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DOI: 10.34813/ptr2.2023.2

## **Sacredness in healing and magical rituals of the folk healers (the szeptucha) from Podlasie**

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**Abstract.** The activity of people that are involved in magical-healing and curse laying is as old as human existence. However, especially in its folk, rural tradition it became the topic of academic interest and debate relatively recently. Not so long ago, such research was considered shameful, and the very activity of people dealing with traditional treatment as superstition. Only recently has it been rediscovered that magical practices are deeply rooted on many levels in the culture, religion, and society. In my research on magic in antiquity, I rely solely on historical material; this research also opened the horizon of a direct encounter with the researched matter, and above all with people – the folk healers, whisperers, who have been practicing the process for centuries. After thoroughly grounding myself in the literature on the matter, in September and October 2021, I decided to conduct field research in Podlasie. Its objective was to determine whether folk healers' treatment still exists, what magical components it contains and how it is related to the traditional sanctity of the current religious world of eastern Poland.

**Keywords:** folk healer (szeptucha, whisperer), sacredness, prayer, magic, healing, verbal healing (incantations), folk tradition.

**T**he greater awareness of contemporary socio-historical processes means that in Poland a search has begun for the roots of traditional culture and religion. In search of an institution of sanctity, a few folk practices were noticed which several generations earlier were a natural source of authority for local communities. The very first results of this research showed that the traditional institutions of holiness, apart from the obviously inviolable role of the Christian church, enjoyed enormous authority, sometimes even bordering on fear. The peculiar sacredness of these insti-

tutions was based, *inter alia*, on healing by magical treatments as well as by laying curses. In this field, I agree with Józefów-Czerwińska (2017, p. 26) that every meeting with sacrum related to religious experience.

According to Engelking (2010, p. 20), we can talk about the existence of a separate literary genre, which are the texts of incantations<sup>1</sup> and the specialized medical-magic practice that accompanies them.<sup>2</sup>

In the East of today's Poland, in the Podlasie region near the Belarusian border, the person who combined magic and healing practices was known as a 'whisperer' (*szeptucha*), an institution and person in one.<sup>3</sup>

I wrote this article based on two main pillars. The first of them was a scientific trip to Podlasie in September 2021. During this time, I visited and talked with three folk healers, and participated in their rituals (participant observation). Some of these visits were very specific, as it was during the closure of the border zone with Belarus, and I had to apply for a special pass to get there. My efforts were successful, and it was a double entry into this zone, and I was the only visitor the folk healer had at that time. In Orla, I discontinued my visits to the local folk healer. The reason was quite simple. I talked to the people who came to her with great hopes and very serious illnesses, and I felt that I was not morally entitled to take her patient's place by coming for a completely different reason (for scientific research). However, I used this time to talk to the people awaiting their visit to know their motivation and history of their meetings with folk healers. From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. a huge crowd of people was always waiting to see her. I realized how essential my research was because the folk healers just disappear as most of them quickly pass away and folk healing is threatened with extinction. It seems that the phenomenon of the folk healers in their traditional form, unfortunately, is inexorably heading towards extinction.

The second pillar was based not only on scientific literature, but above all on articles, columns in the press, video recordings on the Internet and full-length films devoted to this subject. The credibility of these accounts can be determined by repeatability of descriptions and the authentic utterances that we can hear and watch in documentary films.

## Definition of the term 'szeptucha'

In opinion of Engelking (2010), "in the consciousness of representatives of folk culture there is no phenomenon called 'magic' – there is 'doing', 'talking'<sup>4</sup> and a special kind of 'knowledge'" (pp. 38, 42), and specialists such as *szeptucha* (folk healer) have the appropriate power and knowledge that they can utilize. That is why all people

<sup>1</sup> The words of prayers and orders are not widely known, although they are occasionally written down, as exemplified by Franciszek Kotula's book (1976).

<sup>2</sup> The definitions of magic in Polish folk tradition (see Engelking, 2010, pp. 30–31, 39–41, 43–4; Buchowski, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> In Podlasie, not only *szeptuchy* (*babki*) were famous for their knowledge of magic, quackery, and healing (See Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 223).

