

## WITCH AND SORCERY IN FOLK TALES OF POLISH CARPATHIAN VILLAGES

Witch, one of the vital beings in folk tradition has often appeared in the stories of the inhabitants of the villages in which – during the years 1976–1987 – I have conducted ethnographic research on folk demonology.<sup>1</sup>

Exemplifying material, in spite of the flow of time and contamination of content, still includes numerous identification details as well as archaic elements. It reflects vigorous belief in this very being.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF WITCH

A witch is usually an old woman, hideous in appearance and possessing distinct both physical and psychical features.

Ugliness, deformity or at least a scar belong to the physical features mainly pointed out. Among psychical ones attention was paid to special kind of malice, secrecy, avoiding contacts with people, psychical deviations included. Such a picture was preserved by informants, though not always answering the real appearance of a woman said to be a witch. Still it did not influence any change of appreciation. It existed, as some pattern, fixed by tradition. And a person, disliked for different reasons, substituted it.

The features enumerated above were not the only qualifying ones in the eyes of superstitious people to say a woman was a witch. Such a person had to be wise in herbs, to have contacts with devil. She was said to participate in witch-rallies on Łysa Góra (so called "Bald Mountain") and had metamorphic capabilities. First of all, though, she was proficient in magic, namely in taking away cows' milk. This secret procedure was inherited from generation to generation.

1 Field work was done within the framework of research of Ethnological Study of Archeological and Ethnological Institut at Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow in seven villages of the West Carpathians. The villages are situated in the chains of mountains named Beskid Sądecki, Śląski and Żywiecki.

Some of the features mentioned have been surprisingly alive and found continuation, some others have disappeared or have been found sporadically in tales and stories. Still after the World War II in one of the villages where the research had been conducted there was a case in which the informant's mother was said to be a witch just because she was collecting herbs for her own use.

Care taken by a housekeeper of the cattle which resulted in high productivity of milk would be enough to impute her witchcraft. The examples mentioned so far reflect mechanism of functioning of given stereotypes in a new cultural reality.

In individual cases information appears only there pointing out some connection of witch with devil as well as her flights to Łysa Góra.

In the first piece of information given, it was said that two women (one was said to be a witch) had gone to a bush of a willow (*Salix rosmarinifolia* L.), a would-be sit of devil. The magic formula recited there was to ensure the coes of witch's neighbour with stable and great quantity of milk. The formula went as follows: "Rokita, here is a woman to you and she is in want of milk / She has come with her soul and body".<sup>2</sup>

The presumed effect didn't take place as the bush rustled and the frightened woman ran away.

The second story mentioned a witch-housekeeper who flew on her besom to Sabbath. Her farm hand-thanks to overheard spell: "Besom, besom, carry me on Łysa Góra" – managed to get there too. He met dancing witches and an old cat playing the double bass. Presumably it was a devil himself. The boy was made obliged to keep the secret. After he had come back he burst out with the mystery and for doing so was strangled by the cat-devil.<sup>3</sup>

A witch was said to be able to turn herself into a toad and for that reason a woman doing harm to cattle was often described by this word. Information dealing with zoomorphic skills of a witch comes from two examined villages only.

One piece of it, more elaborate than the other, says that some man while seeing a toad approaching the cow barn hit her with a spade and cut her foot. The next day he met a neighbour with hurt, fingerless hand. The commentary was obvious: the woman was a witch turned into a toad.

Apart from the information passed from generation to generation as far as the appearance of witch and her way of acting was concerned some magic acts to enable her were known identification.

2 Rokita in one of a folk – name for devil living in a willow.

3 Relation of an inhabitant of Sól village (Beskid Żywiecki).

Thus, as the informants were convicted, the suspicions could be proved. To obtain this a small stick a day was collected from St. Lucia (13.12) till Christmas Eve (24.12). On Christmas Eve the sticks were burned in the oven. The first woman who had appeared that day was undoubtedly said to be a witch.

Such methods, unmasking a witch, are commonly present in folk tales. The forbiddance of lending something during concrete days is also connected in a way with identification.

The last years of a witch's life were marked with diseases and sufferings. The witch finished her life in pain, dying slowly and seeing "something" that wanted to devour her. It meant that in the declining years her fate was like this for her alliance with the devil.

### MAGIC PRACTICES

The significant role in magic practices of a witch was played by place and time apart from the techniques, various accessories and apotropea. Thus, the area of the witch's magic practices was the territory directly or indirectly connected with an object to do harm. But it was also a house to which she was coming to borrow some object. The question of the role played by place in a magic will be presented in the context of the practices of this kind.

Magical practices of the greatest intensity were observed during several given days in a year. However, it did not exclude the possibilities to harm animals and people in some other time.

The special days were: St. Adalbert and St. George's Day (23.04), St. John's Ev (24.06), St. Lucia's Day (13.12) and Good Friday as well as all the first Fridays of the months. Those "dangerous" days are generally connected with the concentration of magic/religious meanings in folk culture.

