FOLK BELIEFS ABOUT THE SUPERNATURAL AND FOLK/VERNACULAR RELIGION

Interview with Mirjam Mencej

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Folk beliefs about the supernatural are some of the oldest research topics in folkloristics, ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology. They usually have been explained in connection to the religious sphere. Today, they are often linked to the term "vernacular religion", which covers not only folklore, but also some phenomena of alternative spirituality that often make use of folk traditions. In this connection, we decided to address one of the most distinguished scholars researching contemporary folk beliefs, especially related to witchcraft, magic, and the dead. Mirjam Mencej is the professor of Folklore Studies at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her bibliography includes numerous titles addressing various aspects of human life, such as narratives, social relationships, symbolism of the domestic sphere, time and space, death, etc. At Ljubljana University, she teaches related courses, such as *Traditional European Folk Beliefs*, *Introduction to Mythology* and *Ethnology of Witchcraft*. Her works are well-known not only in Slovenia and Central Europe, but also in many other countries, including Germany, Great Britain, United States, and Russia. Her recent book *Styrian Witches in European Perspective. Ethnographic Fieldwork* (2016), published in London and New York by Palgrave Macmillan and Springer, brings a comprehensive exploration of witchcraft beliefs and practices in the rural region of Eastern Slovenia from folkloristic, anthropological, as well as historical, perspectives. The following interview with Mirjam Mencej addresses her work in relation to witchcraft beliefs, vernacular religion, corresponding theoretical and methodological issues, empirical research, and her teaching practice.

The present issue of the *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica* yearbook is dedicated to the topic of "Religion in Society". Religion has been one of the

most important themes in social sciences and humanities since their very beginnings, and it was the focus of the first theories of society. Religion, however, is a broad term, often interlapping with another wide-ranging concept – tradition, which includes folk beliefs about the supernatural – your main research topic. What aroused your interest in this sphere of human life? And how was it reflected during your professional career?

Frankly, what could be called "folk beliefs about the supernatural" has attracted me as far as I can remember. In my childhood, I used to devour magazine articles on UFOs, ghosts, magic and the like, and my school friends still remember me telling frightening ghost stories… I had, of course, no clue at the time that this was going to become my life interest and that it was actually possible to study this topic professionally. When I finished high school and had to make the decision about what to study, I wasn't even aware that something like "folkloristics", that is, a discipline which studies folk beliefs, existed. In fact, at the time, there were no classes in folkloristics offered at the University in Ljubljana. I therefore decided to study Sociology of culture and Slovenian language and literature, but this choice anyway ultimately led me towards the study of folk beliefs. My affinity towards this topic was clearly reflected in my diploma thesis on "mythical motives in Slovenian folk narratives" – the theme that, as it later turned out, began my life-long journey of the exploration of folk beliefs as articulated in folk narratives.

Most of your works address folk narratives, which are some of the main subjects of folklore studies. Recently you paid intensive attention to the social aspects of narratives. Indeed, stories do not exist without people, and people do not exist without society; but social relationships are usually explored by social sciences, such as socio-cultural anthropology. What is your opinion on the boundaries between disciplines? How do you see an interdisciplinary approach to the study of folk beliefs and folk narratives?

Indeed, it is folk narratives that have always been the focus of my research. Stemming from literature studies, I was, however, more interested at the beginning in the comparative perspective which treats the narratives as texts, rather than in conducting field research and studying narratives within their particular social context. But it was never the aesthetic aspects of narratives, or their linguistic, that is, textural aspects that I was interested in. In my first studies, I investigated the texts of narratives in relation to rituals and charms and from the perspective of their function in the division of the annual cycle in Slavic traditional culture. Narratives can offer so much insight into people's life and their worldview, much more than it appears at first glance! Lately, however, as you say, I have become mainly interested in studying narratives within their social context. It is the relation between narratives and the social and cultural context within which they are being transmitted that aroused my scholarly interest. Stories that people mediate in their daily communication tend to address social

and cultural issues; they reflect social relations, express cultural/social values and expectations, discern cultural/social anxieties and conflicts, reaffirm (but also counteract) social norms of behaviour, react to social, economic, political and legal changes in a society, and so on and so forth. Indeed, narratives do not only reflect, and react to, but also constitute reality, and are versions of reality, as social reality is constructed through language. The study of folk narratives can thus bring many new insights into our understanding of the social reality of people, in particular in how they themselves experience it.