<sup>4</sup> In this case, language is a way of doing things, not a tool of reflection (See Malinowski, 2000, p. 22, Engelking, 2010, pp. 86, 90).

who practice this special art, which researchers call magic, enjoy great respect among those who are familiar with folk culture.

The oldest document in which the term 'szeptun' (masculine form of szeptucha) appears is the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* from 1859, but the practice itself is probably much older (see Petriczko, 2020). One of the most important elements of Orthodoxy in Russia is the synthesis of magic and religion, that is, the occurrence of pagan magic rules and joining them to the principles of the Christian religion. These broadly understood magical and religious activities are also used by folk healers from Podlasie in their practices (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 194). The folk healer (szeptucha) has its roots in the East of today's Poland, and in Polish conditions it is a border phenomenon. First, her name is of the eastern provenance. In Russian and Ukrainian, it means a person dealing with witchcraft, but foremost with healing. Then, szeptucha is a healer, a specialist in healing diseases and casting spells.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to people dealing with so-called "black magic" (witches) associated with harmful activities, szeptucha deals primarily with fighting against witchcraft (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 191).

Just a decade ago, many hundreds of folk healers lived in Podlasie. Today there are only a dozen of them. The average age is 70 years (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 202; Petriczko, 2020).

In one of her statements, the local folk healer said:

I once dreamed that in Kornin Virgin Mary gave her clothes to Jesus. I had absolutely no idea what that meant. I asked everyone and no one could explain it to me. Only a woman from Hajnówka explained to me that there was a miracle in Kornin and that I would now heal people. And I help. (Pawlikowski, 2008; 'Szept' 2010)

The gift passes from mother to daughter, according to the folk healer from Orla ('Szept' 2010). This daughter should be the family's first or the last child because it is said that only those women who were the first- or last-born can inherit the gift (See Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 224). The folk healer usually passes knowledge on to the oldest woman in the family, who should preferably be post-menopausal. At the time of the transmission of the texts of prayers and incantations only the whisperer and her successor are present. The women sit together in the room until the adept learns everything by heart. The spells cannot be written down on a piece of paper, as they could fall into the wrong hands. According to Guzior, after passing on the knowledge, the whisperer stops healing, loses the power necessary for it, and often dies soon after (Guzior, 2017, p. 1; Petriczko, 2020). Without giving her gift to the next generation, the whisperer would be doomed to death in agony (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 224; Petriczko, 2020).

From the folk healer in Grabowiec, I learned that no one wants to take over the teachings of the whisperer in Orla. She would even ask one of the younger male members of the family, but he would also refuse. This folk healer said that none of the young people want to take on such a difficult duty anymore, that it is a calling, which means hard work with a break only on Sundays and church holidays. She said that it was not only accepting patients, but also fasting every day and night

<sup>5</sup> According to Józefów-Czerwińska (2017, p. 227), "the term szeptunka/szeptucha has a clearly pejorative meaning". However, I did not recognize that during my visit.

prayers in order to be able to cast a spell on water and wool. She stated that even at night, she prayed for good-luck charms and health for her patients, hence she was frequently very tired.

### **Prayer – the most important factor**

It can be observed that a complete ritual consists of words, gestures, and objects. Words have the function of creating; gestures emphasize the meaning of words, and objects, being in constant use, become part of the gesture and complete the whole ritual.

The folk healer emphasizes that she is not doing anything – God is above the people, and he heals them. She added, “One God, regardless of religion”. Each of her prayers is different. All depends on whose intention it is to be recited and which disease of the patient should be healed (Pawlikowski, 2008; ‘Szept’, 2010).

The folk healer was supposed to get her power from God and Virgin Mary or the saints, she was healing at their command. The healers were sometimes exceptionally religious – they kept a strict fast, often went to confession, and led an ascetic life (Pawlikowski, 2008; Charyton, 2011, pp. 7–8; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 203).

Each time, the folk healer wants to pray together with her patient(s):

First there was the word, the word was God, it was the beginning. Everything began to be because of God. And the light shines in the dark. Lest darkness overwhelm a man.

