

VERBAL MAGIC IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S NARRATIVES ABOUT NIGHTMARE EXPERIENCES IN ESTONIA

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Abstract: The focus of this article is on the contemporary use of verbal magic in situations interpreted in personal experience narratives as nightmare (old hag) attacks whereby the emphasis is on women's perspective. First, the author gives a general overview of the outputs of protective verbal magic in contemporary Estonian material to situate more specific verbal magic used for warding off the supernatural attacker during the nightmare experiences. The author concludes that the topic of nightmare attacks as well as verbal magic against them is still relevant in modern folklore. Although elaborated long charms are rare, contemporary verbal magic against nightmare in general is even more heterogeneous as in older tradition. Expectably, new international trends of verbal magic have influenced contemporary tradition but some key elements from older tradition are still present, combined with protective objects and rituals from older folklore as well as diverse new sources.

Keywords: contemporary beliefs and practices, nightmare, personal experience narratives, verbal magic

INTRODUCTION

This article is about the contemporary use of verbal magic in situations interpreted as nightmare (old hag) attacks with the focus on personal experience narratives narrated by women. Verbal magic as any magic

is apt to evolving and adapting to changing circumstances, therefore *the aim of this article is to analyse the dynamics of its contemporary use, viewed on the backdrop of the more general contemporary techniques of protective verbal magic and parallels with nightmare descriptions from older Estonian narrative tradition in order to find out to what extent is verbal magic against nightmare attacks still used and how present-day international trends in the spiritual-religious milieu have influenced such outputs.*

The term “verbal magic” is understood in this article as the use of words, phrases and formula with the purpose of protecting oneself magically against a frightening situation and/or supernatural being – thus greatly overlapping with the definition of ‘word magic’, proposed by Merriam-Webster dictionary as “magic involving the use of words in a manner determined by a belief that the very act of uttering a word summons or directly affects the person or thing that the word refers to.” However, verbal magic is usually embedded into a larger context of magic and ritual which causes specific terminological and defining challenges (cf., Tambiah 1985: 60, Tsonkova 2015: 7). Verbal magic used against nightmare in Estonian older tradition can be characterized by a syncretic use of Christian prayers and magic charms and incantations whereas in contemporary tradition various international loans from spiritual and self-help teachings have been further picked up, such as mantras or affirmations that may additionally contain elements from positive psychology and thus not always include a clear magical component. Thus, genre classification and terminology can be even more blurred than before (cf., Fisher 2016). Sometimes an allegedly traditional element of verbal magic can come even from pop culture, for example Harry Potter spells, whose protective use among pupils was reported in Estonian school-lore documented in 2018 (Hiemäe 2020: 87–88).

Verbal magic in the context of protective magic has a long history and a universal character (cf., Roper 2009: xiv) whereby the border between curative and apotropaic verbal magic may be fuzzy (cf. similar observation by Tsonkova 2015: 77). Thousands of texts involving verbal magic for various protective purposes, including against nightmare, have been documented in Estonia in the 19th and early 20th century (to a lesser extent also later in the 20th century).

Belief narratives about protective verbal magic in general and for warding off nightmare in particular are also prevalent in contemporary sources, including internet forums and media narratives, with collec-

tions of authentic traditional folklore published by folklorists likely contributing to the spread of this information. For instance, in some internet forum discussions on nightmare experiences, there were direct references to topical books (e.g., Eisen's popular book that was first published in 1922 and re-published as an internet version in 2002). Yet in children's folklore, the topic of verbal magic against nightmare was not much highlighted. Although there were several dozen self-reported descriptions of nightmare attacks in the School-lore 2018 material, verbal magic was mentioned only once (in the form of reading a prayer).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

As source material for this article served contemporary folklore texts (mainly personal experience narratives narrated by women, to a lesser extent also by teenaged schoolgirls) from around the past decade. Although the material came from various sources and age groups, the common denominator of the selected sample was that these were narratives related to encounters interpreted as nightmare (old hag) attacks. For the sub-chapter about the role of verbal magic in the context of contemporary protective magic in general, the material collected for a book about women's rituals (Hiimäe, Kõiva 2022) was additionally used. Topical folklore from older tradition was reviewed as reference (ca. 500 texts from Estonian Folklore Archives from 19th to early 20th century) to find out about continuities of tradition. As there were no significant regional differences detected, the article does not elaborate about regional aspects.