Insofar as folkloristics approaches narratives as an integral part of culture and society within which they are mediated, the boundaries between folkloristics and anthropology are definitely blurred. Indeed, since the end of the nineteen sixties, anthropology and folkloristics have to a large degree become intertwined. However, while we folklorists take folklore, that is, "expressive culture", as the basis and the starting point of our investigation, anthropologists may pay more attention to other aspects of social life and culture and approach them through concepts that folklorists may not necessarily apply in their research. On the other hand, there are aspects of expressive culture that folklorists have long learned to comprehend and pay attention to, whereas anthropological studies, when they incorporate narratives into their study, seem to sometimes lack a sensibility for them. Such are, for instance, the relevance of narrative genres in the critical examination of narratives and the recognition of the types of tales that people share, the importance of individuals as participants in the conduit and their repertoires, the understanding of actions as ostensions, the performative and discursive aspects of narration, and so on.

That said, not all folklorists are necessarily interested in the social aspects of folk narratives and in how narratives reflect or impact social context. While most folklorists would nowadays pay at least some attention to the social and cultural context, knowing that folklore does not appear in a social and cultural vacuum, they may still focus on the texts as such, on their aesthetical value or linguistic specifics, and study the comparative perspective of particular motifs and types of narratives and alike.

Witchcraft is an important topic of your research. Your book *Styrian Witches*, as well as your earlier works, present witchcraft as part of social reality, strongly related to misfortune. Thus, your research results are in accordance with many anthropological works exploring witchcraft beliefs all over the world, starting with the classical Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Magic, and Oracles Among the Azande* ([1937] 1976). However, in each society this universal phenomenon is always shaped by a specific socio-cultural context. Can you, please, give us some examples of such specifics of Slovenian witchcraft beliefs?

Indeed, in anthropological work, witchcraft is generally considered as an ideology, a cultural repertoire explaining misfortune, ascribing its origin to the malevolent agency of others, that is, "witches". These are usually searched for among neighbours believed to use apparently supernatural means to cause misfortune or injury to others. Research into early modern as well as contemporary witchcraft in Europe showed that accusations of bewitchment tend to arise in specific socio-cultural contexts: more or less isolated, small-scale, close-knit traditional agricultural communities. In these communities, people are bound to the land and tend to remain in the same village or region from birth to death; they live in precarious and often harsh living conditions, and mostly depend on themselves for survival. Such communities appear to be the typical socio-economic context in which witchcraft in Europe indeed continues to provide a means to explain misfortunes, shaping social reality into the twenty-first century. This description also applies to the rural region in Eastern Slovenia where my students and I first came across rather vivid witchcraft beliefs and occasionally ongoing accusations of witchcraft during our field research in 2000-2001.

However, in spite of the common features of the social-cultural contexts within which witchcraft tends to thrive, and many common features of witchcraft discourse all over Europe, witchcraft still appears in many diverse shapes and forms which may vary extensively between regions. Let me mention but a few specific features of witchcraft in the region where we conducted our fieldwork. Within Europe, for instance, there are plenty of different techniques and manners for carrying out bewitchment. In our region, however, the technique that by far prevailed was that of burying eggs in a neighbour's property in order to cause harm to their livestock or poultry. Another example: in France, for instance, where Favret-Saada conducted her extensive research on witchcraft at the end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s, the victims of witchcraft assaults were typically male farmers, unable to handle the permitted violence they needed to perform as heads of the farms and as successful salesmen of their products on the market. The unwitchers therefore basically carried out a "therapy", as Favret-Saada argues, helping them to achieve the needed aggressiveness (Favret-Saada, 1980). In our region, however, where there was no market where the farming products could be sold, it was mostly females that were believed to have fallen victim of a bewitchment. They also formed the highest number of the unwitchers' clientele. When their status, which entirely depended on their success in performing domestic tasks, within a family and a community was threatened due to misfortunes in their area of domestic work, a woman had only one possible option: to avert insinuations that the misfortunes were her fault and redirect the responsibility for them onto another person – a witch. This, however, could not be carried out persuasively without the unwitcher's support.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of witchcraft in the studied region, yet quite uncommon elsewhere, is the integration of the night-time experiences of being led astray (often combined with the experience of seeing light(s)) into the witchcraft discourse. Narratives describing such experiences are common in European folklore, but these are usually attributed to fairies, the souls of the dead, or other "supernatural" agencies, whereas in our region people as a rule understood them as experiences caused by witches. While witchcraft elsewhere is thus typically restricted to social relationships, in our region it also encompasses what might be understood as experiences of the "uncanny". The narratives about "night witches" are not usually related to particular people in the community. At first glance, they have nothing in common with the neighbour-witches or "village witches", meaning those who were identified as such by the whole community, not only by an affected neighbour. However, what unites all three types of witches is their otherness: territorial, social, symbolic and ontological. They all transgress the established boundaries, be it those of the human body, the homestead, the community or the world of humans as such.

