

## Name – Text – Ritual: The Role of Plant Characteristics in Slavic Folk Medicine

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“...while trying to use remedies of every available kind empirically to treat various afflictions, but being at the same time incapable of making an informed choice, the commoner tries instead to find a guiding thread and a departure point for his domestic remedies at any rate in analogy, compassion or the similarities between certain characteristics of plants and other objects and the symptoms of the disease” [V. F. Demich. Essays on Russian Folk Medicine. Folk Midwifery and Gynecology]

The aim of this article is to show how among the Slavs a given objective feature of a plant becomes one of the most important factors in the selection of plants for use in folk medicine. At the same time I shall reveal the remarkably close ties between the feature, the plant name and the folk beliefs surrounding it.

### Color

In the nineteenth century the well-known researcher into folk medicine, V. F. Demich remarked that “often in the countryside people use red plants, ones with red flowers and berries, to treat menstrual disorders, or else they may administer a tintured infusion” [1889: 7]. According the same logic, leucorrhoea (a white vaginal discharge) was treated with white plants [Demich 1889: 31-33]. Modern field studies show that the same principle is still in force: for example, in the Chernivtsi region of Ukraine women use a plant known locally as *bilyi kamenets* (which has small white flowers) to cure leucorrhoea [EU-Chernovtsy 2000]. The opposition of white and red can be observed in a charm for regulating menstruation: “red rose, give me your redness, and take my whiteness” [Čajkanović 1985: 209].

Slavic materials on folk botany furnish us with a great deal of data supporting the suggestion that the principle of using a plant with a distinctive feature for treating a disease that has the same feature is not limited either to color or gynecological ailments. Thus yellow plants were used to treat jaundice: “jaundice in children is successfully cured with a decoction made from yellow everlasting flowers (*bessmertniki*), in which the baby is bathed and a small portion then given to him to drink” [Nikiforovskii 1897: 45, no. 290]. In Bulgaria jaundice is cured by bathing with the flowers of *zhǔlti fundi* [Pirinski kraj 1980: 484] or *zhǔlti turti* (marigolds or *Tagetes*) [Sofiiski kraj 1993: 192].(1) Furthermore, while giving a new-born baby his or her first bath, the midwife would put yellow flowers into the water as a preventative measure against jaundice [Strandzha 1996: 265]. In Kratov in Macedonia the treatment employed yellow roses [Radenković 1996: 316], in Serbia the common sunflower,

*Helianthus annuus* (*suntsokret*) [Čajkanović 1985: 224], while in Ukraine it was mouse-ear hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*) [Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 144] and spring adonis (*Adonis vernalis*) both of which also have yellow flowers [Toren 1996: 62]. The sandy everlasting flower, *Helichrysum arenarium*, was supposed to be the most effective remedy for jaundice in Ukrainian folk medicine, because the color of its flowers “resembled the face of someone with jaundice” [Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 61]. *Zolotaia trava*, *zolutukha* (lit. golden herb), i.e. greater meadow rue (*Thalictrum majus*) acquired its name “because when water is poured on the leaves of the plant, they acquire a golden hue.” It was a remedy for scrofula [Potanin 1899: 233]. The scrofula herb, *zolutushnik*, that is, goldenrod (*Solidago virgaurea*), was “believed to be a good remedy against scrofula (*zolutukha*) and was said to possess diuretic properties.” It was given in the form of a decoction [Avgustinovich 1853: 66]. It should be noted that a given feature of a plant not only often influences its use but also the choice of name; a feature can be referred to either directly as in *zhlti fundi* where *zhlti* means “yellow” in Bulgarian, or indirectly, through a name of a thing/substance with the same feature: *zolutukha* (meadow rue) c.f. Rus. *zoloto* = gold; Ukr. *krownik* (St John's wort) c.f. *krov*' = blood.

