

**NIGHT WITCHES IN RURAL EASTERN SLOVENIA  
IN THE CONTEXT  
OF SLAVIC AND EUROPEAN PARALLELS**

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In Europe in the 20th and 21st century, witches appear in many guises. They take part in public and private festivities, especially on Halloween, their images are widespread on the Internet, witches riding broomsticks have become a symbol for one type of radical feminism (cf. de Blécourt 1999: 150). They appear in various types of modern folklore, social games, films, computer games, advertisements, novels, picture books, newspapers, cookbooks etc. (cf. Harmening 1991). However, in addition to the many modern forms that witches in appear today, there are also still “witches” that have their functions within traditional village witchcraft. Research of witchcraft in European ethnology has been somewhat irregular, making a precise comparison among the different types of village witchcraft in Europe impossible, but on the basis of the available data it is possible at least to establish many similarities among the different types of witchcraft in various parts of Europe, as well as many differences – especially with regard to what constitutes witchcraft in a certain area, and what the word ‘witch’ means in various places. My paper is based on fieldwork done in 2000 and 2001 in a rural, undeveloped region of eastern Slovenia of 550 km<sup>2</sup>,<sup>1</sup> on the border with Croatia. The belief in witches is (still) very vivid in the region. Although people talk about them in the past tense,<sup>2</sup> they mostly talk about their own experiences. However, it became pretty clear that witchcraft here is anything but a unified system and that the word ‘witch’ has many different meanings. On the basis of the materials collected it is possible to distinguish between several aspects and elements of witchcraft, which partially overlap, but which otherwise can be more or less clearly differentiated.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork was done together with students from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana. More than 150 interviews were conducted. Data on the informants, transcriptions and cassette recordings are kept at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

<sup>2</sup> On the use of the past tense in witchcraft beliefs see Favret-Saada, 1980: 64-5.

<sup>3</sup> On differences and points of convergence among these three aspects see Mencej 2003.

The first aspect involves social tensions within the community, especially among neighbors: here I am referring to accusations which directly touch on relations between people, for which people consider the envy, jealousy or wickedness of their neighbors to be the main driving force behind the harm which is done. The second subcategory of witches, still 'social' beings, but with somewhat different characteristics, are the so-called 'village witches', i.e. women who for various reasons have the reputation of being a witch throughout the entire community (cf. Mencej 2003, 2003a, 2005). In addition to these people, who are classified as part of the witchcraft that occurs on the level of social relations within the village, people very frequently report nighttime encounters with witches.

Night witches appear most often in the form of lights or as an undefined, invisible presence, which is identified as a witch only on the basis of negative experiences which people usually describe with the words: "the witch(es) took me", "the witch(es) mixed me up". People sometimes identify these 'night witches' as women from the village, usually women who otherwise have the reputation in the village of being witches, while nighttime experiences are mainly seen as an experience of the supernatural – these experiences are distinguished from the social and economic realities of the community. In this paper I will not go into great detail about the experiences of losing one's way, wandering about, going in circles, inability to move etc., as people usually describe these experiences,<sup>4</sup> but I will focus only on the *phenomenon of the night witch*, when it appears to people in a visible form – as light.

The descriptions of the lights vary widely with regard to color, size, and number as well as in other details. People most commonly see or directly encounter a larger number of lights – although this number is only rarely precisely defined (three, five or six, seven); for the main part people simply speak of lights in the plural. The colors of the lights are described, in approximately the same numbers, as simple yellow (like the light from a light bulb), blue, red or green, but they are most often described as multicolored or all colors, in which all of the above mentioned colors appear, as well as pink, violet and white. The size of the lights also varies in the descriptions: they are most commonly compared with the size of fireflies; other descriptions mention comparisons with light bulbs, walnuts, balls, flashlights, small flames etc.

The typical locations for nighttime encounters with witches are above all forests (thickets), crossroads, areas near water surfaces (near streams, rivers, springs, in one case in a swamp). Occasionally the time of the appearance of witches will be given during the course of the year, such as Midsummer's Eve, the full moon at the end of November, in the spring and autumn, Advent and Ember Week, but this data is so marginal that it cannot be spoken of as a collective tradition. The appearance of witches with respect to the phases of the moon is also fairly atypical in this area.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this see Mencej 2004.

