

Vampirism

The so-called "real vampire" community consists of individuals who either feel they must consume the blood or vital energy of others in order to maintain their physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing or who otherwise hold esoteric beliefs relating to vampires and vampirism. Generally, real vampires do not claim to be literal undead revenants as described in Slavic folklore. Rather, they employ the archetype of the vampire—as filtered through Romantic literature, nineteenth-century esoteric theories, and popular horror media—as a cultural shorthand to discuss complex identity claims and metaphysical beliefs. Real vampires often, although not invariably, participate in a larger vampire subculture that shares connections with the Gothic, BDSM, occult, and holistic healing subcultures.

Archival records trace the history of the real vampire community back to the early 1990s, however there are oral reports of the community existing as early as the 1970s. In the 1980s, several organised vampire religions emerged offering to initiate members as vampires. The most prominent of these were The Order of the Vampyre, an order within the Temple of Set founded by Michael Aquino, and The Temple of the Vampire, a group based in Lacey, Washington, that operates primarily through mail correspondence. In their literature, both of these groups based their authority on revelations received from "archetypal forces" or "vampire gods". However, these groups remain peripheral to the larger real vampire community, which generally rejects the idea that one can become a vampire through ritual initiation and is largely uninterested in joining a structured religious organisation.

The real vampire community coalesced in its current iteration primarily through the publication of vampire "zines" (self-published documents created using a photocopier) and the internet. The early 1990s coincided with a surge of vampires in popular culture marked by films such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and television series such as *Forever*

Knight (1992-1996). White Wolf's role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* was published in 1991. The live-action version of this game brought vampire enthusiasts into face to face contact and the imaginary vampire society of the game became an important influence on an emerging vampire subculture.

There is not a consensus within the vampire subculture about what defines a vampire. One widely recognised distinction is that between so-called "lifestyle vampires" and "real vampires". Lifestyle vampires admire the vampire of folklore and fiction as a cultural archetype and enjoy emulating it. This interest may include participating in a subculture of vampire-themed societies and special events held at nightclubs. The vampire lifestyle also has a heavy sartorial element that may include Goth or Victorian clothing, special jewellery (especially ankhs), and prosthetic fangs. High quality fangs, customised to the wearer's teeth, can be a sort of status symbol in the vampire community. Individuals trained to produce these prostheses are known as "fangsmiths". In rare cases, lifestyle vampires may have porcelain fangs that are installed permanently. But no matter how dedicated lifestyle vampires are, they generally concede that they are more or less ordinary people participating in an unusual subculture.

By contrast, "real vampires" believe they are different from ordinary people in a more fundamental way that goes beyond affiliation with a subculture. Vampires disagree as to whether real vampirism is supernatural in nature or a naturally occurring phenomenon not yet understood by medical science. Some are open to the possibility that the condition may be entirely psychosomatic. However, vampires generally agree that one cannot "choose" whether or not to become a vampire. In most cases, the real vampire community does not believe that an otherwise normal person can be "turned" into a vampire as in fiction. Instead, the majority of real vampires describe coming to a realisation that they have always been a vampire and that encountering the vampire subculture simply provided them with the vocabulary to express this condition. This self-discovery is sometimes referred to in the community as "awakening". Real vampires may or may not participate in the vampire lifestyle. Those that do often describe wearing fangs and other forms of participation in the subculture as an outer cultural expression of an identity they were born

into.

Real vampires do not claim to be literally undead or immortal. Some real vampires feel they have unusually sharp senses or heightened levels of empathy and intuition, but generally do not claim to have any superhuman abilities associated with fictional vampires such as shape-shifting. Most real vampires do not describe having the traditional weaknesses of the vampire (garlic, silver, etc.) although a sizable minority claims to have a sensitivity or an aversion to sunlight.

The feature that most defines real vampirism is a need to consume either the blood or vital energy of others. This need is typically framed as a health issue in which the vampire's wellbeing deteriorates the longer they go without feeding. There is not a universal set of symptoms associated with the need for feeding, but vampires have reported experiencing migraines, anxiety, nightmares, and other physical, mental, or emotional problems. Vampires feed in different ways but the most common feeding types are known as "sanguinarian vampires" (blood consumers) and "psychic vampires" (energy consumers).

Sanguinarian vampires generally consume human blood, although there is precedent for consuming animal blood. Since the vampire community became more organised in the 1990s there has been a focus on finding the most sanitary and ethical methods of acquiring blood. Sanguinarians rarely consume more than a few drops of blood released from small cuts. Some sanguinarians prefer to use disposable lancets designed for testing blood sugar. Blood is only acquired from consenting donors. The vampire community believes in self-policing and abuse of donors appears to be very rare. In 2004, Belfazaar Ashantison, a sanguinarian from New Orleans, produced a "donor's bill of rights" outlining an ethical relationship between donors and vampires.

Psychic vampires believe they feed on the life force or "subtle energy" of other people. The idea of a psychic vampire is described by numerous esoteric writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Éliphas Lévi, Helena Blavatsky, and Dion Fortune. These writers generally agreed that the vampire as described in folklore could not exist.

Instead they argued that the vampire of legend was based on an occult reality. Drawing from Mesmerism, these writers suggested that vampires feed not on blood but rather on vitality or subtle energy through a process described as "occult osmosis" or "magnetic vampirism". Many of these writers assumed that it was possible for living people, especially the elderly, to unconsciously drain energy from those around them. Their writings often described techniques to thwart this form of vampirism.

Michelle Belanger, an author and self-identified psychic vampire, describes reading this occult literature as a teenager and concluding that she had unconsciously been a psychic vampire. Belanger eventually concluded that psychic vampires are not inherently evil and can find ethical ways to feed if they are aware of what they are doing. Her early writings on the phenomenon of psychic vampirism were published in *The Psychic Vampire Codex* (2004), which became a seminal text for a new metaphysical theory of vampirism. Belanger suggested that ethical psychic vampires could feed on ambient energy found in gatherings like rock concerts or religious services, so that no individual's vitality would be noticeably taxed. She also suggested that psychic vampires could help others, for example, by feeding on "stress energy" or calming people suffering from hyperactivity. Since the 1990s, the psychic vampire community has increasingly been in conversation with, and influenced by, concepts of subtle energy found in Asian holistic health practices, such as qi gong and Reiki.

In addition to sanguinarian and psychic vampires, there are so-called "hybrid vampires" who engage in both feeding modalities as opportunity presents. Some vampires have also raised the possibility of other forms of feeding, such as sexual vampires or "Eros vampires", that feed through sexual interactions (Carré and Gray 2016). Exactly what types of feeding constitute vampirism and what sort of "energy" vampires are actually feeding on has been an ongoing topic of discussion and debate within the real vampire community.

It is unknown how many self-identified vampires exist. Some within the community estimate the total population to be several thousand. From 2006-2009, a research group called the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA) conducted the "Vampire and Energy Work Research Study", which surveyed real vampires and other individuals who believe they

work with vital energy from around the world. Over 1450 individuals completed the survey (Suscitatio Enterprises LLC 2016). While it seems unlikely that real vampires will ever be a sizable minority, it also seems unlikely that this community will disappear any time soon.

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