Plants resembling the color of blood often had the root *krov-* in their names and were supposed to be able to stop bleeding. The considerable number of names for St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) (Rus. *krovavnik*, *ivanova krov'*, *semibratnaia krov'*; Ukr. *krivtsa*, *bozha krivtsa*, *Hristova krivtsa*, *krov sv. Ivana*, *molodetska krov*; Belarus. *zaiacha krow*, *siamionova krow*, *kryvawnik*, *kryvavets*, Cz. *krvniček*, *krvavnik*; Lusatian. *konjaca krej*) (lit. blood herb, St. John's blood, hare blood etc.) results from the red spots that the leaves of some species have, while the sap is red in color, just like the petals when they are crushed. So, in Transcarpathia it was used for stopping hemorrhages and bloody flux, while in the Kuban' part of southern Russia it was prescribed for someone spitting blood, or with blood in the urine and for wounds [Toren 1996: 67], and in Bulgaria for diseases of the blood [Sofiiski krai 1993: 178-79, 187, 180].

Other plants with red flowers were also associated with blood. For example, the Serbs treated blood-spitting with sweetbriar [Čajkanović 1985: 209]. Great burnet, *Sanguisorba officinalis*, was used to heal haemorrhoidal bleeding in Tobol'sk province, in Tomsk the bloody flux (dysentery) [Toren 1996: 70], and in Saratov exceptionally heavy periods [Annenkov 1876: 315]. In South Slav lands women who were not menstruating drank red clover tea (*Trifolium pratense*). In Bosnia and Herzegovina a woman who did not want to have her period, should wash herself and then pour the water over a rose bush. She would not then menstruate until the following year when the rose bloomed anew [Čajkanović 1985: 87, 209]. In Barnaul women with problem periods used European madder, *Rubia tinctorum* [Demich 1889: 8], while red clover, *Trifolium pratense*, was used in Tver', Vladimir and Riazan' provinces [Annenkov 1876: 360; SRNG 15: 271].(2) Furthermore, charms for stemming the flow of blood also mention red plants, especially the red rose [Chubinskii 1872, I, 1: 127; Efimenko 1874: 13]. The enumeration of red objects is also present in Serbian charms against erysipelas (Serb. *crveni vetar* (red wind)) [Radenković 1973]. An incantation could be pronounced either together with the healing practice or instead of it.

Another folklore genre, the etiological legend, may explain not only the genesis of a plant but also its usage in folk medicine, and sometimes its name. One of the legends about St. John's wort says that while the

executioner was carrying the head of John the Baptist to Herod's palace, several drops of blood fell on the ground. On that spot there grew a plant that had absorbed the blood – St. John's wort [Kuznetsova, Reznikova 1992: 86]. Another legend says that it grew beneath the cross on which Christ was crucified, and received its healing powers from his blood [Mandel'shtam 1882: 316]. It may be that legends about the genesis of St John's wort from St. John's or Jesus' blood are connected with the styptic properties of this plant [Usacheva 1991: 93].

In Serbian tradition the distinctive feature of St John's wort - the red spots on its leaves - is explained in this way: these come from the blood of Our Lady, which dripped onto the leaves when she was menstruating. Hence it bears the name *bogorodichina trava*, or *bogoroditsa*, *bogorodichitsa*, *gospino tsveche*, *gospina trava*, *gospino zelje* (lit. Our Lady's herb) [Čajkanović 1985: 259; Sofrić 1990: 13].

The most interesting is the case when a plant looks somewhat unusual: so, local names for common eyebright, *Euphrasia officinalis*, (Rus. *glaznitsa*, *glaznaia trava*, *ochanka*, *ochnaia trava*, *svet ochei*; Ukr. *ochanka*; Serb. *očanica*, *vidac*, *vidica*, *zornica*) show it was used to cure diseases of the eye, because “in the corolla of its flower there is a mark like an eye” [Toren 1996: 74, 232; Annenkov 1876: 141; Dal', 2: 664, 4: 159; Gornitskii 1887: 73]. Using eyebright mostly for curing eye afflictions is also mentioned by Machek [1954: 215] and Nosal', Nosal' [1960: 48].