Experiences of encountering some sort of lights differ among themselves with regard to the consequences which such encounters either have or do not have for the person involved. The first group of stories talks of simple observation of lights which people believe are witches, but does not lead to any negative consequences. An intermediate group includes stories in which people experience the lights as aggressive: the lights approach them, they run away and save themselves. The final group of stories is characterized by the experience of direct negative consequences of such encounters: loss of way, inability to move, inexplicable changes of location, wandering, walking in circles etc.

The explanation given for the appearance of one or more lights outdoors at night is almost unanimous in this area: practically every inhabitant interprets these lights as witches. Only three (from 150) informants believed that these lights were poachers and one as fairies. In the first case, when the lights are explained as being poachers, they are always also connected with other, auditory stimuli, especially the sound of gunshots, which is not characteristic of the experiences which are usually described by the locals in connection with lights, while it is a typical occurrence during the phenomenon of the Wild Hunt (*divja jaga*). Since the appearance of lights is not generally characteristic of descriptions of *divja jaga*, we can assume that in the three examples which we recorded there was some combination of both traditions.

In many places in Slovenia people believe, as in our research area, that lights are witches. In Trnovec ob Savinji, Mlinšek recorded a belief in the thirties of the 20th century that the blue lights which darted to and fro during the evening were witches (Hudales, Stropnik 1991: 56). Lights which are seen to fly during the night are also often interpreted as witches in the upper Kolpa valley (Primc, 1997: 187, no. 171; 191-7, no. 177-9, 181-5; 211, no. 205; 215, no. 210; 229, no. 226; 232, no. 230; 242, no. 245, 190, no. 176), as well as in Haloze (Gričnik, 1998: 86, no. 169; 146, no. 310; 160, no. 348 ) and in Gabrovčec (Kastelic, Primc, 2001: 52, no. 92; 54, no. 102; 54, no. 103). In Kal the lights which are seen at night are considered to be *vejšče*, i.e. witches (Žele, 1996: 31, no. 10). An Istrian story from Butari mentions that after attempting to attack a man at a crossroads, *štrige* (witches) changed into lights and disappeared (Tomšič, 1989: 49; no. 30). We could perhaps also find a trace of these beliefs in stories from the Karst, which speak of witches dancing during the full moon once a year with burning torches in their hands and playing a game like marbles with them at midnight (Kocjan, Hadalin, 1993: 68; no. 32, Koboli) or once a year gathering in a sinkhole and throwing burning logs into the air (Kocjan, Hadalin, 1993: 69; no. 33, Čehovini).

In some places Serbs also offer the same explanations, e.g. Serbs from Knin and Bukovica believe, as in our research area, that lights *are witches* (*veštice*): "A spherical dancing light which dances the "kolo" is called *sjajost*... These are *vješnice*. You shouldn't point your finger at them." (Handwritten materials, collected by Dražen Nožinić, from the collection of Ljubinko Radenković.) Karadžić also recorded a belief that whenever a witch (*vještica*) flies at night, she glows like fire (Karadžić, 1972: 301-302; Čajkanović, 1994/5: 219). I have even come

across the same interpretation of some types of lights or torchlight (as they describe phenomena which they call "santa compañía") as witches among the recorded beliefs of people in Galicia, Spain (Rey-Henningsen, 1994: 199).