She asks the patient to repeat:

Jesus Christ, you who appeared on the holy mountain, for your disciples and for the apostles, please transform all me and my family problems. Turn them into love and health, so that there would be only joy in our life. (See Petriczko, 2020)

During my research visits, I could see many icons and sacred images on the table. The largest image, that of Pope John Paul II, embroidered with tiny checks and framed, was situated as if in a place of honor. There was a large amount of wax around, even the holy books were stained with wax and there were numerous candles on the table. The *szeptucha* from *Opaka Duża* asked for the patient’s name, lit a candle, and began to pray, holding the holy pictures facing the candle flame. She made the visitor repeat some fragments aloud after her. The words were about the Lord Jesus and the Virgin Mary whom she claimed to have regularly met on the bridge where she went to pray for people, and she also mentioned the names of some saints’ that I didn’t know. The point was that they should intercede for her patients, that they should be intermediaries in the prayer. The prayer was in Polish, and then she repeated the same utterances in a local dialect.

The core of the verbal healing ritual and the basic therapeutic agent are the words – ritual magic formulas, which have a causative and creative power in the folk culture. The words are sacred – they cannot be used inadvertently and if used improperly, they will bring severe punishment on the reckless person (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 196).

The prayers are written in the liturgical language of the Orthodox Church, i.e., Church Slavonic, and numerous incantations are in the dialect. The prayers are often

transformed – other words are inserted; the pronunciation is changed. This creates a characteristic ritual language – a mixture of dialect (profane language) and Church Slavonic (sacred language). The canonical Orthodox prayer is slightly changed to include folk ideas of divinity (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 201; Bułgakow, 1992, pp. 161–169 as an introduction to the topic of mysticism in the Orthodox Church).

It is also worth noting that there is a direct turn to the disease in the text – the folk healer persuades anxiety disorders (like “fear”) to leave the body of a sick person. It is also worth noting that in each of the above-mentioned texts there is a direct reference to the disease – the whisperer urges “fear” and skin diseases to leave the patient’s body. The personification of the disease is related to the power of words. The power of the disease’s name, along with imperative speech, is to summon the disease and make it do what she wants it to do (Charyton, 2011, pp. 6–7; Guzior, 2017, p. 6; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 198).

Szeptucha Anna from Rutka emphasised that she did not heal, she only prayed: “Strong faith heals the sick” (‘Szept’, 2010). Anna took the Virgin Mary on her legs, told the patient to put her fingers on the picture, and she placed her hands immediately on the patient saying: “Look at the sky, at the clouds and tell me what you see” and started muttering something in Belarusian under her breath. Finally, she rose from her squat and took a thick Bible in her hands, put it on the patient’s head and started reading passages from it. She asked her patient to say the names of his parents and spouses and began to say her prayer again. She kept repeating the word of incantation. And every now and then she asked the patient to repeat his own name and the names of his loved ones and wove them into the prayer, asking for the evil to be driven away (‘Szept’, 2010; Diemianowicz, 2015).

The prayer is a request because it aims to persuade the addressee (in the case of prayer, it is God) to fulfill the supplicant’s wishes. It is assumed that the deity can meet the requirements. The request must have the appropriate intonation, otherwise it can be taken as a demand, which in turn presupposes that something must be done, and that it isn’t granted through grace (Guzior, 2017, p. 6).

The gesture is consistent with the words, in order that word and gesture complement each other. In the healing rituals the sign of the cross is the most frequently repeated gesture.<sup>6</sup> The folk healer performs it before each prayer, and several times during and after it:

Sometimes a sick person crosses during the procedure, but – what is important – the sign of the cross is often used by the szeptucha. She makes the sign of the cross before she starts and when she ends the prayer, she makes it above the patient’s head, over the sick place, further over the water and every other thing that she verbally heals, finally she crosses herself. (Charyton, 2011, p. 9)

Whispering gestures were depicted both in the movies of Kołaczkowski and Palusińska, as well as in Żakowiecka-Krysiak and Baranowski. In the first one, szeptucha Paraskieva warded off disease and then placed her hands on the healed

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, DuBois presented that during the Viking-Age Nordic people’s charms for health and good fortune were very popular and the significance of cross in a magic healing was very important in the Viking society. In healing or protection, the signs of the cross are made on the patient’s limbs (DuBois, 1999, pp. 108–10, 116–8).

woman's head. The sign of the cross was also performed when uttering incantations and holding flax which was supposed to be purifying. She touched the flax while saying the words of the spell. Then she burnt the flax over the woman's head in order to remove the cured disease ('Szept', 2010; Guzior, 2017, p. 6).