In addition to the social context, in your book you paid attention to the psychological mechanisms causing witchcraft accusations or those which may help bewitchment as well as un-witchment to work. Do you consider applying a psychological perspective to be necessary in order to explain witchcraft beliefs?

Anthropologists (and historians) would usually acknowledge that (fear of) envy plays an important part in witchcraft accusations. They would also usually emphasise that it is people's *belief* that is crucial for these "supernatural" attacks to be effective, and that they are only effective to the extent that victims allow them to be. The victims' claims that they suffered misfortune due to an alleged bewitchment have thus been explained (away) as a result of their weakness, fear, imagination, suggestibility and similar. Indeed, the latest attempt by Edward Bever to explain the "realities of witchcraft" (also) by psychological mechanisms has not received a most welcoming reception in the academia. Bever explained the harmful effects of looking, touching and speaking, typically understood as manners of bewitchment, by scientific studies showing that these manners of expressing hostility can trigger a stress response in a recipient which can be highly somatic. Sorcery, i.e. magic practices too, according to Bever, work using the same psychological mechanisms, whereby an interpersonal conflict would usually take place beforehand. Facing the witch's overt anger, or knowledge via a third party that she had performed a bewitching deed, may trigger an illness or other unwished-for bodily reactions. Indeed, he argued that people's *belief* in the effect of witchcraft (and fear of it), although a stimulus, is not critical for the interpersonal effects to occur.

At any rate, no matter how much weight one puts on people's belief, psychological processes certainly do play their part in the fear of witchcraft and

contribute to the accusations of bewitchment. Contrary to the social perspective, however, these were rather seldom discussed in witchcraft research. In my book, I thus tried at least briefly to point to the psychological aspects of witchcraft as I believe they can supplement our knowledge of the reality of witchcraft.

In a broader discourse, witchcraft beliefs and magic beliefs are often presented as irrational, even as survivals, in the sense of Edward Tylor's theory of socio-cultural evolution (Tylor, ([1871] 1920). The irrationality of magic has also been connected to Max Weber's idea that modernity is characterized by the progressive disenchantment of the world. Weber ([1919] 1970) argues that in a dis-enchanted world, "the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life"; the magical, "mysterious incalculable forces" give way to "calculation", scientific rationalism and bureaucracy (pp. 155, 139). However, your research, as well as other ethnographic research, has demonstrated that magical beliefs do not belong to the past. On the contrary, not only do they exist in rural areas, but today they are also frequently used in various spiritual movements. Have you met with the use of traditional folk beliefs in spiritual practices or spiritual/ religious movements in an urban environment? Can you give us some examples?

You are absolutely correct. People would not have continued to believe in the reality of witchcraft and magic had their beliefs been based merely on irrationality and ignorance, as has been assumed since the Enlightenment. As several authors have argued already, witchcraft has its own logic, no less rational than other ways of thinking; it is a way of knowing that obviously covers domains that are not satisfactorily explained by rational ways of thinking. De Blécourt (1999, pp. 212-213) indeed rightly points to the "presupposed narcissistic hegemony" of such a "vulgar rationalistic approach".

New spiritual practitioners in an urban environment also often rely on the discourse of their rural "predecessors". They draw upon similar beliefs and in their therapies follow similar procedures to those of traditional "cunning-folk". That said, the changes that our society has gone through in the last decades or so are clearly reflected in the adaptations that they have made in their practices and discourse. During my study of witchcraft, I also conducted an interview with a New-Age practitioner from the capital to whom a woman from a village who feared she was bewitched turned. Although her discourse in every way resembled that of traditional rural unwitchers, she – unlike traditional unwitchers who as a rule confirmed their patients' suspicions that they were bewitched – denied that witchcraft was at stake and dismissed any assumption of bewitchment. While the identification of the witch in the traditional unwitching procedure was considered crucial for the overcoming of the witch's power and protection against further bewitchments, the New-Age therapist, on the contrary,

