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FEATURES OF THE TRANSMISSION AND READING OF INCANTATIONS AMONG THE EASTERN SLAVS

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Abstract: This article examines the characteristicss of charms transmission among East Slavic healers. The tradition of passing on charms from the older generation to the younger, both inside and outside the family, and the trend of transferring magical knowledge for free, as well as the practice of limiting the transfer of especially important fragments of incantations (the so-called 'locks' or 'fixings') is highlighted in this piece. In the second part of the article, the author explores the rules of the healer's treatment with a charm as a magic tool: the attitude to a verbal charm as a material object, the practice of restoring the power of charms, the types of healer, as well as the regulations governing the choice of incantation object.

Key words: verbal charms, healer, types of healer, connections between healer and patient

Integral to the practice of charming are the healer's knowledge, the conditions and rules of how this knowledge is applied, and most especially the words of the charm texts. At the same time, verbal charms are a popular topic within the mythological stories and beliefs known to the Eastern Slavs[1]. A commonplace of this evidence, or rather, the ideological basis for the evidence, is the fact that a healer or a witch doctor must transfer their knowledge to another person before their own death. At the same time, while healers who practiced healing techniques during their lifetime, such a transfer of knowledge was perceived primarily in terms of duty, and if this duty was not fulfilled, it was seen as a violation of the rules (with no far-reaching and severe consequences for the guilty), then for sorcerers, witches and other 'knowledgeable' people who engaged in malicious activities, transmission of this knowledge was the only way to get avoid a long and painful agony. Thus it was that they resorted to a wide variety of methods, even including deceptive methods of transferring witchcraft, sometimes to a random and unsuspecting person. These differences are especially noticeable when analysing mythological stories about the death of healers and of

sorcerers (in the first case, emphasis is on the fact of transmission, in the second on the agony of death), although it is evident that the dividing line between these cases remains quite blurred.[2]

At the same time, the obligation of this act itself did not mean that when transferring knowledge and texts, great importance was also attached to the will of the healer, as well as that of their chosen successor. It is known that if it was a question of transferring handwritten charms contained in sacred notebooks (or on sacred sheets), then they, and the texts written on them, only had power when they fell into the hands of the person the healer intended them for; if they should come to another person, they lost their power, as per this contemporary piece of evidence from Karelia: "Well, there, a piece of paper written … and the release is also written on paper. If that's all and I'll die, give it to this person. That's all. And if you give to someone else – it's useless…" (Etnologicheskii arkhiv).

If the healer did not want to pass on knowledge to anyone, or no-one dared to accept it, then before death he or she would speak the charms' words over spoons (Jeleonskaia 1994: 224), over an aspen log (Etnologicheskii arkhiv), over water (Agapkina 1994: 82), or over a stone, "agony beat her against the side of the body… no-one accepted her words, she had to put them on a hot stone, a stone was brought from the stove, from the bathhouse, and she pronounced all her words on the stone when she came … to consciousness…" (Etnologicheskii arkhiv). "when this person dies, if she knows a lot of words, she should spit it out on a broom. That's how she spits, talks and spits…" (Etnologicheskii arkhiv). That is, the practitioner sought to get rid of the knowledge one way or another.

The transfer of the art of healer and of their incantations was usually carried out within a certain co-ordinated system, in which such oppositions as friend–foe, senior–junior, male–female and first–last played an organising role. This transfer of knowledge, including the incantations themselves, was carried out in various ways, although the most common form was that of inheritance, which is explained by the understanding of the charm both as secret and professional knowledge. There was a widespread belief that incantations could not be communicated to an outsider, but could only be passed on to relatives, and only at the end of life; diseases and other misfortunes awaited the violator of this rule (Sobolev 1914: 15 for practices in Vladimir Gubernia). For example, in the Kharkiv Gubernia, the treatment of rabies was considered almost as a professional occupation, and therefore the secrets of this were passed down through families of practitioners from generation to generation.

> The belief that by passing on their 'remedy' to others, they weaken themselves is also widespread among healers. By 'charming' various diseases, witch-healers, pass on their words to their daughter, a relative, and then not directly, but through a child and only when they reach old age. The old woman speaks loudly her words and prayers to the child, who, of course, does not understand anything, and at the same time the trainee is standing in the hall at the open door and listening. The drugs used in the treatment of rabies are an even greater mystery and constitute the pride of the family (Ivanov 1886: 136).