In szeptucha's practices, some people claim to have seen a halo over the healed person's head. Charyton mentioned that she perceived a halo above a candle right after szeptucha had finished burning flax over the head. She adds that this circular symbolic is related to the correct course of the world (Charyton, 2011, p. 9; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 199).

One of the most common non-verbal elements of folk healing of a disease is blowing and spitting, as well as making circles around a sick person with a candle or other objects.<sup>7</sup> Each of these gestures has a symbolic meaning in folk culture.

To drive out the diseases, not only prayers and verbal healing are used, but often also special tools (items): scissors, scarves, knives, a rosary, candles, wax melting pots (Charyton, 2011, p. 12). Occasionally, folk healers use herbs for incense. Finally, the patient must complete the ritual by himself, performing the task entrusted to him by the healer. Most often, he receives a piece of bread or cookies. Most of the patients who were healed by the szeptucha from Orla ended up with a slice of bread divided into three parts. Each part had to be eaten at a specific time of the day: morning, afternoon, and evening, while saying a prayer to Virgin Mary three times (Guzior, 2017, p. 3).

## Healing by the szeptucha

In the folk tradition, when devil co-created man with the God, he pierced man's body and placed diseases there (Engelking, 2010, p. 263). The szeptucha heals all kinds of afflictions: various skin diseases, anxiety disorders (like "fear"), pain, and so on. When a bad charm resulting in the affliction is cast on someone, the affected person should turn to the szeptucha (Charyton, 2011, pp. 13-17; Guzior, 2017, p. 3; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 195).

When performing the ritual, the folk healer enters the sphere of the sacred, which is dangerous, then she is separated from the profane by incantations and prohibitions. She is accompanied by magical and symbolic gestures and words, activities aimed at enabling her to contact the "other side". Ritual is understood here as a magical, structured action with a specific goal that "is possible to achieve by invoking the power of the sacred". So, "rituals are mediation activities: to enable contact and mutual interaction between the spheres of the sacred and the profane" (Engelking, 1991, p. 75; Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, 2001, pp. 107-9; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 196).

Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska cites two definitions of incantations of Toporov and Tolstaja, and in both cases the word "magical" appears. In the first there are "special texts of a formulaic nature, which are attributed with a magical force capable of causing the desired state". In the second, "small folklore texts serving as a magical

<sup>7</sup> Words and even charms can be spit out, and saliva is a mediating substance between a person and the outside world (See Engelking, 2010, p. 80). The meaning of candle in the magical rituals (See Engelking, 2010, pp. 109-10).



means of obtaining something desired in healing, protective, fertility, and other rituals” (See Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, 2001, p. 102).

Judin also talks about orders. He successively discusses mythotoponyms representing the different term and places of ritual in magical tradition. According to him, saying the names is supposed to magically open the way to the center of the world, where a meeting with a magical helper (protector) is expected, which guarantees the success of the enchantment ritual (Judin, 1999, p. 177).

While praying, healers from Podlasie make the sign of the cross three times, embrace the patient’s face which the healer covered with a white or red scarf and touch the painful place. The patient remains motionless. This may be due to the relationship between motion and stillness. Movement in rituals is related to life, and stillness to death. Following this lead, in the healing ritual, life (movement) can be read in the context of giving the healed person a new life in good health. Movement contributes to the expulsion of the disease, and thus to the rebirth of the sick. Figuratively, the immobility of the healed person is death because the disease limits functioning. The healer becomes a medium between God and the disease, thereby stimulating immobility and banishing death to return the patient to the path of life. With the help of God, to whom she prays, the healer becomes the creator of a new reality. Folk healers pray to God (sacred) or address disease (profane). Through prayer, the healer joins a dialogue with the divine forces and becomes a mediator between these forces and the person, who, being healed, remains in the earthly profane sphere. The healed person feels the energy flowing from the repetitiveness of the healer’s gestures. (Guzior, 2017, p. 3).