Much more frequently we encounter the explanation that the lights are the *souls of the dead* or that human souls can show themselves in the form of lights. In his collection of the beliefs and legends of the people of Prekmurje, Kühar describes a belief in the *brezglavec* (headless one), which is highly reminiscent of the beliefs which we recorded about witches: in the evening, when it is getting dark, or early in the morning before dawn, you can see a bright light, like a burning candle, which flies over the earth at a high speed. It is the soul of a deceased child who died without being baptized (Kühar, 1911: 57, no. 46). In the same area they also spoke of *džileri* (engineers) and *méraši* or *merari* (surveyors, geodesists), whom they saw at crossroads, who light their way with lanterns, sometimes in the form of a glowing being – after death they run over the fields because during their lifetimes they never properly surveyed the land, and they have to walk from hell back to earth to survey in order to make up for the wickedness they caused for people (Rešek, 1995: 61, 62, 67, 69; no. 20, 21, 23, 24). The same conception can probably be found in the description from the Kanal valley of a small light which "jumps from boundary stone to boundary stone" (Zupan, 1999: 24, no. 12). A story from the Zilje valley describes blue flames among the mountain rocks, which shot up towards the clouds – first one flame would appear, and then one could see countless blue tongues of flame flying this way and that. These were supposed to be poor souls which the Pope had banished to the mountain rocks and which were driven to and fro by a mysterious force until they repented their sins (Graber no. 184; cited in Kelemina, 1997: 123). In Mojstrana a belief was recorded about damned souls which rise up from the swamp in the evening in the form of little flames, and rule the world all night (Bezljaj, 1976: 66). In eastern Štajerska people call wandering souls *svečniki* (candles) – according to their belief these are the souls of dead people who during their lives moved border stones, buried ill-gotten money or died violent deaths (Kelemina, 1997: 21). In Slovene Carinthia they once believed that souls from purgatory could reveal themselves to people as wandering lights, reports Zablatnik (1990: 127), and the same holds for a story recorded in the Pivka region (Žele, 1996: 32, no. 11). In Carinthia they believe that lights which move from hill to hill at night are pious souls which have no peace and are pleading for help (Repanšek, 1995: 94, no. 57), and also sometimes as '*cahen*' (a harbinger of death) (Repanšek, 1995: 92, no. 55). In the Bohinj basin and above Dravograd, people say of the small lights which people see at night that the "souls are doing purgatory" ('*duše vicajo*' in Slovene), i. e. that they are souls in purgatory ('*vice*') (Cvetek, 1993: 154; no. 110; Glasenčnik, 1998: 22-3, no. 10). In the area of Tolmin a story was recorded about two lights which people frequently saw flying through the air at night, especially in highland meadows, and called them *vidanic* – they said that these were pious souls which fly around at night (Dolenc, 1992: 41, no. 24, cf. also 111; no. 79). In the Škofja Loka hills the lights which move to and fro above puddles and pools are called

*videnci* – these are held to be the souls of children who died without being baptized, accursed people, struggling souls, the souls of living people, or are understood as *cahen* (Dolenc, 2000: 29-31, no. 58-70). A record from Pohorje speaks of a light which people who were watching over the dead saw glowing by a barn, and when they approached it it disappeared – although it is not explicitly clear from the story, one could assume that this was the soul of the deceased child whom they were watching over at the time (Gričnik, 1994: 41, no. 57). In Šmartno pri Litiji they believe that such lights, called *svetinje*, which flew from one castle to another through the air, are the souls of the dead who had to atone for their sins (Dolšek, 2000: 61, no. 60).<sup>5</sup>

Parallels with the Slovene tradition about lights can also be found in Slavic, European and from there also American traditions. Croats in the Kordun region have a belief in '*divji ogenj*' (wild fire), green flames which can be seen in meadows and forests. These are the souls of suicides. Croats in Sisek give a similar description of '*pesi ogenj*' (a light which moves around at night and which they believe are bones blown by the wind), '*jognar*' (a light which moves at night) or '*lampere*' (a light which moves over fields). Croats in Lika call the dead who return home from the grave with candles '*mrtvačko svitlo*' (the light of the dead) (handwritten materials, collected by Dražen Nožinić, from the collection of Ljubinko Radenković).<sup>6</sup> On the island of Brač, '*macići*', the souls of unbaptized children, appear among other things as moving flames (Bošković-Stulli 1974/5: 145). People in Croatian Istria who saw candles burning in the twilight believed that they were the souls of the dead – the grandfather of an informant from Peroj was followed by such a candle – like a fire (Bošković-Stulli 1959: 141; no. 135). Croats in the Drava region in Hungary also frequently interpret candles as the souls of the dead (cf. Franković 1990: 135-7). Muslims in Bosnia (Cazin) call flames which can be seen in the forest '*nur*' (Arabic for 'light') (handwritten materials, collected by Dražen Nožinić, from the collection of Ljubinko Radenković). A record from Bosnia states that the people believe that evil spirits appear in the form of flames, while others believe that they are the "glowing souls of deceased people" (S. M. 1889: 334). Also in Czech folklore we find a series of images of the 'unclean dead', which appear as lights, small fires, small flames, carrying lanterns etc. and which prefer to gather around the roots of trees, in graveyards and similar places: the souls of unbaptized children can after the death of the child turn into children of fire, while other souls of such or similar unclean dead can change into men of fire ('*ohnivec*', '*světloňša*'), small men with lanterns etc. (Navrátilová, 2004: 296-307). In Slovakia people are often led astray or even tried to be drowned by the *svetlonos* (Gašparíková, 2002: no. 17, 128, 146).