The art of healing passed almost exclusively from the elder to the younger, regardless of whether this transfer was carried out by inheritance or not, and compliance with this requirement was always and everywhere given priority. An age difference suitable to 'teacher' and 'pupil' was the most important principle of transmitting the tradition, as is evident in these instructions from northern Russian healers: "You cannot teach someone older than yourself" (Kulagina: No. 113, Kostroma region); "Do not speak to older ones than yourself, there will be no strength" (Smirnov and Iljinskaia 1992: 21, Arkhangelsk Gubernia). A. Leopoldov, publishing a handwritten incantation to deal with 'infirmity' in horses, accompanied it with a narration of how, while peeping at this incantation written on a piece of paper, enclosed in a book in the house where he happened to be, he was caught in the act by the owner of the house. The latter expressed evident displeasure with what he saw, and then asked the guest how old he was. In response to the direct question, why did he need to know the age of hisguest, the host explained: "If I pass the incantation on to someone younger, then it will benefit both him and me, and if to someone older, then it will only benefit him, but it will lose its effect for me" (Leopoldov 1868: 2, Saratov Gubernia). The role of the age factor in incantational and wider knowledge of magical practitioners is also indicated by the fact that in disputes between two healers (where, for example, one might have caused damage to or bewitched a person, and the other be called upon to remove the magical harm), the older one will inevitably be the winner (Sposobin 1844: 203, Vladimir Gubernia).

In order to learn and adopt the craft of healing, it was considered necessary not only to be younger than one's 'teacher', but also sometimes to be the first or last child in the family. See, for example, this evidence from the Belarusian and Ukrainian Polesie:

> "That woman who told me, investigated. "Are you, Varka, the eldest or the youngest [in the family]?
>
> I say, "the youngest."
>
> "Here you can take over, as I will only help the oldest"
>
> (Polesskii arkhiv, Zabuzhye village, Volynsk region)

"The youngest could study incantations… I'm the youngest – I can study, and I can acquire it. And to the oldest…" (Polesskii arkhiv, Oltush village, Volynsk region). The involvement of the first and last child in the family in therapeutic magical procedures (for example, 'gnawing' a hernia or 'trampling' a strained back) was widely practiced in various East Slavic regions, although it was not always revealed to them.

In this regard, the description of the *utina* treatment ritual from the Perm region, in which all the children of the patient, from the eldest to the youngest, took part, is very expressive. When the mother's back ached, a healer was called to her. She laid the patient across the threshold, and her eldest child stood up over her, holding an axe in one hand and holding on to the door frame with the other. All the other children stood behind him, right down to the youngest, who played along within the

traditional *utina* treatment ritual dialogue, which featured phrases like "What do you cut?", "I cut Utin.", "Cut deeper, so that it will not come for a century." At the end of the dialogue, the oldest child gently hit his mother on the back with the butt of the axe (i.e. the thick end of the axehead); a healer, who was present, and whole organised the whole event, did not intervene at all (Skromnyi 1897: 3). The involvement of the whole family in the treatment most likely symbolises the integrity of the time continuum, its inviolability, magically projected onto the life and health of a patient who was a member of the same family.

Within the family, however, the transfer of knowledge could be move not just from parents to children, but also along more distant lines of kinship. For example, in a legal case from the beginning of the eighteenth century, filed at the provincial chancellery of Arkhangelsk, among the things a certain Vasily Bakov reported during interrogation was that that "his late uncle Leonty, who died childless, taught him this magic" (Popov 1877: 12).

Within the framework of the transfer of the art of healing by inheritance, another principle, contra-sexual transfer occasionally manifested itself. Thus, R. G. Pihoya notes that in the Urals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the knowledge of the healer (*volkhva*, *shepotnika*, *portuna*, etc.) could be passed on by inheritance, and by special training; if it was inherited, however, then it certainly went from mother to son, or from father to daughter (Pikhoia 1987: 227). The same tradition was recorded in the Perm region in the nineteenth century by the local doctor D. Petukhov, who pointed out that when transmitted in another way, "the secrets of witchcraft … lose their force and become powerless" (Petukhov 1864: 186). The practice of transferring knowledge from man to woman and vice versa was noted in Ukraine in the nineteenth century (Ivashchenko 1876: 4).

Along with inheritance, extra-familial transmission of healing skills was also practiced, with the rule of transfer to someone younger than the healer once again being strictly observed. It was also believed that the number of pupils a healer had should be limited: in Transbaikalia, for example, a healer could have no more than nine pupils (Loginovskii 1904: 30). In the middle of the eighteenth century, Altai peasant Artemy Sakalov informed those who interrogated him that "he, Sakalov, learned at a young age ugly words from an unknown person for a fee...", and during his "studies" he allegedly had several teachers: "From childhood he began … learning the divine words from an alien person, attached to God, asking him for help in how to get to the beginning and be wise" (Pokrovskii 1979: 53).