One very unusual feature, the combination of two colors of petals in the same flower, formed the basis for the emergence of names like *brat-sestra* (lit. brother-sister), *ivan-da-mar'ia* (Ivan-and-Mar'ia), for blue cow wheat, *Melampyrum nemorosum*, as well as numerous etiological legends about a brother and a sister turned into a flower as a punishment for incest, and prompted its use in magic: village healers (*znakhari*) used it “for establishing harmony between spouses” [Annenkov 1876: 211].

Individual specimens of a plant could vary in color, in which case they were used in different ways. Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) with green stems, it was believed, stopped heavy periods, while those with red stems started an overdue period (Tver' province); milfoil, *Achillea millefolium* with pink flowers was a remedy for uterine bleeding, but when it had white flowers, it was used for leucorrhoea, the disorders themselves being called *red rupture* and *white rupture* respectively (Perm' province) [Annenkov 1876: 387, 390; Demich 1889: 8-9]. Similarly in Vologda province women used specimens with white flowers for leucorrhoea; but those with red flowers were used “to initiate menstruation” [Ivanitskii 1890: 150].

## Form

Form can influence the usage of plants too. Hound's tongue *Cynoglossum officinale* (a plant with long leaves) was called in Vologda province *pesii iazyk* (lit. dog's tongue), and its roots cut and baked in bread were considered a good antidote to the bite of a rabid animal [Ivanitskii 1890: 152].

Herbs with leaves in a form of a paw or hand and with corresponding names were often used to heal a rash between the fingers, as reflected in the Russian name *mezheparshchitsa*, *mezheparshchitsa* (lit. between-the-fingers plant) for lady's-mantle (*Alchimilla vulgaris*): “If there is swelling between the fingers, it is covered with the dried leaves of the *mezheparshchitsa*,” Smolensk region, 1890 (see also: *mezheparshchitsa* = a rash on the hands, itch or scab, Smolensk, 1914) [SRNG 18: 85, 90]; it was also used for itchy feet [Dobrovól'skii 1914:

407]. *Lapchatka* (white tormentil, *Potentilla alba*) was used for the same purpose under the names *mezhiperstnitsa* (Tambov), *mezhiperstnik* (Chernigov) and *rasperstnaia* (Orel) [Annenkov 1876: 269].

Plants whose roots resembled genitalia had corresponding names and were used in fertility magic, whether as love potions, to increase sexual potency [Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 84], or cure infertility [Krylov 1882: 35-36]. For example, the bog orchid, *Orchis palustris* was known in Ukraine as *krasnye sultanchki* (red plumes); "its roots are collected here when it is in flower... they supposedly stimulate the genitals" [Avgustinovich 1853: 50]. It is thought that the Russian name for this plant (*iatryshnik*) is derived "from *iatro* (belly, testicles, balls) after the knob-shaped roots" [Annenkov 1876: 232]. The root of *kukushkiny dary*, the broad-leaved Fen orchid, *Orchis latifolia*, also known as *Orchis impudica*, was used as a remedy for "a spoilt wedding" (when a sorcerer was thought to have put a curse on it). This property may have been attributed to the plant because its tubers resembled testicles. The root of another orchid, *Orchis maculata* (the spotted orchid) was also used in love magic: "Fortune-tellers give the root to peasant women to carry with them so that they will be loved, and especially to married women who are not getting along with their husbands" [Annenkov 1876: 233; Potanin 1899: 233]. *Orchis palustris*, "in popular conception, is a plant able to evoke love and increase sexual potency. Like other plants of this kind, the bog orchid was used by the Slavs as a love potion; the Hutsuls (south western Ukraine) used it as a treatment for impotence" [Zelenin 1995: 343]. Women tried to guess the sex of their unborn baby from the shape of the root: long for a boy, round for a girl [Kedrina 1912: 102, 108], or two-pronged root for a girl and three-pronged for a boy [Afanas'ev 1994, 3: 227].