The contemporary material came from responses to the fears' rubric of the School-lore 2018 questionnaire (3717 respondents in total, with the abbreviation KP) where respondents shared mainly their own experiences or related stories from their family members, threads from internet forums discussing nightmare experiences from 2012–2024, and student interviews about protective rituals from 2017–2023 (ca. with 300 persons predominately belonging to the interviewers' circle of friends and relatives, sometimes accompanied by the interviewers' comments about their own experiences, with the abbreviation VPK). Although internet forum posts are mostly anonymous, the gender of the writer was nevertheless often identifiable (e.g., in cases when the person referred in the course of the discussion to herself as mother or woman or as having experienced a pregnancy). Keyword search was used for finding topical narratives. However, the search for traditional

terms does not always give results because in contemporary material non-traditional terms can be used for describing nightmare experiences or protection against them, inspired by some newer tradition (e.g. the term “protective songs” (*kaitselaulud*) came up that is non-existent in older material), therefore frontal reading of the material was partly also used. In addition to methods from folkloristics (e.g., qualitative content and motif analysis, context and discourse analysis, historical comparisons) this analysis got inspiration from approaches from medical anthropology and social psychology.

An attempt was made to analyze responses to nightmare experiences from a genderized viewpoint to discern how gender can influence the content of such experiences and the ways people narrate, interpret and react to them. Previous research has established that women retrospectively report more about nightmares (here meaning in general terrifying dreams that awaken the sleeper) than males (cf. a scoping review by Schredl, Reinhard 2011) whereby this difference has been attributed to socialization factors by means of which females experience more negative affect and have associated nightmares (Kelly & Daughtry 2021: 131). My empirical research has shown that female respondents tend to write or narrate about their perceived supernatural experiences more in-depth and be more open to interviewing, women are also more active in sharing their nightmare experiences in the discussions of women’s and family internet forums, thus the focus in this article is also on women’s narratives. By the reluctance of sharing nightmare experiences by male respondents, the discrepancy with the stereotypic self-identification of men that prescribes being in control may also play a role, for example Levin & Nielsen (2007: 482) found in their study that women are more open in reporting negative experiences and also tend to report more emotionally-laden memories. In some analyzed nightmare personal experience narratives that were narrated by men, they noteworthyly tended to position themselves as being able to have or gain control. However, women’s narrations expressed more often feeling vulnerable and scared in relation to the old hag experience.

VERBAL MAGIC IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY PROTECTIVE MAGIC

Contemporary methods of protective magic are remarkably heterogeneous, interweaving elements from both older traditions and newer religious currents whereby keeping special protective objects (such as

semiprecious stones or figures of protective angels) at home or wearing them are often the main component of a ritual. Elaborated traditional curative and protective charms can be mainly found in the repertoire of practitioners of alternative medicine and esoteric teachings; in other spheres a steady narrowing of the stock of traditional verbal magic can be observed (cf., Kõiva 1995: 226). As a new form of verbal magic, mantras and chants of protection, often learned in camps or workshops of esoteric teachings, are worth noting as their use was also reported in narratives about nightmare attacks.