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<sup>5</sup> Near the border with Croatia in addition to explanations of lights as witches they also have an interpretation which explains them as *vile rojenice* (the Fates) (Primc, 1997: 128, no. 98). In Istria they are sometimes believed to be supernatural beings called *mrak* (Morato, 2002: 47, no. 30).

<sup>6</sup> Many references for beliefs in various phenomena or beings which appear in the form of light or lights among Slavs were given to me by Ljubinko Radenković of the Institute of Balkan Studies in Belgrade. I thank him deeply for his kindness.

A belief was recorded in Russia that such small fires appear above the graves of dead sinners who cannot enter heaven, and such fire also frequently appears in places where murder victims and unbaptized people are buried (Vlasova, 1995: 61) or above graves or in the forest (Tolstoj, 2000: 76) etc. Belief in *'bludjačyj ogoň 'bludjačyje ogoňki'* (wandering fire which appears in the air, in swamps, above treasure, as a meteor), is also found in the Grodnenska gubernija, where they speak of some sort of tongues of fire which appear above graveyards, and whose colors constantly change. In the Carpathians there are stories about meeting with a night spirit called a *nučnyk*, a supernatural being which appears as light or as a light, usually near or above water (Bogatyriov, 1998: 133). Vinogradova writes that so-called *nocnice* in a pan-Slavic context are believed to be spirits which appear in the form of small wandering fires – according to the people, the souls of dead unbaptized children or girls who die before their weddings are supposed to turn into them (Vinogradova, 2000: 20). Macedonians imagine the souls of the dead to take the form a small flame at the moment it leaves the body (Tolstoj, 2000: 76).

We can find the light phenomena described in these stories under different names in western Europe as well: the most universal name for such lights in English literature is *Ignis Fatuus*; in England it is known as “foolish” or “false” fire; in Italy *fuochi fatui*; in France they are *feu follet* (ancient French “folet” means “fairy”, so the expression would mean fairy fire) – this expression accords with the English elf-fire from the 17th century (E. Owen, *Welsh Folklore*, Oswestry, 1887-96, 112), as well as the English fool’s fire. Some languages use the Latin “*ignis erraticus*” for their conceptions: e. g. the English “wandering fire”, “walking fire”, in the English tradition especially Will-o’-the-wisp or Jack-a-lantern (Wells Newell, 1904: 44-5); Hunky Punk and Hobbedy’s lantern are other names for Will o’ the Wisp, in Scotland similar beings are called Spunkies, in Great Britain Piskies, Piskies or Pixies, which are described as white “witches” which appear at dusk – some believe that they are fairies, others that they are souls of the dead, and in Cornwall they are thought to be the souls of unbaptized children (Briggs, 1978: 198) etc. In areas of Germany we find many stories about the appearance of lights in forests, in fields, near suspected buried treasure and so forth, which people often believe are spirits (cf. e. g. Uther, 2003: no. 178, 264, 409, 440 etc.). Röhrich mentions that in Germany the wandering lights called *Irrlichter* are believed to be the souls of unbaptized children (1966: 34). In Sweden a belief has been recorded that a flame or rolling ball which leads people astray is the soul of a deceased person (Klintberg, 1968) etc. Jack o’lanthorns in Pennsylvania are believed to be the spirits of people who lost their lives through violence, either by murder or suicide: their spilled blood instantly hardens upon contact with wet ground, and at night a flaming ball rises up from the ground and flies around as if it were lost; such balls of fire also appear frequently in ghost stories (Hand, 1977: 230-1). In the West Country of England small white fairies (piskies) which dart above the earth at night are believed to be the souls of unbaptized children. Will o’ the Wisps are usually believed to be the ghosts of deceased persons. Spunkies

and Pinkets are believed to be the ghosts of dead unbaptized children, and Will o' the Wisps are also frequently believed to be usurers who hoarded gold during their lifetimes, or people who unfairly moved border stones during their lifetimes, or, in some stories, also people who were too clever for the devil and now cannot enter either hell or heaven (Briggs, 1967: 54).