The Ukrainian name for this plant is *liubka* (derived from the root *liub-* = love). "Certain peculiarities of the shape of its root prompted its use as a means of making people fall in love with each other. The root can have two forms: divided like fingers (male) and a simple heart shape without protuberances (female). You had to dig up these roots, dry them, make an extract in vodka and give it to a youth and a maiden to drink, saying: 'These flowers loved each other in the forest meadows; now you, children, in your homes love each other like these flowers in the fields'" [Khatemkin 1900: 8-9]. In Volhyn' its roots were used as a "medicine for impotence and for exciting sexual desire." The young used it as a love potion [Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 84]. Similar qualities were assigned to members of the orchid family in Czech folk culture [Machek 1954: 299].

In the province of Kazan' the fragrant orchid, *Gymnadenia conopsea*, bore the names *liub-trava*, or *liubovny ruchki* (lit. love herb, love hands). When making a love potion a specimen with "hands" (i.e. tubers) pointing towards each other was used; if the "hands" pointed away from each other, the plant was used for the opposite purpose. It was also given to barren women to help them conceive [Krylov 1882: 35-36]. It is very likely that the belief in the Archangel region about what is locally called a *kukusha* (lit. cuckoo plant) also refers to a member of the Orchis family: "the root is double: representing the husband and wife. If a husband does not love his wife, he should give it to his wife to drink, and if a wife does not love her husband, she should give it to her husband to drink, and then his wife will love him" [Kharitonov 1848: 15].

In Kaluga province the common storksbill, *Erodium cicutarium*, was drunk as a medicine for convulsions, "because the petioles of this herb are drawn together like elbows, as if in convulsions" [Annenkov 1876: 136].

Names with the component *golova* (head) are generally used for plants that have some spherical parts (flower heads, seeds etc.): in Russia *sobach'ia golova* (lit. dog's head) is a name for meadow knapweed (*Centaurea jacea*) in Vladimir; in Siberia it is called *adamova golova* (lit. Adam's head). In Kursk *krasnogolovki* (lit. red heads) is the term for greater knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*, while *ivanova golova* (lit. Ivan's head) is a name for the peach-leaved campanula, *Campanula persicifolia*. In Ukraine, on the other hand, *adamova golova* (Adam's head) is the name given to field eryngo, *Eryngium campestre* [Annenkov 1876: 90-91; Bulashev 1909: 349; Beilina 1968: 422]. But the equation between roundness and medical application is also true of the plants used for curing headaches. Sometimes the two groups overlap: “tall and slender, it has two or three white heads, *adamova golova* helps with a headache, here, look, on the slope, blue, prickly round heads”(3) [Rodionova 2002: 38]. Or in Ukrainian it is said of *bolygolov* (hemlock, *Conium maculatum*) that “when the head aches, moisten [the forehead?] with an infusion of this herb” [Markovich 1891: 425].

A number of names are based on the special shape of stem or root, for example *trubnik lugovy* (lit. meadow tube herb), that is the meadow pasqueflower, *Pulsatilla pratensis* [Beilina 1968: 433]. A legend says that *prostrel-trava* (lit. the shot-through herb) was once whole, but the Archangel Michael shot it with a thunderbolt while pursuing the evil force which had hidden in it [Iakushkin 1844: 42; Annenkov 1876: 6]. The usage of plants with hollow stems is based on the same idea. So, hunters in Vologda province put *prostrel borovoi* or *strelinaia trava* (the finger anemone, *Pulsatilla patens*) into the barrel of a rifle, believing it would give the rifle special force [Ivanitskii 1890: 147]. Here the formal similarity of hollow stem and rifle-barrel is supported by parallels between plant name, *strel'naia trava*, (lit. shoot-herb) and the verb *streliat'* (to shoot). It is logical to assume that the name based on the plant's distinctive feature merged into the subsequent link with words of the same root, thus causing the next wave of associations. For instance, in the following situation the effect of the herb *prostrel* (*Pulsatilla patens*) is thought to be equal to the effect of a small piece of coal, “shot out” from the stove: “A woman in labor drinks ... water with a piece of coal that has jumped out of the stove in it. The coals are collected in advance and kept ready to help her give birth to her baby as quickly as the coal leapt from the stove. With the same thing in mind, people drink an infusion of the herb known as *prostrel'*” [Ivanitskii 1890: 108-09].