The ceremonies linked with those days could be treated as rites of passage as they fall on peculiar, crucial days of the year and so they provoke the intensity of evil forces' activities. They are opposed by protective rites and magic.

So, St. John's day is Midsummer; the longest day of the year. Ancient heathenish rites were concentrated at the time and for witches Midsummer was said to be a favourite one for organization of Sabbath.

St. Lucia's Day and especially the night prior to it was first of all the time of meetings of witches on Łysa Góra and the intensified activities.

St. Adalbert and St. George's day was commonly accepted as the first day of grazing the cattle on pastures. So it had a rite character linked with magic acts that served as the protection of cattle against evil forces.

The intensification of harmful acts performed by witches on first Fridays of the months as well as on Good Friday illustrates the exemplification of the struggle between oppositional forces: good and evil, fighting constantly with each other in the folk system of world's image. The first Friday of a month as the commemoration of the Passion and Good Friday, the anniversary of Christ's death on the cross, through the accumulation of the secrets of belief and giving them the rank of sacrum are the days causing – according to the conviction of the informants – greater intensiveness of evil forces' acts than during normal days. During all those days it was forbidden to lend anything from the household.

Apart from the traditionally "dangerous" days there has been mentioned "dangerous" time of day and night. It was, so to say, the "border time" between day and night especially the hours between sunset and sunrise. It was believed, that a witch performs her magic both before sunrise and at night-time. Therefore it was prohibited to sell milk and milk products as well as lend anything after sunset.

In magic undertaken by a witch two categories of behaviour towards the object could be selected: direct and indirect ones. The first category of behaviours contains the following kinds of activities:

1. drinking down milk,
2. feeding the cows of others with bryony (*Bryonia alba* L.),<sup>4</sup>
3. causing harm by a look or glance.

The first type of the magic acts was that a witch utilizing her metamorphic features under the shape of a toad would get into a cow barn and drink cow's milk directly from the udder. The root of bryony, mentioned in the second version, was given by a witch to people's cows to be licked. She would do it during night-time getting stealthily into a barn. As a result cows either lost their milk completely or it became useless: mixed with blood, with unpleasant smell.

Some words should be devoted here to bryony as the magic plant which usually appears in folk tales. First of all the antropomorphic shapes of its root were underlined; sometimes they were to be found also in an overground part of the plant. It was believed that the herb after having grown should be kept in a

<sup>4</sup> It is Polish equivalent of Mediterranean herb mandragora (*Mandragora* sp.) used for magic purposes. Beliefs connected with mandragora were transferred on an easy-to-reach homely bryony or banewort (*Atropa belladonna*). See *Kopaliński, W.*: 1985. 646–647, 940.

cellar to keep it away from light and from people's eyes. It demanded special care and cultivation. It had to be "milked" instead of "watered". If that was neglected the plant was supposed to cry loudly. It also uttered sounds when a stranger came close to it to warn a witch of approaching danger.<sup>5</sup> In one of the villages still in 1976 the information of growing that plant by a witch was recorded.<sup>6</sup>

Equally interesting though sporadically occurring is a piece of information dealing with a magic way of growing bryony. To obtain it you should kill a snake on St. Adalbert's Eve, took a fang – that is "a sting" – put it into garlic (*Allium sativum*) and bury in the ground. It was prohibited to touch the plant which grew out of it for 9 years. During all this time it acquired the magic power.

The third kind of magic behaviour was an evil eye.<sup>7</sup> In this case an object had to be within the reach of a witch's eyes as the act itself meant harmful glancing at somebody or something. It was a simple technique not demanding any special preparation or accessories and could be performed in the presence of others. Such an evil eye – numerous informants absolutely believe in it nowadays – caused diseases of live-stock and people. Cows lost milk or it was useless for consumption. Other animals for example horses, swine or even poultry got ill and the young ones even dropped dead. Causing harm by a glance was not in principle the domain of witches but being one of the practised magic acts, belonged to the repertoire of their sorcery.

Magic measures during which a witch had no direct contact with an object belong to more developed forms of activities. Here come behaviours symbolizing the process of taking away so called "benefit" that is removing or spoiling milk by an act performed in a magic way. There are the following versions:

1. picking up the grass,
2. gathering dew drops,
3. taking away objects from the farmyard,
4. leading a rope,
5. sweeping,
6. lending something.

5 Relation from Obidza village (Beskid Sądecki).

6 Relation from Beskid Śląski.

7 For more information see *Lehr, U.*: 1981. 91–104.

These magic activities were more or less developed technically which means either limited to manual operations or broadened to manual/verbal ones with addition of magic formula.

The acts were done on the territory much frequented by cattle or near the place of their actual presence. The effectiveness of the magic effort was conditioned by the time and place of action. The accessories used during the act were – depending on the version of the practice – a bucket, a stick (version 1), a jug or other dish (version 2), a rope, a rag (version 4), a besom (version 5). In the tales nudity of a witch was already pointed out as certain accessorial practice determined the fulfilling of magic acts.