In the later incantation tradition, traces of such an extra-familial failure can be seen in the Polesie incantations, where the motif of "gratitude to the deceased healer who transmitted this charm" occurs. For example, "I start reading and say: "Thanks to Aunt Tatiana, that she knew and pointed me out" (Agapkina and Levkijevskaia and Toporkov 2003: No. 337).

Regarding witchcraft, several other cases are often described, specifically the teaching of witchcraft techniques (or methods), designed, so to speak, for a single use. In 1752, in Moscow, a Detective Order heard the case of the 'yard-wife' Irina Ivanova, who tried to put a powdered dried frog crushed in the drink of her mistress, the wife of the Senate secretary Stepan Alekseev, so that the lady would wither and die. At the

same time, she confessed to the master that "she was taught that evil from a peasant sorcerer, with whom she had lived for a while" (Jesipov 1878: 235).

In such situations, the teacher–pupil pair is replaced by a seller–buyer pair, because the seller could receive remuneration for the transfer of a particular technique or means. A similar method of acquiring a magical tool or magical knowledge was widely practiced, of course, later on in situations where a person in a difficult situation (including in relation to a certain third person) turned to a sorcerer or other 'knowledgeable' person for help (and acquired, for example, the means of love magic, damage, or a rewritten incantation). At the same time, in a huge number of other sources, the acquisition of healing skill for money was considered unacceptable. Thus, according to materials from the Poltava Gubernia, none of the healers allowed the transfer of incantations for selfish purposes, as this involved the danger of losing the "miraculous power of the word and ritual" (Ivashchenko 1876: 4).

The second aspect that will be discussed in the article concerns the rules of reading and/or pronouncing incantations by healers, as well as treatment using them. The peasants believed deeply in the power of charms and therefore very often resorted to the help of healers and sorcerers, sincerely believing that the success of treatment depended on how accurately the rules of charming were followed. The following was written by D. Berezhkov, from Vladimir Gubernia, a correspondent of the Russian Geographical Society, in the early 1850's:

> If there is no benefit from incantations, then the reason is either someone not knowing the incantation properly, or the omission of something from the accompanying actions. If everything necessary is done – the words are true, the rituals are observed – then the benefits of the incantation are amazing! They charm maggots from wounds, they charm toothache, bleeding, and what then? Maggots disappear, teeth don't hurt, blood stops (Agapkina 2023: 24).

The rules for charming, as well as the rules for reading them, varied greatly. Handwritten prayers had to be kept wrapped in clean rags: "When he wakes up and does not wash his hands, he will never dare to touch them: touching the amulet (bypass prayer) with unclean hands means his destruction" (Kharitonov 1847: 149, Archangelsk Gubernia). It was necessary to speak the incantation as usual without a break, at the end of a month, on an empty stomach, and observing the rules of "preservation" of the word, for which the chimney or door was closed so that the word was not blown away by the wind (Adonjeva and Ovchinnikova 1993, No. 135, Vologda region). Here is how P. Ivashchenko described such rules for reading incantations:

> In order for whispering to have a meaning assigned to it, it is necessary to observe strictly the integrity of the text, three-fold, nine-fold and three-nine-fold pronouncement of it is required, otherwise there will be no help. Its strength depends even on the pronouncement of the known part of the whisper without breathing (*ne oddixajuchi*), i.e. without pausing to breath...
>
> (Ivashchenko 1876: 3)

He continues:

> it is necessary to say three or ten words in one breath, otherwise it will not help. You need to whisper quickly. You cannot turn words over: turning words over, whisper to Jews or pigs (Ivashchenko 1876: 3).

There was a strict rule in healing practice of keeping incantations secret. Healers believe, for example, that "it is necessary to speak quietly so that no one hears the words" (Valevskaia 2002, vol. 1: 596, No. 17, Novgorod region); that the ritual loses its power and the effect of the words diminshes if someone is present when the incantation is read (Berdiajeva 2005: 292); that the healer should recite the spells very quietly, because if a person younger than the healer hears them, they will cease to work (Iljina 2006: 42, Russian North); that "having proclaimed a charm publicly, you yourself lose the ability to spell, and hencefoth will grumble some impotent words" (Luganskii 1845: 250), etc. However, sometimes the ban on transmission applies only to the most important words, specifically the *fixing*, the 'lock', i.e. the final words of the incantation that act as if to lock it. As the collector notes, after a long incantation was recited "on the *prich*" (*pritka*, a suddenly-sent disease), "the key (fixing) words follow, but I could not get them out of the witch. She says, 'I can only say the key words before I die to someone who takes up this craft'" (Kurets 2000: No. 311, Karelia).