Prayer over bread and burning flax, pouring out wax and collecting wax are practiced on Monday and Thursday. This wax comes from Candlemas or sacrificial candles, consecrated, and burned earlier during the service in church. Flax protects from the bad wind and wax from ‘fear’ (‘Szept’, 2010; Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, pp. 230–1).

The most difficult diseases to cure are anxiety disorders, which in Podlasie is equated with “neurosis” (“nerve”). It requires a long-term treatment and is associated with pain in the entire body. Wool is most often used in the treatment of this ailment; when applied to the patient’s body, it “draws” the disease out of him (Pawlikowski, 2008; Charyton, 2011, pp. 13–14; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 199). The patient who has received a lot of bad energy from people and whose nerves are agitated needs a lot of peace (‘Szept’, 2010).

One of the most common folk “ailments” are skin diseases. They are treated primarily with the burning of flax fibers that have been rolled into loops. Then a red or white handkerchief is placed on the head of the sick person or the place on the body that is afflicted, and the flax is put atop it. The folk healer uses the wax of candle, to heal the affliction (Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, 2001, pp. 104–5; Charyton, 2011, pp. 13, 16–17; Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 234). If the flax loops go up, the disease gives way; if they go down, the ritual should be repeated (Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 200).

The *szeptucha* heals anxiety disorders most often with wax as well. The basis of this method is the use of beeswax melted in a small pot on the stove. The head of

the person who is scared is sometimes covered with a handkerchief, a pot of cool water is placed on it and melted wax is poured into it to solidify immediately. This is important because the healer can take it out of the water and guess from its shape who the perpetrator of the affliction was (Charyton, 2011, p. 18; Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 231; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 201). Finally, in many cases, the disease can be overcome and abandoned at a special place, preferably “at a crossroads” (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, pp. 234–5).

### **The water, fire and earth elements**

The element of water in folk tradition has an ambivalent meaning. There is the so-called good and even miraculous water that cleanses not only the body, but also has power to restore the holy order of things created by God, i.e., health and holiness.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, some water reservoirs and flowing water could be inhabited by various supernatural beings of often negative power (‘water nymphs’). Such water is sometimes called “that water” marked by misfortune and death, dangerous to human health. It is impure water which, for example, transferred the disease from a washed dead body to a sick person. According to some accounts, such water was often poured on the road so that it could imperceptibly transfer misfortune (illness) to a passing person (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, pp. 134–40, 165).

Curing a ‘patient’, the folk healer stood in front of holy pictures and poured water from a large bottle into a small one, telling the patient not to be afraid because it was only healing water from the well, and she began to pray, alternating back and forth from a loud to quiet voice, clearly pronouncing the patient’s name each time. Sometimes she turned her head and whispered the prayer’s words straight into the bottle, to direct into the water. Sometimes the patient was urged to repeat her words, but mostly she prayed. The patients claimed that as she touched their chest and back with her hands, they felt great warmth. The healer also emphasized the fact that numerous cures were not her doings, but doings of God. She only prayed in the name of the patient. So, when someone thanked her, she told them to thank God. She also said that she prayed orally but also wrote down prayers on pieces of paper and took them to the priest to pray in church.

In the folk tradition, fire is related to sacred elements (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, pp. 129–34). In extreme cases, fire can give birth, and often regenerates the body (Tokarska-Bakir, 2000, pp. 324–5). The folk healer bent over the sick person, put his right hand on his head and recited the praying formulas – it resembles the sacrament of confession, while the thurification with herbs is reminiscent of burning incense in Christianity. Of course, thurifying people or rooms has an ancient, mystical meaning.

The earth has long been understood as the nurturer of humankind (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 141). Depending on the ailment, the folk healer uses different

<sup>8</sup> Historically, the first sacrament was baptism. Jesus ordered to make it by water, because water has been a symbol of purification since ancient times. Just as water washes the body, it washes away sin from the soul (Mieñ, 1992, p. 149).



methods of treatment. She protects the patient from a blow by the bad wind (Libera, 2003). She uses ashes to pull out the disease. She gets the ash from the stove, throws away the coals and fills the glass with the sifted dust. She wraps these tightly in a white linen handkerchief, turns the bundle over and recites a prayer many times walking around the sick person. At the end of the rite, she puts the glass down on the kitchen table, after which she checks the appearance of the ash. If it forms a smooth, compact layer, it means that the wind was not the cause of the disease (‘Szept’, 2010; Charyton, 2011, p. 13; Sadanowicz, 2018, p. 199). Wind in folk culture is often connected with evil spirits (Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 229).