redirected the client's focus from the witch to themselves. The protection against evil, and consequently against all further misfortunes, was no longer achieved in the therapy by the identification of the enemy posing a threat from the outside, and a counteraction against this enemy. Instead, it was ultimately proclaimed to lie *inside* the patient's own body and psyche. The process of personal growth, implying the elimination of negative emotions and the strengthening of one's "energy" with the help of prayer, meditation and therapy, was the process that was suggested as the one leading to permanent and ultimate protection against all sorts of "enemies" from the outside. While in the context of traditional witchcraft, the key underlying premise was that the source of misfortune is a threat from the outside, in New-Age therapy the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is thus transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

This basic difference between traditional and contemporary procedures aimed at resolving personal misfortune, and ultimately, at releasing anxiety, thus seems to reflect the changes that have occurred in our contemporary, individualised neoliberal society, in which individuals are encouraged to look at their own life as an artistic product, an enterprise, and to take it into their own hands. Yet, just like the specialists from the past who helped people relieve their anxieties in times of misfortune by relocating the blame from themselves to another member of the community, and thus ultimately helping them to maintain their social position when it was threatened, contemporary New-Age specialists, too, help people relieve their tension in times of misfortune. They help them to resolve, or at least to stay in control of, their own anxieties – and thus consequently to maintain their social position in the society. "Unwitchers" who adapted to the New-Age discourse and the demands of contemporary society thus continue to be in demand by people in times of anxiety, triggered not only by economic uncertainty but also by the problems that people experience with regard to their social roles. At the same time, however, they help protect contemporary neoliberal society at large from any "disturbances" by individuals who are not constantly maximally productive and fully in control of themselves – as society expects them to be.

The resurgence of magic and, in general, the revival of spiritual life during recent decades has been labelled as the "re-enchantment of the world" – the term used by Zygmunt Bauman (1993) who attached it to postmodernity. What is your explanation of the persistence of magic in the modern and postmodern world? Do you consider the idea of a shift from an enchanted past through a disenchanted period to a re-enchanted present suitable, or it is perhaps too simplistic?

The concept of re-enchantment is based on the assumption that a dis-enchantment took place at some time in the past. Since the advent of the Enlightenment, a rationalistic and sceptical worldview has indeed become dominant

in our society, and belief in the supernatural was thought to ultimately disintegrate with industrialisation and urbanisation. Towards the end of the twentieth century, folklorists thus announced the end of ghosts and haunting, witches, fairies, and the supernatural in general, as an indisputable phenomenon. However, surveys and polls conducted in Europe and the USA since the beginning of the twentieth century demonstrated that the level of "superstition" has remained at a steady, high rate. A fairly high percentage of people claimed to have experienced some sort of "supernatural" experience. The results of the polls thus obviously contradicted the scholarly opinion about the end of beliefs in the "supernatural". Apparently, in spite of scholars' predictions about its extinction in today's rationalistic world, the "supernatural" has continued to thrive. While the interpretations of the "supernatural" may have changed, transformed, and adapted to the modern worldview, the "supernatural" nevertheless occupies our lives just as it did in the past.

One may therefore wonder to what extent the dis-enchantment really took place, and to what extent the belief in the "supernatural" was perhaps just silenced and banned from the dominant discourse, while continuing to silently linger on. As de Certeau argued (2007), notions and customs that fell under the rubric of "superstition" were considered inferior. Their proponents were marginalised and ridiculed and consequently, their potential opposition to the scientific way of knowing and access to intellectual, political, and economic power in our society were weakened, too. Lately, however, the so-called "neospiritual" or "New-Age" discourse seems to be rendering new venues for people to articulate, negotiate, and evaluate their "supernatural" experiences without being ridiculed or fearing putting one's mental sanity under scrutiny. Indeed, it seems to have been slowly also gaining access to social power.

During recent decades, the ways in which scholars classify and study religion have changed, especially under the influence of the "re-enchantment of the world". As Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (2000, p. 3) notice, many aspects of vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality fall outside the traditional purlieu of academic studies of religion, although the changes in religious belief and praxis makes it increasingly difficult to characterise what is "mainstream religion". The term "vernacular religion" as such refers to a broad field that has been delineated in different ways in different academic disciplines. Yet, it has been usually related to "folk" and "popular" beliefs (Yoder, 1974). Other terms used in folkloristics are folk religion and religious folklore. However, as Primiano (1995) has stated, these terms imply that religion "somewhere exists as a pure element which is in some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communities" (p. 39). What is your understanding of religion, vernacular religion or folk religion? How do you apply these terms in your works?