The phenomenon which hides behind all of these different names can vary considerably: from a simple flash of light which moves around to personified or (e. g. in the American Negro tradition) even theriomorphic beings which carry lanterns, torches or light arise from this being (Wells Newell 1904: 45-6; Folklore in the News, 1958: 128; Hand, 1977: 226-8). At any rate, *seeing lights* is one of the universals of the entire tradition, as stated by Hand (1977: 228). A visible stimulus is usually the only thing on the basis of which people conclude that this being must be present. Only rarely, e.g. in a report from North Carolina, is such a being also heard (Hand 1977: 228). Similar findings can be obtained in our research area – the prevalence of the visual image, with an auditory phenomenon only occasionally present.

The differences appear not so much in the descriptions of the phenomena as in the interpretations or the various belief paradigms into which these beings are placed. In the area of eastern Slovenia which we researched, people *always* ascribed the appearance of lights (and at the same time the appearance of loss of way, wandering through the forest, inability to move etc.) to witches. As stated above, we can also find the same explanation elsewhere in Slovenia. But both motifs in the other areas of Slovenia and in the wider Slavic and western European tradition are nevertheless most often associated with *the dead* – usually restless souls or the souls of the dead, who according to traditional belief are considered the unclean dead: this means that after death they remain in a liminal reality between this world and the next, that they cannot get to the next world, while of course they no longer belong to this one. Unclean death can be the consequence of incomplete ritual obligations (unbaptized children) or sins committed during life (moving border stones, incorrect measuring or other sins) (Vinogradova, 1999: 45-9).

Researchers of the folk tradition also interpret such beings as unclean dead: Ljubinko Radenković interprets wandering lights (*lutajuča svetla*) as the souls of the dead or as fairies which arose out of people who died prematurely.<sup>7</sup> He even hypothesizes that red and possibly white color, which are frequent characteristics of supernatural beings, arise from the idea that the souls of the dead can be seen as wandering flames (Ljubinko Radenković, written information). Wayland Hand, who studied the western European and American tradition about such beings, also states that behind this tradition is a belief in souls which remain in a liminal state because they cannot get to the next world (i. e. restless souls), as well as about ghosts and spirits (Hand, 1977: 230).

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<sup>7</sup> The premature dead are one of the categories of the unclean dead.

While we can find parallels in the traditions of other areas of Slovenia with the prevailing Slavic and western European explanations for such phenomena, namely that they are unclean dead, in the area which we researched we did not find such explanations. The appearance of lights, whether or not there were consequences for people, is believed here to be witches.

Confirmation that the descriptions of night witches and their actions are actually closer to conceptions about the souls of the dead (or descriptions of fairies which arose from the souls of the dead) than the actions which are ascribed to “social” witches within communities, can also be found in numerous other elements which confirm the mythological origin of nighttime agents of misfortune – for example in the time and place of such experiences and in protection against them.

The *places* where lights/witches appear or the places where loss of way occurs (in all of its variants) – most often forests, near water and crossroads – are of course places which in folk (village) conceptions are considered unclean with respect to the oppositions ours/theirs, home/forest, near/far etc. (Ivanov, Toporov 1965: 156-174), in other words places which are dangerous for people, which are inhabited by demons, the unclean dead etc. and which are also typically the loci of the appearance of fairies (Vinogradova, 2000: 42-3).

The *time of day* characteristic for the appearance of fairies is (in addition to other dividing lines throughout the course of the day) always and as a rule nighttime or evening, from the beginning of dusk until the break of dawn or the first crowing of the cocks. Here as well there is no question that we are speaking about a time which, according to folk beliefs which we can trace not only among Slavs, but throughout Europe, belongs to the fairies – and from this also the many taboos about leaving home at night (Vinogradova, 2000: 43; Tolstaja, 1995: 30).

These stories also differ from the stories about “social witches” (village witches, envious neighbors) in the methods of *protection*. Protection against night witches is completely different from protection against envious neighbors whom people believe are witches, i.e. against women who have the reputation in the village of being village witches. One of the methods of protection against night witches is to turn your clothing inside out. This is a method of protection against an “unclean force”, which we find in all Slavic and European traditions, and is directed against fairies i.e. unclean forces. <sup>8</sup> All other protective measures which people use in their nighttime encounters with witches, such as the use of urine against witches,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> N. I. Tolstoj wrote a paper on “turning objects around” in general in folk beliefs; in it he especially mentions turning clothing inside out in cases where people become lost in the forest, which is supposed to be connected with the belief that the person in such a case is being led by an unclean force (Tolstoj, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g. the supernatural being known among Serbs and Bulgarians, called the *živak*: “The živak enters the room at night, moves around the room lit up like a firefly. We can rarely catch it. If we can't, we pee on it as soon as we see it and shovel as many burning coals from the fire as possible on it.” (Tucakov, 1965: 39). Cf. also measures taken against the *mora* (Morato, 2002: 52-4, no. 41). In Serbia and in Kosovo when a child has his or her first epileptic seizure the mother touches their mouth with her vagina and (after uttering words which are supposed to protect them against further seizures) urinates into their mouth (Plas, 2004: 261-2). Anyone who wishes to protect