### Specifics of the verbal healing charms

In the incantation’s ritual, the healer talks with the person being healed about the ailments while addressing the disease in the words of the incantation (Charyton, 2011, pp. 5–7). The disease becomes both the subject of the talk and the recipient of the healer’s words. The magical power in the healing ritual is also contained in the repetition of given words, which is supposed to be a guarantee of evoking the desired reality. Verbal healing charms are addressed directly to the disease. It happens that the words of verbal healing are spoken aloud. They appear to be a plea: “to Jesus and Virgin Mary!”. The verbal healing formulas are most often a demand that shows the conviction that the addressee is to submit to the uttered requirements. The requirement is distinguished from a polite request by its categorical nature. It is aimed at an immediate effect (Guzior, 2014, p. 6).

The healers are people who use folk medicine in treatment processes that have a traditional use in rural society. They possess the knowledge about medical procedures and the healing properties of plants passed orally from generation to generation. These medical procedures include verbal healings and prayers. Formerly healers used herbal medicine, but this practice is slowly disappearing (Charyton, 2011, p. 10). Folk medicine is combined with magical activities. This is related to old beliefs according to which the causes of many diseases were curses cast by witches or people with the so-called “evil eye” (Guzior, 2014, p. 1, 3).

### Casting spells

According to folk tradition, jealousy has great power. Spells have been cast for a long time and people who become their victim often look for their cause in the so-called ‘evil eye.’<sup>9</sup>

Kuźmicz from Gródek says “It happens that a person comes home, sits down, without the will to live. It means that someone cast a spell on him”. In such a case,

<sup>9</sup> About the curse (see Engelking, 2010, pp. 99–126, 224–57). The curse should have been most powerful when uttered on Tuesday or Saturday. The prescribed posture for swearers is to take off the headgear, sit with the hands crossed on the knees, preferably in the place of the proverbial or literal passage (e.g., the threshold of the house) (see Engelking, 2010, p. 205).

the healers from Gródek took salt in their hands and made three circles over the patient's head, then threw the salt into the furnace. This operation had to be repeated two more times on the following days. They also rinsed their eyes with holy water and gave them holy water to drink in a very special way, in the hollow on the outside of the bottom of the bottle (Sulżyk, 2019).

No one has succumbed to charms as often as children and farm animals, to this day a red ribbon tied to the cot is said to protect infants (Guzior, 2014, p. 3).

Today, there is still another method of dealing with bad charms. It consists in "cleansing yourself" at the end of the day on which you fell victim to the "evil eye". You should put on your clothes turned inside out on that day. The condition is that the clothes are natural, cotton (Charyton, 2011, p. 19).<sup>10</sup>

## The magical meaning of numbers

In healing practices, numbers are not accidental. With great probability they are related to religious symbolism. The most important number is three, which is the number connected with the persons in the Holy Trinity, and the third day when Christ was resurrected. Number nine ( $3 \times 3$ ) becomes a symbol of full divinity. The folk healer often makes the sign of the cross three times when she makes incantations. A slice of bread is divided into three pieces, and the prayer should be repeated three times at three times of the day. This number also relates to the most important qualities of the healing ritual: word, gesture, and mystery. Additionally, it is commonly associated with the beginning, middle, end, and with the three stages of human life: birth, life, and death (Guzior, 2014, p. 5).

There are some other examples of the numbers in folk healing and folk prejudice: the prayer is repeated three times, one should spit three times to prevent the charm, the three-time (or  $3 \times 3$ ) repetition of the formula for enchanting sickness, blessing for a child leaving home, the three-time request for a blessing before the wedding, the three-time knocking on the coffin on the threshold of the house, the three trials of the hero in his fight against evil, etc. (Engelking, 2010, pp. 178, 303–4; Guzior, 2014, p. 5; Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, pp. 285–9, 228–9, 230–2, 234).