Incantations, like magical words in general, have traditionally been understood as being 'material', substantial, having a material nature. And as material objects, they were subject to the destructive influence of time, which was reflected in the rules for dealing with incantations. It is known that the incantation remained in force only until the death of the healer, and that afterwards the pain or illness returned to the patient (Manzhura 1894: 189, Yekaterinoslav Gubernia). According to Voronezh beliefs, the former patients of a deceased healer who treated them for toothache "begin to suffer from it at a time when the healer's body had completely decomposed"; to continue the healing process they had to get a bone from the cemetery and rub the sore tooth (Selivanov 1863: 84). However, there is evidence of incantations created "on death", i.e., until the end of life, which ceased to operate only in the event of the patient's death (Sposobin 1844: 203, Vladimir Gubernia).

In the Russian North, people believed that incantations lost their potency over the year. Therefore, to restore the power of the incantations they should be "corrected" by regular re-reading. In the Vologda Gubernia, a healer read them every year on Maundy Thursday after midnight and before sunrise (Agapkina 2023: 130). According to evidence from the beginning of the nineteenth century, "if words are spoiled, then on the Maundy Thursday, before sunrise, having got up before dawn, bring water and talk water. Words that you know, and drink water, they will take it" (Turilov and Chernetsov 2002: 293).

The words of a incantation, understood as a material entity, can be transferred to another material object, literally spoken onto it, such as spoken water, wine, bread, etc. In the Arkhangelsk Gubernia, a healer performed such a trick on salt: the sorcerer poured a little salt into a cloth and, uttering a shrill and lingering cry, lifted the

cloth, brought it to his mouth and, whispering 'words' against the disease, spat into the salt three times; this salt was stored for a year, and if necessary such 'spat' salt was diluted in water and given to a patient to drink (Popov 1911: 2).

Of course, the personality of the healer was also of great importance in the success of the treatment. The first and main requirement for him was, of course, age: mainly older men and women performed the treatments, and in relation to the latter there was an almost universal rule that menstruation had to have ceased. Before reaching this age, a woman had no right to perform treatments (Shambarajevskii 1862: 277, etc.). It was also considered mandatory for a healer to have teeth (Sujeverije i predrassudki 1885: 683, Olonets Gubernia).

According to materials from nineteenth-century Ukraine, there was a fairly clear distinction between healers who differed both in their skills and in the peculiarities of social behaviour. One large group consisted of women healers, who possessed incantations and healing techniques and could cope with fairly common ailments like bleeding, toothache, "uraza" and erysipelas. These women inherited their knowledge from their mothers and mothers-in-law and there were usually several of them in every large village. They did not differ in any important regard from most other villagers (i.e. they led the same traditional way of life) and they received a modest reward for their labours. Others, most often old men (and, less often, women), healed complex diseases and accidents (animal rabies, snake bite, etc.). They usually passed their knowledge onto their beloved sons, relatives or godparents, and in their absence to an outsider who took care of them. There were few of them (not every parish had such specialists), so they usually came from afar; for their labour and help, they took a comparatively significant reward of food or even money, so they did not need to engage in agriculture, since they were fed by their craft (Kovalenko 1891: 147–148; Shambarajevskii 1862: 276).

This division of healers into two groups was also noted among the Terek Cossacks, and it is especially noticeable that it was the narrow specialisation and 'professionalism' of the healers of the second group that allowed them to take payment for their labour in the form of money (as well travelling around the villages offering their services), while ordinary healers did not accept monetary payment, being convinced that it was sinful, and that the prayer or charm would have no power in such circumstances (Baranov 1899: 173). In general, the issue of remuneration for healers was resolved in different places in different ways, determined by local traditions and superstitions. Thus, in the Gomel region a healer explained that she treats her 'own ones' (i.e. fellow villagers) for free, because she would be "ashamed" to take money from them. But if someone else came to her from further afield, she must accept money from them: "they say, if you don't take a fee, then treatment won't help me" (Tsiapkova 2016: 391).