Statistically, there are few people of Christian affiliation in Estonia (among native Estonians only 11 percent Lutherans and 3 percent Russian Orthodox according to 2021 census), but one of the most common traditional protective texts is still the Lord's Prayer. In several narratives the narrator directly mentioned not being a Christian (e.g., in EFITA, VPK, N7, woman, 30, 2022), but having a belief already in the family tradition that the Lord's Prayer would protect in a difficult situation. Around a tenth of the texts from the VPK and KP material sets referred to verbal magic but in a number of cases only a general hint to "praying" or "saying protective words" was mentioned, like in the following example that combines a rather modern-sounding ritual with "words": "To get rid of problems at home, I take an orange, say the words and throw it into running water, it's good if you can do it from a bridge" (EFITA, VPK, N4, woman, age range 60–65, 2020).

In the modern teachings of positive psychology and esotericism, there is a strong suggestion that in order for a wish to come true, it must be said out loud (examples about respective teachings and books in Estonia can be found in Alkeemia 2018, Nafousi 2022), and such an understanding is also reflected in the contemporary vernacular material, for example:

My mother also believes in the power of words and thinks that if you really want something very much, you have to say it out loud. Then this wish will come true. She always reminds me of this before exams. (EFITA, VPK, N5, woman, 25, 2021)

In the context of nightmare attacks, this reasoning pairs with the traditional understanding that the name of the person plaguing a sleeper as nightmare, or charms warding off nightmare must be spoken out loud.

The topic of energy vampires is unknown in older folklore, but frequent in the new material examined for this article, so verbal magic was also represented to parry such situations, like in the following example:

I am a relatively sensitive person myself and I can recognize an energy vampire. I prefer to stay away from them, I don't use any techniques to protect myself. If at all, then with words in my mind: "Everything that you use to harm me comes back in a circle." (EFITA, VPK, N9, woman, 60, 2022)

Explanations related to sucking energy or attacking on energy level come up also in relation to nightmare attacks.

Similarly, special words were used in relation to places that were perceived as dangerous, for example one woman narrated that place-related horror stories from others make her feel eerie and she feels that there can be a connection with place energy, thus when coming into such a place she starts quietly repeating mantras, such as "My energy belongs to me" or "I'm light and love." The same narrator also mentioned that as child she used to read the Lord's Prayer in such places because her mother had told her that it helps (EFITA, VPK, N20, woman, 25, 2023). Another woman said that she is afraid of attics of old houses because of a strange experience from her childhood, therefore when she really needs to go to such a place, she always carries a torch, a protective bracelet and repeats the words "Everything is well and I'm protected" (EFITA, VPK, N18, woman, 21, 2023). There was also a woman who was afraid of closed rooms and had special verbal means for feeling better:

My mother (49 years old) is afraid of small, closed spaces. She doesn't know how this feeling arose or where it comes from, but it started when she was a couple of years old. She has thought that maybe it could come from a past life. In order to escape from such unpleasant feelings in closed spaces, she chants mantras and other protective songs that protect and support her. When she is near people with whom it is uncomfortable to be with, chanting protection songs also helps, even if they are sung only quietly. (EFITA, VPK, N18, woman, 21, 2023)

On the other hand, similarly to the older tradition, the connection with the ancestors is still perceived important, and some of the narratives mentioned one's deceased parent or grandparent as one's guardian angel and the habit to thank them regularly either in thought or loudly for granting further protection (e.g., EFITA, VPK, N12, woman, 77, 2022). For example, in one case a woman narrated how her mother told her the following words when she was preparing for her third driving test after two unsuccessful attempts: "Grandma is with you and helps you to

pass the test”, after which she was able to pass the test (EFITA, VPK, N21, woman, 46, 2023).

Thus, contemporary verbal magic is usually short, pragmatic and functional and doesn't presume a strong sacral or religious dimension. As protective magic along its verbal outputs against evil supernatural beings is nowadays a much more private matter, dialogic incantations (Kõiva 2007) and other collective forms of verbal magic didn't occur in the examined material.