The course of one of the mentioned magic activities ran as follows: on St. John's day before sunrise a naked witch went to a neighbour's fields. She had a stick and a bucket. She was passing 9 fields borders and she was picking grass on each, putting it to the bucket after having drawn a circle with her stick. Each time she was saying: "I take the profit but not all of it". After she had come back home she gave the picked grass to her cows. This act – as it was believed in – guaranteed to the witch's cows milk for a whole year while those of neighbours' lost it automatically. In a very similar way she collected drops of dew. And there were analogical consequences of the act. Only the words used were different: "Come dew drops to my jug".<sup>8</sup>

As in those two versions also in version 3, the result of taking away cows' milk was obtained by taking a stalk of straw, moss scraped away from the wall of a barn or dust from the somebody's farmyard stealthily by a witch. The same happened after having dragged a sheet of linen or a rope through the pastures. The contact of any of those elements with grass used for feeding cows, caused the spoiling or loss of milk. It was the same in the case of sweeping being a symbol of taking something away. A witch swept also at night on St. John's Eve going nude to a road along which cattle was taken to pastures.

One of the simple techniques, as far as taking away is concerned, was the actual borrowing of an object or touching it to take milk magically away. It consisted of magic gesture made on the hold object. It was a round movement reverse to that of clock hands.

One more way of magic acts of a witch, during which she had no direct contact with an object was to put down fleece, picked up at midnight on cross-roads herbs under the threshold of a barn.

8 Description and the words of magic formula come from Istebna village (Beskid Śląski).

Crossroads as well as the threshold create a certain border which according to folk beliefs assume magic features. A border limits certain territories closing or separating them from the influence of evil forces. But everything that happens at the border that is between protected areas is ruled by demons. That is why a witch chooses such places for her sorcery.

#### PROPHYLACTIC – DEFENSIVE ACTIVITIES

Deep conviction and first of all belief in existence of witches and their magic activities have led to the creation of the system of protective measures. Their aim was to avoid – be spells and – if they had been cast – to "reverse" them.

The prophylactic steps belonged to the first group. Among them were observed like:

1. fumigation of cattle,
2. sprinkling with holy water,
3. protection of buildings in which cattle was kept,
4. guarding of the farmyard.

Cattle was fumigated before being allowed to graze on pastures for the first time in spring as well as during some other days characterized by intensive activities of witches, so that are St. John and St. Lucia's days.

The dried plants blessed on the octave of Corpus Cristi or on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (so called "Herbal" – 15.08) served the purpose. The most common form in which the blessing of the plants took place on the octave of Corpus Cristi, were wreaths twisted from herbs and decorated with garden flowers. The plants blessed on the Assumption as they were many more, formed bundles and bunches. They contained herbs as well as leaves of vegetables and corn ears. A branch of fir blessed on St. Stephen's day (25.12) was also used for the fumigation of cattle. Fumigation of cattle was sometime connected with making use of apotropeas, meant among others a thing belonging to a witch for example her hair, a piece of rag etc. A smouldering plant or an object were put on a pot top and one was going around the cow fumigating it.

To protect cattle the sprinkling with holy water was practiced which – according to the beliefs – had a special power of protecting against the influence of evil forces.

Apart from fumigation or sprinkling with holy water other measures were practiced to protect cattle against witches e.g. her entering the barn. To reach

this goal a red hot nail was driven into a threshold of a barn or three crosses were drawn upon a door with a piece of blessed chalk. Dried and blessed herbs were kept in a barn.

Guarding of the farmyard – a barn first of all – especially on "dangerous" days was an additional element helping the prophylactics. A strange woman wandering on a yard was hunted out mercilessly. It also happened that she was licked.

The prophylactic steps did not always give wanted results and cows lost milk. So it was tried to reverse the course of things and use magic to give the milk lost by the cow back again. The measures of the kind meant:

1. fumigation of cows with splinters from the threshold of witch's barn,
2. pouring milk through the red, hot metal wire or a rag-colander with pins driven into it,
3. pouring milk on a range or a table top and piercing it with knife or spitting on it three times,
4. pressing of a churn twisted with a chain and praying simultaneously,
5. scalding of a dish used for milk or a churn with water (drawn at midnight with annealed horseshoe),
6. driving a red hot nail into a threshold of a barn.

As the result of the activities undertaken, a witch was coming and asking to stop the acting as it caused her pain (mainly it was connected with the practices dealing with milk). Then you were not supposed to yield to her requests but to proceed with the measures to the end and cows got their milk back.

Some of the prophylactic/defensive activities mentioned here survived till present days in active form. However, they are limited both in shape and range to like ones prohibition of lending anything and selling milk after sunset as well as fumigation of cattle and sprinkling with holy water. The belief in evil eye has survived till today. These elements of traditional culture function in investigated villages and the communities as a relict of bygone years. They express the ambivalence of attitudes being an example of still existing in folk conscience Christian/magic syncretism.

#### LITERATURE

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