Christian symbols (the cross), utterances,<sup>10</sup> or simply demanding that they talk and thus break the silence,<sup>11</sup> are known defenses against fairies. Therefore, for example, spells cast out witches in lands where no bells toll, where no birds sing etc. When a person spoke he or she in a certain way re-established this world, this reality, and abolished the presence of the other world, which was embodied by the witch.

All of these forms of protection are therefore much closer to protection against demons, fairies and the dead than to protection against envious neighbors or village witches who wish to do harm to others (cf. Mencej, 2003: 174-5). But this is actually not surprising: belief in the souls of the dead and/or fairies (which, as stated above, according to some hypotheses are supposed to arise from the souls of the dead) also affected belief in witches to a great extent, as has been stated often especially in research of western European witchcraft. Belief in Irish *fairies*, Norwegian *huldrefolk* (hidden people), Balkan (*samo*)*vila* and witches and their functions are frequently the same in the same area, as researchers of these traditions have reported. Disease, accidents etc. can also be caused by one or the other, although each also has their specifics which differentiate them. In Ireland beliefs have been recorded that witches and fairies (supernatural beings) dance together on Halloween; and many actions which people ascribe to fairies are also ascribed to witches (cf. Briggs, 1967: 140; Mathisen, 1993: 23; Jenkins, 1991; Alver, Selberg 1987, Dorđević 1953, Wilby 2000). Bennett pointed out the intertwining of beliefs about conceptions of witches and conceptions of the souls of the dead in English materials: the souls of the dead (ghosts) appeared according to the church demonology as disguised demons, fairies and animals or beings who were witches' helpers (familiar spirits), and people who saw things which others did not appeared as witches and warlocks. A review of the English literature on the supernatural from the late 16th to the early 18th c. indicates that both of these conceptions were so closely connected that they meant practically the same thing for over a hundred years (Bennett, 1986: 3-6). Éva Pócs, who studied beliefs in fairies and witches in southeastern Europe, showed that in Croatia and Slovenia the negative aspect of otherwise ambivalent supernatural beings was integrated into the figure of the witch. In the Balkans, where organized witch hunts were not performed, this reinterpretation of belief systems did not occur (Pócs, 1991/2: 308; 1989). Whereas before fairies provided a supernatural explanation for accidents which befell people, after their integration into the institution of witches all unexpected accidents were ascribed to human beings with supernatural powers, and everyday

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themselves against being struck by a whirlwind which contains fairies ('*samodivski veter*') must according to Bulgarian beliefs yell that they are dirty, shitty and peed on (Vinogradova, 2000: 359). In Iceland according to beliefs from 1400 – 1800, one was supposed to snort some urine into one's nose in order to protect oneself against evil magic throughout the entire day (Hastrup, 1990: 205). Changelings (children who were foisted upon people by fairies) were usually "treated" in Ireland among other things by forcing them to drink urine (Jenkins, 1991: 319).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Gričnik 1998: 98, no. 197; 145, no. 307.

<sup>11</sup> This method of protection probably comes from the widespread traditional belief that silence reigns in the other world, and that silence is a sign of the other world (Nevskaja, 1999: 126).

life was no longer regulated by a supernatural system, but by the rules of human coexistence; supernatural punishment relinquished its place to human evil. Thus also the characteristics of pre-Christian demonic beings are begun to be attributed to real, human “witches” – the human witch followed the actions of the destructive demons which were typical for a given area (Pócs, 1989: 7-9, 27-8).