VERBAL MAGIC IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES ABOUT NIGHTMARE EXPERIENCE

The supernatural experiences that are in modern personal experience narratives most often associated with physical pain and discomfort are exposures that are interpreted as nightmare attacks. The descriptions of heavy bodily sensations related to such experiences have remained similar over time, being characterized by the impression of wakefulness, a strong feeling of intrusion or pressure, inability to move, breathing difficulties and intense fear, sometimes also sensations of pain (Adler 2011: 37, Hiiemäe 2018: 292). Dániel Báth (2024) has noted that especially in the case of illnesses, the needs of healing are constantly activated regardless of historical periods, and believers seek immediate, direct, and effective solutions within the current dominant religious field. The same applies to frightening and painful experiences – such as situations comprehended as nightmare attacks. The nightmare experience has many cross-cultural patterns (cf., Hufford 1989, Adler 2011: 8ff, Milne 2017), having been documented from various places through history along with protective rituals but there has been not much analysis of verbal magic used against it in contemporary settings.

Examples of long and artfully elaborated charm texts for preventing or stopping the unpleasant experience have been documented from various European folklore traditions, such as the following text from German origin:

I lay me here to sleep;
No night-mare shall plague me,
Until they swim all the waters
That flow upon the earth,

And count all the stars
That appear in the firmament!
Thus help me God Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen! (Kuhn
1859: 191; see more examples in Milne 2017)

In Estonian older tradition, comparable long verbal magic texts are rare but below is still one longer example:

Against nightmare. Take three crusts of rye bread and make three five-pointed stars on every crust with chalk and read these words three times on each crust: “The world may still help me to hear his [probably Christ’s] words. Maybe others threaten me, I despise this voice – it doesn’t last forever. (ERA II 202, 95 (41) < Pärnu < Kihnu, 1938)

In the following, some main categories of contemporary verbal magic against nightmare are presented.

1. THE LORD’S PRAYER AND OTHER PHRASES WITH CHRISTIAN CONTENT

One of the most frequently suggested remedies is reading prayers from Christian tradition. Some authors have tried to differ between magic charms and prayers, arguing that prayers can be characterized by a religious relationship between the one who says them and the addressee of the prayer (e.g., Vaitkevičienė 2008: 68). In the modern material, using a prayer often doesn’t presuppose any active religious background or commitment, thus being used in the function of a magic charm or sometimes even rather simply as a technical aid cited mechanically when wanting to end an unpleasant situation. In contemporary use, there is also not much attention paid to the Christian content; reading prayers for protection is rather triggered by the association that they possess some intrinsic protective or sacral power. Thus, it is oftentimes described rather as a mechanical or technical procedure where believing seems of secondary importance (Hiimäe 2018: 308).

As in older folklore (cf., Eisen 1922/2002), the Lord’s Prayer is mentioned most frequently in contemporary narratives or sometimes even only the spelling of the name Jesus Christ is considered sufficient. In older texts also formula like “Oh God” (e.g., ERA II 188, 410/1 (48) < Tallinn < Noarootsi, 1938) or “In the name of father, son and the holy

spirit” occur. In the older tradition, the use of the Lord’s Prayer could obtain magical additions, for example: “But if a nightmare comes, the Lord’s Prayer must be read backwards and the big toe of the left foot moved” (ERA I 3, 411 (24) < Kirbla, 1930) but the method of backwards-reading didn’t come up in the contemporary material – for a person who has no close connection with the prayer tradition, even reading the Lord’s prayer in normal way may be difficult. Next example reveals that the experiencer who shares her story on a women’s forum needs to find the prayer text first and then tries to memorize it. A woman from older generation – in this case mother – is the source of respective information, telling her about the protective power of the Lord’s Prayer and the bible. It is noteworthy that according to this personal experience narrative, the attacks of the nightmare continued despite of reading the prayer and keeping the bible close. Nevertheless, the experiences concludes that the ritual still helped to some extent:

Well, the best things always happen to me – tonight the nightmare visited me again, this time it wasn’t as scary as the last one, but still, damn it, who hates me so much? My mother also gave me a bible under my pillow because it should help. In the evening before going to bed I even looked up the Lord’s Prayer and read it, trying to memorize it, but still it happened :S As you know, the bible was supposed to keep it away, but interestingly, still the thing got close to me, but it wasn’t that strong as before, I think the bible somewhat helped, because it seemed like it [the nightmare] attempted to come but it didn’t turn out the best – this is already still something :-S. (N2, naistekas.delfi.ee/foorum, 2010)

