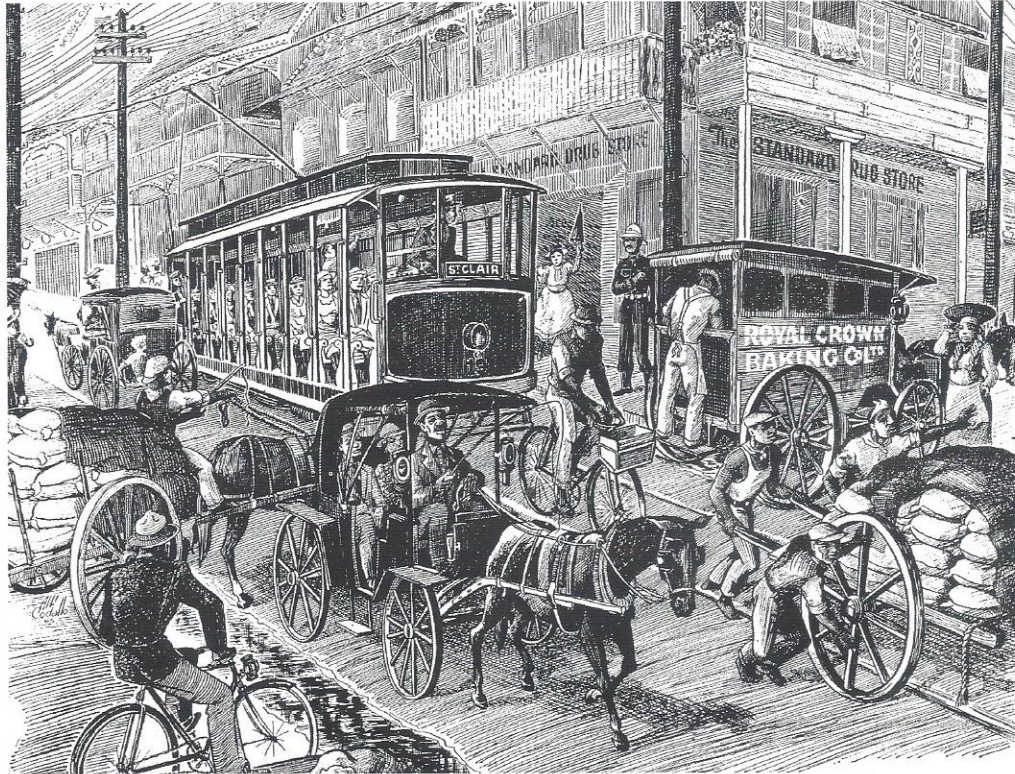
"Yes, yes. A cow foot—you have an eye for detail. Would you like some tobacco? What are you reading?" enquired the old man politely.

"Everything! This book have everything in it you want to know about. Cow foot ... wait ... ah go find it," said Mi-Jean, busy with the index. "Cow heel ..."

from Derek Walcott's *Ti -Jean and his Brothers*



The Soucouyant



GROWING UP IN PORT OF SPAIN in the late 1940s and early 1950s you could still see many aspects of life as lived by its inhabitants sixty or seventy years before as though preserved in a time-capsule. Trams were overtaken by clip-clopping buggies, bread vans made deliveries and hand carts, stacked with bags of sugar, were manoeuvred by three-man teams through the streets. There was horse-drawn transport and lots of bicycles.

The old house on Abercromby Street has long ago become a parking lot. But as a boy I was taken there to meet Madame Juillet.

My aunt Ameline said to me, as we climbed the creaky, dimly lit stairs:

“Be careful what you are thinking. She will read your thoughts.”

Have you ever tried to think of nothing?

We met her at the top of the stairs. She had been expecting us. They spoke quickly in patois. The sitting-room was almost bare. A large rocker and an old couch, a low bench and a small wooden chest. Mademoiselle Barth sat on the rocker. Madame Juillet reclined on the couch. My aunt and I sat on the small wooden chest. They were both very old and smelled of vertiver and ‘Evening in Paris’.

Mlle. Barth, with Madame Juillet's murmured encouragement, seemed to fall asleep. The other rocked herself gently. I thought of nothing. My aunt had gone there to inquire about Maxim Arneaud, with whom she was in love, and had been for years. As it turned out, she married Charles Loshon, and as Ameline Loshon lived a very happy life.

During the 1940s and 1950s, these two old ladies of Abercromby Street were well known as mediums, voyagers into the spirit world, who were able to solve love triangles, cure maljoe, and were credited in aiding the authorities in finding the remains of Mikey Cipriani in the high mountains of Trinidad's north coast.

It was while on one of these spiritualistic missions that Mlle. Barth in fact met her death. It was well known that old Mrs. Molay of Mayaro was a soucouyant. She didn't trouble the village, and the village didn't trouble her. The problem arose, if you pardon the expression, with her homeward-bound flights. As she grew into her nineties, her sense of direction began to fail. There was, for example, that embarrassing morning when she was discovered naked on top of the water tank in the police station compound. She had put her skin in its protective mortar on the tank. Now her problem was to get down!

The ladies Barth and Juillet were called in to exorcise her soucouyant personality, and that was when the trouble started. Although Mrs. Molay was old and frail, the soucouyant was strong. In the end, Mlle. Barth was savaged and subsequently died. She had been bitten and sucked by the creature on the sole of her foot.