Another important number in the context of the folk medicine is seven, which is the sum of three and four. Four in the biblical sense is the number of four directions of the world and four seasons. Number seven represents fullness and perfection, and in the Middle Ages it was a sign of the mystery of man. We can find the number seven in the Bible many times. It is found in the Apocalypse of St. John, which mentions seven churches, stars, seals, etc. In turn, in the *Old Testament*, seven locks of hair gave Samson strength (Judges 16:13, see Guzior, 2014, p. 5; Zajac, 2021).

The meaning of numbers three, nine and seven is supposed to give divine power to the ritual of healing and the use of these numbers protects the person healed from evil (Guzior, 2014, p. 5).

<sup>10</sup> I was a witness of a similar conviction during an interview with a "babka" in a completely different area of Poland, near Kartuzy, in Kashubia.

## The official position of the clergy

Officially, most of the clergy, both Orthodox and Catholic, have a negative attitude towards folk healers (see Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 226). They claim that folk healers help people physically but distract them from spiritual matters. The clergy consider it suspicious that the healers die in terrible torments if they do not pass their knowledge on to others. The clergy suppose that the powers of the verbal healing come from unclean forces (Jankowski, 2009; Zielińska, 2009; Petriczko, 2020). However, we should keep in mind that this is an official position. Many priests turn a blind eye to the practice of whispering because of its great godliness. The documentary movie 'Szept' presents an orthodox priest's (= batuszka) words about healers. He notes that it is difficult to define the boundary between being religious and magical, it depends largely on the participation of szeptucha in the life of the community. This batuszka also states that the healers give people hope, which, in his opinion, is very important in life ('Szept' 2010).

The batuszka explains that they are on the verge of their religious community, but he will not throw them out because they are baptized and give hope to the sick persons (Guzior, 2014, p. 7).

In response to my question about her contact with the priest, a folk healer said that she had a very fruitful cooperation with the batuszka and she even asked the priest for prayers and masses for the health of her patients. She mentioned that she had a good communication with the previous priest, who had been in the parish for 16 years as he knew everything about her activities, and they could cooperate successfully. With the current one, who had been in the parish for only two years, there was no such bond; she could not rely on him as he confused the names of people which she gave him to pray for.

## Summary

The szeptucha moves in the world of the profane, but she is at the same time immersed in the sacred. Her sacredness is very specific, because it is based on Christian rites, prayers, and ceremonies. However, she is aware of presence of the evil one (devil) in the process of creating the world and in its functioning. And this is a significant force, since the folk healer always insists that one must come to healing rituals before sunset, because later her prayers could become ineffective, as the God does not listen to them anymore. The szeptucha from Grabowiec claims that there is no reason to pray after dark, because prayers after dusk fail to reach God, and they are ineffective.

Darkness, then, is the domain of the devil. In the folk tradition, the world was created in dualistic form, by God but also by devil. God created the eastern part of the world in the morning, and the devil the western part at dusk (See Tomicki, 1976, p. 59; Engelking, 2010, pp. 268–9).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> However, there are exceptions to this e.g., treating a "fear" (See Józefów-Czerwińska, 2017, p. 233).

Folklore accepts the presence of good and bad in the world. The szeptucha is there to heal physical ailments, but also to protect against evil curses and add light to the world where darkness has a very strong position. God is the most important, but devil also has his role to play (Engelking, 2010, pp. 162–163, 198, 318).

Scientists and theorists will describe the folk healer's treatments as magical, but she herself treats it as prayers and an effective activity. She heals in accordance with the mission received from the divine. Receiving this as a gift, she does not want to be paid. Her actions are effective and the methods for this are not only verbal healings, but those based on complete confidence in divinity in its folk-pious dimension (Charyton, 2011, pp. 2–4).

Is the religious-magical culture fading into oblivion? Based on my observation, there is no single correct answer to this question. Yes, it is, because the world is moving towards mechanization, and the calling of the folk healer in its traditional form seems to be coming to an end. However, there are advertisements for 'modern' whisperers and even for courses for them, offering to acquire this 'skill' in a very short time and to monetise on it.

All in all, folk healing does not go away, people deprived of hope in traditional medicine, stand in queues to folk healers look forward to receiving something extraordinary, which the modern world is unable to offer to them. People are longing for healing and contact with divinity through words of prayers spoken by whisperers and by their hands transferring healing from the world of the sacred to their bodies and souls.

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