In contemporary women’s accounts, the grandmother is most often mentioned as the source of traditional protective magic. In several personal experience narratives about nightmare experience, there is a clear hint to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, such as: “I have been taught since I was a child that the Lord’s Prayer protects me in such situations and I still use it” (EFITA, VPK, N16, woman 35, 2023). In the next example, a woman describes the nightmare experience of a good female friend as gradually intensifying: it is first perceived as the sensation of air moving, then as shuffling footsteps nearing, and finally as a heavy weight falling on her. The narrative culminates with a solution and again contains a reference that the protective tools were learned from grandmother:

In a frenzy of fear, the thought came to her that grandmother had once said that with nightmare one should read the Lord's Prayer. She, however, could not move or even make a peep, the weight bore down on her stomach and chest with tremendous force, until she was out of breath. With effort she only managed to think "Amen" and suddenly the heaviness was gone. There was no one in the room, the door was still closed, she was all sweaty either from fear or from great effort. (EFITA, VPK, M1, middle-aged woman, 2018)

While in older magical protection rituals, the word "amen" is often the word that sums up and closes a magical act, then in the above case it also proves effective separately.

As already mentioned above in the context of general contemporary protective magic, in some personal experience narratives related to warding off the nightmare, it was not clear what the prayer was and how lengthily it was read, as in the following example:

Once when I had some nightmare-like things, I used prayer beads, reading the prayer every night, twisting the beads between my fingers. For some reason I believe in them because I got rid of my nightmares by using them. (KP, ID32, girl, 16, 2018)

Interesting is the use of the protective words "The blood of Jesus" in the next example where these words are combined with turning to angels for help. Communication with protective angels is extremely popular in contemporary Western spirituality trends (cf., Draper & Baker 2011, Arnold & Walter 2017) but the theological meaning of the blood of Jesus only seldom comes to fore as teachings focusing on love and freedom from fear and suffering are preferred:

I myself have quite a lot of experiences where angels have helped me. One story is about nightmares. I have been tormented by nightmares all my life. It's very scary. Some creature just comes and occupies your body and scares you. At this stage you cannot speak or move. You can only think. And once I tried calling angels in my mind and it worked. In a second, this creature was gone. I also know that if you say "the blood of Jesus" in your mind, this creature also should disappear immediately. (EFITA, VPK, N2, woman, age range 20–30, 2018)

2. NEGOTIATIONS AND REQUESTS DIRECTED TO THE NIGHTMARE

In the contemporary religious landscape, several traditional supernatural notions have become obscure as the old concepts and meanings are no longer in active use. For example, when asked about rituals in connection with nightmare, a woman told the narrative below that provides a personal experience story that mentions “old souls” – a term unknown in older folklore and usually used with a different meaning in contemporary spiritual traditions where it usually refers to someone who has reincarnated already many times and thus has much empathy and spiritual understanding. However, the behavior of the described “old souls” has certain overlaps with the activities usually attributed to the nightmare (disturbing during sleep). Similarly novel is the described conversation – which I consider here also verbal magic – with these supernatural beings:

When I go to sleep in a place where it is said that old souls still move, I sometimes feel a different energy in the air. I've been taught that if you ask them in your thoughts (or loudly) that they would help you to have a deep sleep and accept your presence, they won't bother you and would let you sleep peacefully. I have used this ritual sometimes. (EFITA, VPK, N3, woman, 44, 2020)

In the next example text, traditional narrative motives related to nightmare and house spirit become intermingled. A new motif is “making peace” – a rather well-known element in contemporary esoteric healing traditions (an example of a respective teaching can be found in Alkeemia 2024). The narrative contains negotiations that are somewhat similar to the ones described in the previous example text, but they are accompanied by offering food and drink that resembles already a more classical reconciliation ritual:

When I moved to a city apartment, someone already lived there. I think it was a house spirit or a house old man or whoever. Anyway, he was such a furry – I saw him once through an accidental side-glance and my daughter felt his presence as well. It was a cat-like creature, and for example, when you were sleeping, you suddenly felt him come to the top of your body. I was completely afraid, and once I saw him then through a

side-glance, but immediately he seemed to vanish into thin air. Then I talked to him – I was taught how I should talk, because I nevertheless had broken into that home as a stranger. I talked and made peace with him and put him food and drink for the night. After that, there has been no cognitive contact with him. But if some other person stays with us, sometimes he can still play tricks. For example, he turns on the TV – then you have to talk to him again that everything is fine. He seems to know who is good and who is bad. (EFITA, VPK, N17, woman, 45, 2023)

In older folklore, no such friendly dialogue takes place, as forceful intervention was considered justified in the case of confronting an aggressive and demonic being. A well-known form of defence was recognizing the person who came in the shape of nightmare and calling out his or her name, sometimes accompanied by shouting harsh vulgar words directed to this person (as for example in ERA II 37, 611 (5) < Jöhvi, 1931). According to traditional belief narratives, it was also useful to directly command the person who was suspected to be the nightmare to stop plaguing (e.g., ERA II 167, 139 (3) < Koeru, 1937, cf. the same motive in Eisen 1922/2002, and in international context Milne 2017: 100). In contemporary material, only some texts in a specific forum of paranormal topics (para-web.com) contained instructions to use swearwords or just short commands like “Enough!” or “Stop!” against nightmare.

3. TALKING TO ENERGIES AND OTHER APPROACHES RELATED TO NEW AGE TEACHINGS

In contemporary New Age teachings, the concept of “energy” has a significant role, believed to be a mediator between natural and supernatural realms and building a relationship between an individual and the environment (Kivari 2012: 49). Several elements of the nightly attacker in the next example text are described similarly as in traditional nightmare attack narratives (e.g., a personified intrusion over which the sleeper has no control and thus experiences fear), but rather surprisingly the attacker is soon interpreted as the personified influenza energy. The experiencer calls Archangel Michael and uses prayers but in the content of these verbal utterances the term “energy” comes up again, thus being in line with the modern spiritual traditions:

I have the story of a friend. Many years ago, while going to sleep one night, she felt that someone wanted to enter her, it was like

some sort of energy scratching and signaling that it was coming for something. When she went to sleep, she felt fear and called Archangel Michael to help and prayed that if this energy was not needed, he would take it away, and in a minute the bad feeling was gone. And the next day she still was curious enough to get to know what energy it was, and on a neutral surface, without fear, they met, so-to-say. It turned out that it was an influenza and she had encountered the energy body of this influenza, so-to-say. (EFITA, VPK, N11, woman 50, 2022)

Another example similarly involves a reference to Archangel Michael in a popular Estonian women's forum where a woman asks for advice to help her mother who has been plagued by nightmare. As mentioned above, angels are well visible in the general Estonian spiritual milieu and ways of communicating for receiving help and protection are learned from heterogenous, mainly non-Christian sources (cf. Uibu 2012: 70). One protective ritual suggested in the forum combines several traditions: the use of water blessed in a Christian church, using salt that is well-known in traditional folk magic, feng shui techniques and a verbal part that contains elements from modern spiritual teachings, for example the concept "negativity" that never occurs in a traditional prayer:

Bring blessed water from the church or sanctify the water yourself with salt. Take a candle (you can also bring it from the church) and holy water and start consecrating the home from the front door in a clockwise direction (stand facing the front door, then you will understand the direction) and sprinkle holy water in each corner and say the words that you have prepared for yourself, for example: "With this holy water I cleanse my home of all negativity". But do it soulfully and alone and in a moment when there is no one at home to disturb, or no excessive noise. You can also draw some feng-shui protective sign or the Michael's sword on the home door. (user N1, naistekas.delfi.ee/foorum, 2009)

Thus, availability of various information currents related to spirituality and magic brings along novel combinations of protective elements that are also reflected in innovative outputs of verbal magic.