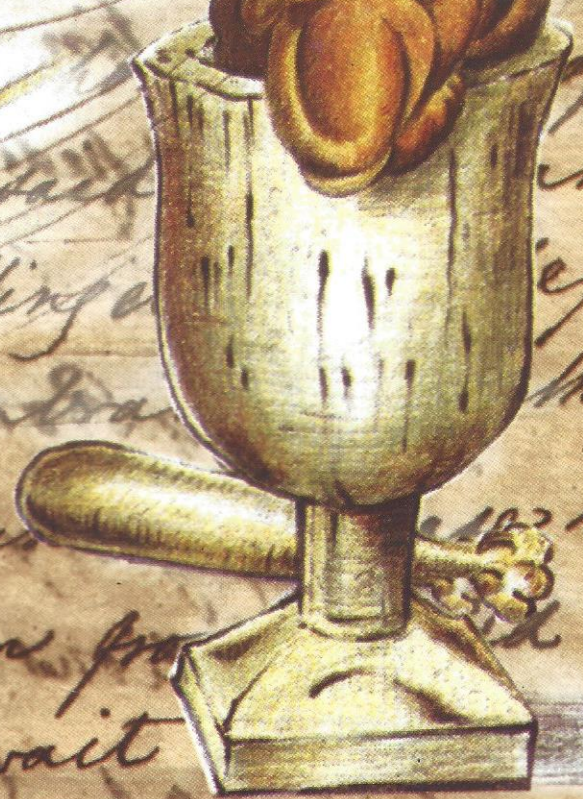
It was said long ago that certain French families brought the vampire tradition to Trinidad. These European vampires intermingled with their enslaved African counterparts, and out of this the soucouyant emerged. The soucouyant makes a pact with the devil, so that she can assume any form. Her first undertaking is to go to a cemetery and dig up a freshly buried corpse and cut out the liver. From this, an oil is made. When this oil is rubbed all over her body, she can slip out of her skin. The skin is kept in a mortar or the hollowed-out trunk of a tree used to parch coffee or ferment cocoa beans.

The soucouyant of Saut d'Eau Island off the north coast is described as a "ball of flame, along she came, flying without a wind". One Monsieur Didier had this to relate:

"One night I was fishing. Suddenly, I saw a globe of fire which appeared far away at the very extremity of the beach where I was and which approached me slowly. I remained absolutely quiet. The globe of fire passed by a few steps away from me, some metres in the air. In the middle of this globe, I saw the face of a woman whom I recognised as a negress from the neighbouring village. When it had passed by, I asked my comrades if they had seen anything. They said they had seen the ball of fire and the face of the woman which it surrounded."

Old people in Paramin can tell you about a soucouyant called Désirée, who on a bet flew to London to steal one of Queen Victoria's gold spoons. However, on her way back with the spoon she "catch a maldie" over Dent Ma Teteron in the First Bocas, and the spoon fell from her. The large gold spoon to this day lies on that rock in the middle of the First Bocas.

A soucouyant doesn't always suck you. She can pinch you too, or cuff you, and in the morning you will have large black-and-blues that turn a little greenish. After a while, you begin to feel bad, weak, thin, frail, "mager". Your eye sockets are sinking in your head and you are staring at nothing all the time. Then you die.



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Sometimes, she is a bat. Sometimes, a hog. There was a soucouyant who used to live at the top of Henry Street. She caused a lot of problems for people coming home late. Ripper Qui Tang's father had a shop. He emptied a hundred-pound bag of rice in front of Rosary Church. The next morning, people saw three big hogs eating the rice. There was another soucouyant who used to live under the washhouse bridge, near to Sunny parlour. She was bad. She used to work the mortuary.

She is the old woman who lives alone at the end of the village road, seldom seen, her house always closed up as she sleeps away the day. As evening draws near, she stirs and sheds her old and wrinkled skin, which she deposits into a mortar that she hides carefully away. Now, as a glowing ball of flame, she rises up through the roof and, with a shrill cry that sets the village dogs to howling, she flies through the night in search of a victim. She sucks his 'life-blood' from him clean.

As the blessed day dawns, she makes a beeline through the forest for her home, finds the mortar with her wretched skin and proceeds to put it on,—but something's wrong, it burns like fire, it seems to shrink and slide away.

"Skin, kin, kin, you na know me, you na know me," she sings, crooning softly, pleading to the wrinkled, dreadful thing. "You na know me, old skin."

Then, with horror, she realises the dreadful thing that has been done: the village boys and men have filled her skin with coarse salt and pepper and will soon come and get her, with a drum of boiling tar, the priest and his silver cross, the church bells—and then, the end.

If you wish to discover who the soucouyant in your village is empty one hundred pounds of rice at the village crossroads, where she will be compelled to pick them up, one grain at a time—that is how you'll know the soucouyant.



The Soucouyant of Sodor

OH, THE SOUCOUYANT OF SODOR, it was an evil sprite;
It slept away the blessed day, it wrought ill all the night.
A ball of flame, along it came, flying without a wind;
And when it burst, that thing accurst, it smote the steersman blind.
Oh, the Soucouyant of Sodor was the terror of the coast!

The "Jesus-Maria-José," she hailed from Pampatar;
It sent her on the cruel rocks, away by Balatá.
The "San Pedro" of Carúpano, the "Santa Fé" of Saïs,
And many more it drove on shore and perished in like wise.
Oh, the Soucouyant of Sodor, it was a gruesome ghost!

There was a crone in Sodor town, this fiend inhabited.
She slept away the blessed day, at night she lay for dead;
Now they have taken that lifeless crone, and put fire to her toes;
A burning match they made her clutch; and sore they wrung her nose.
Oh Soucouyant of Sodor, 'tis time to be at home!

They racked her here, they racked her there, her blood was all a-froth...
A ball of flame a-flying came, and flew in at her mouth.
Then sore, then sore that crone 'gan roar, for mercy sore she cried;
But they have taken the miscreant and drowned her in the tide.
And the Soucouyant of Sodor since then has ceased to roam!

(from *Legends of the Bocas*, A.D. Russell, 1922)