We can therefore actually recognize light phenomena and events which people in our research area interpret as events which are caused by (night) witches as representations and actions of the dead or of supernatural beings which arose from ideas about the souls of the unclean dead. Of course, the phenomenon that the same motifs are freely associated now with one and now with another mythological or demonic being is nothing unusual in lower mythology (Vinogradova, 2000: 20-21). Thus the fact that we find the same actions and formal appearance ascribed at one time to the souls of the unclean dead or to fairies which arose from them, and at another time to witches, does not seem surprising, but only when we conceive of night witches as supernatural, demonic beings, souls of the dead, and not as human beings, i.e. as witches on the social level – despite the fact that such actions and appearance can also occasionally be ascribed to women from the village.

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## SUMMARY

Članek predstavlja plast verovanj o »nadnaravnih« čarovnicah na območju vzhodne Slovenije, kjer smo s študenti v letih 2000 – 2002 opravljali terensko raziskavo. Najpomembnejša karakteristika te plasti, v primerjavi s »socialno« plastjo (Mencej 2003, 2003a), je predvsem čas, ko prihaja do srečanj s čarovnicami. Medtem ko se lahko škodljiva dejanja, tipična za »socialno« plast, odvijajo podnevi ali ponoči in čas teh dejanj sam po sebi ni niti pomemben niti ni specificiran, so zgodbe te plasti strogo omejene na nočno obdobje – navadno na čas od prvega mraka pa do jutra, svita, prvega petja petelinov itd.

Druga karakteristika te plasti je sama podoba čarovnic. Medtem ko je za čarovnico socialne plasti vedno osumljena konkretna oseba iz vasi, najsi bo to že zavistna sosedka ali pa vaška čarovnica, se nočne čarovnice navadno kažejo v bolj nejasnih podobah – najpogosteje kot lučke ali kot nedefinirana, nevidna prisotnost, ki je prepoznana kot čarovnica šele na podlagi negativnih doživetij, ki sledijo. O njih vedno govorijo v množini: npr. »coprnice so me nosile«, »coprnice so me zmešale«. Nejasne podobe nočnih srečanj so ljudje sicer občasno identificirali kot žensko iz vasi, v glavnem

za žensko, ki ima v vasi reputacijo čarovnice, a v času nočnih doživetij gre primarno za izkušnjo z nadnaravnim svetom in sama po sebi so ta doživetja ločena od socialne in ekonomske realnosti skupnosti. Tretji bistven element, ki to plast ločuje od socialne plasti čarovništva, pa je *kraj* teh doživetij. Medtem ko so se čarovniška dejanja prve plasti odvijala znotraj vasi oz. na območju zasebnih zemljišč (njiv, dvorišč) in poslopj (hiše, hlevov) tega ali onega lastnika, so tipične lokacije nočnih srečanj s čarovnicami zlasti gozd (grmovja), križišča, območja ob vodnih površinah. Te tri specifike predstavljajo temeljne kriterije, ki nadnaravno plast čarovništva ločujejo od ti. socialne plasti in so razločevalni že na prvi pogled.

Opisi luči – coprnice se med seboj precej razlikujejo tako glede barve, velikosti, števila kot tudi glede na posledice, ki jih (n)imajo za človeka. Prva skupina pripovedi govori o preprostem opazovanju luči, ki jih ima človek sicer za coprnice, vendar le-to zanj nima negativnih posledic. Vmesna skupina so pripovedi, v katerih človek luči občuti kot napadalne: lučke se mu približujejo, on zbeži in se reši pred njimi. Za zadnjo skupino pripovedi pa je značilno doživetje neposrednih negativnih posledic takšnega srečanja: izguba poti, blokada, nerazumljiv premik položaja.

Nočne luči v naravi ponoči so na tem območju praviloma vedno interpretirane kot coprnice. Le trije sogovorniki so imeli te luči za divje lovce in eden za vile, obenem pa so podajali tudi *racionalne* razlage zanje, kot so trohnenje lesa, sproščanje zemeljskih plinov, vodni hlapi oz. mhurčki ipd. Kar zadeva interpretacijo izgube orientacije, blokade itd., tu ni nobene alternative: to so vedno razumeli samo kot posledico čarovničnega dejanja.

V nadaljevanju avtorica primerja podobne motive drugod v Sloveniji, pri Slovanih in v Evropi. Zanima jo predvsem, ali lahko najdemo paralele enemu ali drugemu motivu tudi drugod v Evropi, ali je preplet teh dveh motivov običajen ali pa gre za izjemo in kako ju interpretirajo drugod.