4. UNIQUE AND ELABORATED MODERN INCANTATIONS

A couple of internet forum posts presented unique incantation texts. For example, a woman who suffered of nightmare attacks claimed that the incantation “Eosite aolite sal! Eosite aolite sal!” suddenly just came into her mind out of nowhere and after repeating it, although not knowing the meaning of these words, the nightmare attacks stopped (naistekas.delfi.ee/foorum, kasutaja: S.E., 2012). Magic words whose meaning is not clear can quite often be found in older folklore, but self-created incantations are rare, because the effect of an incantation was usually namely associated with its traditionality as a proof of its efficacy (cf., Hiimäe 2018: 308, Kõiva, Kuperjanov 2023).

The following ritual that contains also verbal parts is again unique (especially the “fire boys” as addressees of the ritual) and was suggested against nightmare in an internet forum for paranormal topics:

You can also meditate. Place burning candles around you. Sit in the middle. Take a suitable meditation position. Close your eyes. Ask the fire-boys to help you clean yourself. Imagine that you draw a “flame” from these lights closer and closer. It should be light yellow. Now move with this “flame” from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. Until it succeeds. If during meditation you suddenly smell an unpleasant smell, it means that one of the bad guys has been burned. When you finish meditating, thank the fire-boys for their help. You can also ask the sun and the moon for help. (K1, para-web.org, 2015)

Some motives (e.g., cleaning with an imagined flame) in this ritual can be found in translated New Age books containing various rituals for energetic cleansing – however, none of these elements (besides fire as a universal protective element) do occur in older folklore.

CONCLUSIONS

While the belief in many supernatural beings (e.g. the plague spirit) has receded and the verbal magic associated with them has also disappeared from the living tradition, the nightmare (or old hag) experiences continue as a physically perceived sensation even today. Intense experiences interpreted as nightmare attacks presuppose and trigger active narrative reasoning and a readiness for experimenting with various

available methods of regaining one's wellbeing and safety, looking into the multitude of resources available in the society. Popular media offers representations of medical sleep paralysis but also murderous nocturnal spirits – both of them function to introduce cultural and biological frameworks to terrified and confused experiencers (cf., Adler 2011: 134). The ways of verbal magic have even diversified, combining elements of both old traditions and the heterogeneous modern international religious knowledge whereby in the contemporary material, verbal magic related to nightmare attacks was reported mainly by females. This may be partly explained by the fact that women perceive nightmare experiences as more frightening and are therefore more eager to try out ways of protection, including protection through verbal magic. At the same time women are also more familiar with self-help methods available in the spiritual milieu as the majority of present-day vernacular belief forms and spiritual teachings attract particularly women (Utriainen & Salmesvuori 2014). At the same time, verbal magic in the examined material was often rather fragmentary; there was also certain blurriness regarding the understandings related to various supernatural beings. It may be assumed that the confusion of beliefs is partly due to the fact that among the respondents there was a considerable number of younger women, whose connection with the older tradition is weaker and openness to new spiritual teachings is greater. However, the blurring is also due to a more general disruption in traditional knowledge and the wide visibility of new forms of spirituality.

Belief in efficacy of a protective ritual, prayers and charms are related to the authority of the source from where they stem – here, grandmothers as providers of information on self-protection rituals seem to be equally important as contemporary spiritual teachings or leaders in the vernacular conception whereby references to protective wisdom learned from grandmothers were undoubtedly more common in women's than in men's stories. Intergenerational transmission in family has first and foremost helped to preserve key elements from the older verbal magic tradition (such as using the Lord's Prayer as a means of protection).

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

ERA – folklore collection of Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum
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BIO

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