However, the specialisation of healers could be carried out on completely different grounds. Among the very same Terek Cossacks, healers could be divided into two groups: some resorted to prayers and treated illnesses and other accidents, i.e. God helped them; others used such incantations as a 'dry spell' or a charm against the court, that is, they acted with the help of the devil (Baranov 1899: 174).

There was also a hierarchy among the healers, with healers seeking to raise their status by resorting to special magical techniques. In the Ukrainian Carpathians in the early twentieth century, the Hutsuls recorded a special ritual that contributed to this. When starting Christmas dinner, the healer went up the stairs and said: "*Yak pidvalina vischa vid zemlya.... Yak skina vischa vid pidvalini… Yak dah vischa vid hati, so abi i irsheniy buy may goloyniy strilets (bailnik, vidma, healer) over the usma strilts (etc.) at the tsalim sviki"* (Once the foundation is higher than the ground ..., as the wall is higher than the foundation ..., as the roof is higher than the hut, so the baptised one would be the main healer over all healers in the whole world) (Onyshchuk 1912: 19).

The success of healing, including healing with incantations, depended on the patient to whom these incantations were addressed. Treating Jews was forbidden everywhere, for example: "You can't help the Jews with prayers, otherwise if you're happy to give to a pig and the Jew you won't be able to help our people" (Romanov 1891: 93, No. 116, Belarus). See also the Ukrainian belief that the power of incantation would be lost if a healer read it over a Jew (Manzhura 1894: 189). Some rules concerning the transfer of magical knowledge were also projected onto the ill person, in particular, as mentioned above, it was believed that only a person who is younger than the healer can be successfully treated (Valevskaia 2002, vol. 2: 336, Pskov region).

One final remark. For the treatment to achieve a positive result, the healer had to follow certain rules for dealing with the object to which the incantation was directed, onto which he read the charm. Most often, such objects were plants and animals. The main rule was not to harm the object of the spell. "Rare healers in the Minsk region were able to treat snake bites, this knowledge was considered especially sacred…", as T. V. Volodina noted, based on materials from the Minsk region. Moreover, special rules were imposed on the healer, for example, he was completely forbidden to kill a snake. "They pray for a snake, and if you kill a snake, prayer will not help much, because it is very difficult to ask for help after it has been killed. If the snake stays alive, bites and crawls, then the spell will help, and if you kill it, then it is too difficult to ask, then the spell will not help" (Valodzina 2011: 629). In the rituals of ridding livestock of the maggots that might grow in wounds, the healer read charm over a prickly plant (most often, burdock), and pressed the plant against the ground using a stone, thereby 'forcing' this plant to rid the animal of maggots and promising that as soon as they disappear, the healer will release the plant from the stone. An obligatory condition for the success of such a ritual is that the healer who does it should never harm this plant, neither breaking nor cutting it (Szukiewicz 1910: 124, Vilna Gubernia). The rules of treatment in traditional rituals for the treatment of toothache involving trees were similar. According to East Slavic beliefs, a person suffering from toothache could be rid of it forever by asking for help from a rowan tree. To do this, it was necessary to go to the tree, kneel in front of it, pray, kiss it and promise not to harm it by eating its berries or breaking its branches, nor by chopping or burning it: "…it is good to put a piece of rowan tree in a sore tooth, but after that you can no longer chop or break this tree. Otherwise, the pain will come back again" (Kopernicki 1887: 215, Kiev Gubernia).

In conclusion, we note that the tradition of transmitting the healer's knowledge and especially verbal charms, known to the Eastern Slavs, occupies an intermediate position between quite traditional 'training programs' adopted, for example, by practicing herbalists on the one hand, and folklore stories about rituals of initiation into sorcery or witchcraft, on the other hand.

In addition, if we look at the practice of knowledge transfer in a broader context, and compare it, for example, with the richer South Slavic folklore tradition, it becomes obvious that the Eastern Slavs have little evidence of the transfer of incantation texts, and speak more often about the transfer of magical knowledge as such, whilst among the South Slavs, the teaching the craft of incantations and transmitting incantation texts are topics, as such.

NOTES

[1] On the traditions of transmission and existence of incantations, see Smirnov 1988; Arsenova 2002; Novikov 2009: 521–542. Interesting materials on this topic, extracted from investigative cases of the eighteenth century, are given in the monograph by E. B. Smilianskaia (Smilianskaia 2003: 80–86 et seq.).

[2] For the transfer of knowledge by sorcerers, see, in particular Vinogradova and Levkijevskaia 2010: 313–317.

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