Pokazalo se je tudi, da se vse karakteristike raznih svetlobnih pojavov ali bitij, ki jih najdemo v Evropi, vključno z njihovimi dejanji, zelo natanko ujemajo s slovenskim izročilom. Prav tako tipične *lokacije* srečanj s temi bitji ustrezajo lokaciji, ki jo poznamo iz izročila o svetlobnih bitjih v Evropi. *Dejanje*, ki ga druge slovanske in zahodnoevropske paralele teh zgodb največkrat omenjajo, namreč da tako bitje zavede človeka, da izgubi pot (izguba poti oz. dezorientacija) ali da ima magičen vpliv nanj, tako da mu ta mora slediti, oz. da ga privede v grm, poln trnja (blokada poti), so prav tako tista dejanja, ki so stalnica opisov takih srečanj tudi na raziskovanem območju. Razlike med slovansko in zahodnoevropsko ter slovensko tradicijo so predvsem v interpretaciji teh pojavov oz. v različnih verovanjskih paradigmah, v katere so ti pojavi umeščeni. Na območju, ki smo ga raziskovali, so ljudje pojav luči in (obenem) pojav izgube prave smeri, blodenja po gozdu, blokade ipd. praviloma vedno pripisovali čarovnicam. Na enako razlago naletimo tudi ponekod drugod v Sloveniji. Na drugih območjih Slovenije ter v širšem slovanskem in zahodnoevropskem izročilu pa sta oba motiva prevladujoče povezana s predstavo o umrlih – navadno gre za nečiste duše (restless souls) oz. duše umrlih, ki po smrti ostajajo v neki vmesni realnosti med tem in onim svetom, ne morejo niti na drugi svet in seveda tudi niso več pripadniki tega sveta.

Seveda pojav, da se isti motivi svobodno navezujejo zdaj na eno zdaj na drugo mitično oz. Demonško bitje, v nižji mitologiji ni nekaj nenavadnega. Dejstvo, da ista dejanja in pojavno obliko najdemo pripisano zdaj dušam nečistih umrlih ali bajnim bitjem, ki so se razvili iz teh, zdaj čarovnicam, se ne zdi presenetljivo, toda le, dokler nočne čaravnice razumemo kot bajna, demonska bitja (ne pa kot človeška, tj. kot čaravnice socialne plasti). Te pripovedi se od pripovedi o »socialni coprnici« razlikujejo tudi po načinu obrambe pred njimi, ki je popolnoma drugačna od obrambe pred zavistno sosedo – čarovnico oz. pred žensko, ki ima v vasi reputacijo čarovnice.

Načini, kako se je mogoče zoperstaviti coprnicam, so bili obrnjenje oblačil napačno, navzven, upo. raba urina, krščanski simboli, včasih je bilo dovolj že samo oglasiti se ali pa preklinjati. Vsi ti načini obrambe so veliko bližje obrambi pred demoni, bajnimi bitji, umrlimi, kot pa pred zavistno sosedo ali vaško coprnico. Tak pojav absorpcije bajnih bitij v paradigmo čarovništva oziroma prepleta z njo v Evropi ni neznan. Že večkrat je bilo pokazano, da do prepleta med verovanji v bajna bitja in verovanji v čaravnice prihaja relativno pogosto. Mnogi avtorji so dokazovali, da se je (negativni) aspekt sicer ambivalentnih bajnih bitij marsikje v določenem obdobju vsaj na območju vpliva katoliške Cerkve integriral v prevladujočo paradigmo čarovništva in se »nalepil« na čarovnico kot socialno bitje. Tako situacijo lahko na podlagi predstavljenega gradiva in analize zelo jasno prepoznamo. Vendar pa nočne čaravnice na našem območju večinoma kljub vsemu ohranjajo svojo

avtonomijo, tj. svojo »demonsko«, »bajno« podobo in funkcijo in so razmeroma redko prepoznane kot človeška čarovnica. Kljub vključenosti v paradigmo čarovništva predstavljajo torej znotraj le-te relativno samostojno, ločeno in prepoznavno plast, ki se razlikuje od sosedskega oz. vaškega čarovništva ne le glede na kraj, čas, dejanja, funkcijo in način obrambe pred njimi, temveč tudi po tipični dikciji, s katero pripovedovalci tovrstna doživetja opisujejo (uporaba množine, abstraktni opisi).