As with most academic terms, here too there are arguments pro and contra for each of the terms you list. While the US scholar Dan Yoder, influenced by German scholarship, rejected the usage of the pejorative term "superstition" in favour of the allegedly non-pejorative "folk belief", this term, too, has been lately put under scrutiny insofar as the term *belief* likewise calls into question its own validity – we usually describe our own beliefs as "knowledge" (see Motz 1998). It was Yoder, too, who first proposed the term "folk religion" for the subject matter that lies at the intersection of official or organised religion and traditional (folk) culture, ranging from the permitted areas associated with official religion to the occult areas, forbidden in official religion (Yoder, 1974). In order to do justice to the variety of manifestations and perspectives found within past and present human religiosity and, as you mentioned above, to avoid the two-tiered model which dichotomized "official" vs. "unofficial", "institutional" vs. "non-institutional", and "organized" vs. "unorganised" forms of religiosity, Leonard Primiano (1995) later proposed the term "vernacular religion". This he defined as "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it". This term thus implies focusing on individuals and studying the actual beliefs and practices of people and their individual creations of religion (while all the time paying attention to the encounter between the researcher and the researched in the field). However, even the term "vernacular" as such has acquired in scholarly discourse – as Howard (2003) demonstrated – rather different connotations and understandings. Recently, moreover, James Kapaló (2011; 2013), referring to the semantic loadings and ideological dimension of the terms, again argued for the usage of the term "folk religion", at least within the context of European modernity, with its history of the dominance of Christianity, nation states and romantic nationalism, and of the Enlightenment with its secularism. More than vernacular religion, the term "folk religion", he argues, implies the religion of people as a power-laden site of religious struggle and conflicting interests, ideologies and identities. I agree with Kapaló that while the term "vernacular religion" may therefore be more appropriate when one studies various forms of religiosity within neospiritual / New-Age movements, and globalised religious ideas, the term "folk religion" may be more suitable when issues of national ideologies and struggle for political and ecclesiastical power have to be taken into account.

At Ljubljana University, you are teaching several courses that are related to your research. In what way do you use your research results in your teachings?

This depends on the class – in some classes I rely more, in others less, on my own research. One way or another, however, I tend to illustrate the theory, and enliven the teaching with examples from my own field research. I often present stories that I recorded in the field and share experiences from my field-

work with my students. I feel that this way I can bring the concepts and theory much closer to students and attract their interest in the subject.

What are your plans for future research?

As a member of the ERC project *East-West. Vernacular religion on the boundary of Eastern and Western Christianity: continuity, changes and interactions*, led by Éva Pócs, for the last four years before the pandemic I was conducting field research in various, mostly rural regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was mainly interested in how belief narratives about the dead, who were killed in the war in the nineties, relate to traditional notions about the dead who, due to their premature and violent death, are unable to proceed to the other world and are doomed to remain stuck between the worlds, appearing to the living as ghosts. I have already published several articles, and my latest article on ghost narratives from the post-genocide Srebrenica is just about to be published in the journal *Folklore* (London). In it, I argue that the ghost stories, spread among the Bosnian (Muslim) population in the Srebrenica region, are the effects of the persistent denial of the genocide by the Serbian population and of a strong sense among Bosnians that justice has not yet been properly restored and the perpetrators not adequately punished. Ghost narratives play a significant role in the war discourse: through them, the Bosnian inhabitants of the Srebrenica region, lacking social and political power in the Serb-dominated territory, are able to articulate and maintain their memory of the massacre, reclaim the space, acquire some sense of control over the situation, and thus ultimately, some empowerment. Moreover, ghost legends occasionally also prove vehicles for the transmission of ideological messages in the post-war identity processes of the Bosnian ethnic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Anyway, there is still much material that I gathered during my fieldwork that needs to be studied properly. So, hopefully in the near future, I will be able to find some time to sit down and finally start thinking of writing the book.

I am looking forward to it! I am sure that it will bring, once more, plenty of interesting ideas and insights into the nature of beliefs about the supernatural. Thank you very much for your thoughtful and inspiring answers!

Thank you so much for inviting me! It was a pleasure thinking about your thought-provoking questions and well-taken ideas! I am also looking forward to reading your future articles and books on contemporary vernacular religion!

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