Mouse-ear hawkweed, *Hieracium pilosella*, is known in Ukrainian as *nechui viter* (lit. not feeling the wind), as the leaves of this low-growing plant do not move in the wind. This then explains its use as a cure for fever [Rogovich 1874: 16] – the essential quality of the plant is to be passed to the sick person.

The appearance of a flower may evoke associations with a particular emotion, and that association may then serve as the basis for its medicinal use. Thus in Perm' province the nodding catchfly *Silene nutans* is known as *potoskuika* (lit. wistful herb) because its flower heads bend sadly to the ground. This plant was believed capable of curing grief, sadness and similar afflictions [Krylov 1876: 81].

The special role of thorny plants has been remarked upon by others [see e.g., SD 2: 566-68]. Their thorny nature is reflected not only in their names (*koliukha* (lit. prickly plant) for species of thistle (*Carduus* and *Cirsium*); *volchets* (lit. wolf herb) also for *Carduus* and *Cirsium*; *chertopolokh* (lit. devil-scarer) for burdock (*Arctium*), as well as *Carduus* and *Cirsium*), but also in their application in magic (they could scare off the

“unclean force”). And in folk medicine, they were believed to cure *perepolokh* (acute anxiety), or rid cattle of worms. The effect of the plants was likened to the illness itself, which is why thorny plants were often also used to get rid of a stitch/stomach gripes; what was recommended was “to give the sick person a drink made from nine thorny plants – gooseberry, rose, thistle, etc. – and to wash the patient’s chest, sides and back with this decoction” [Nikiforovskii 1897: 270, no. 2106]. In Kazan’ province *perepoloshnaia trava* (lit. fear herb), that is, eryngo, *Eryngium planum*, was used for healing acute anxiety [Krylov 1882: 44, 47]. The situation was the same with plant names like *egor’evo* (*egor’evskoe*, *georgievo*) *kop’e* (St. George’s spear), such names being given to plants with elongated or sharp parts, with thorns, and they are used “for colic,” i.e. abdominal pain. For example, in the Urals the name of *egor’evo kop’e* is given to the maiden pink with serrate petals (*Dianthus deltoides*) or to meadow cranesbill, *Geranium pratense*, which has narrow pointed ends to the seed heads “is drunk for colic in the belly” [Konovalova 2000: 61, 80]. Delphinium was used for stitch in Siberia because of its arrow-like flowers and could also serve as an amulet [Toren 1996: 234, 412]. The sap of goose-foot (*chenopodium*), a plant with a spiny splinter-like outer covering, was supposedly the best way of getting rid of a splinter [Popov 1996: 390]. In Ukraine sickleweed, also known as the longleaf or *Falcaria vulgaris* because of its sharp sickle-shaped leaves, was called *rizak trava* (lit. cutting herb) and drunk for abdominal pain [Markovich 1891: 425]. Another species, *Falcaria rivini*, was used for the same purpose in Ekaterinburg [Annenkov 1876: 143]. In Ukraine the water soldier, *Stratiotes aloides*, (Ukr. *rezak*) was drunk for bloody flux (dysentery) and colic, and in Tobol’sk province for colic, as it has thorny leaves with sharp edges [Annenkov 1876: 344; Toren 1996: 233].

Sometimes the appearance of a plant is only connected with its usage in folk medicine indirectly: in Vologda province aconite (Rus. *ukryt*, *khranitel’*, *khristoprodavka*, *khristovo kop’e*, *ukrop khristov* (lit. covering herb, Christ’s spear)) was prescribed for a sharp pain in the side and chest, because according to legend its leaves were pierced by the spear with which the Jews stabbed Jesus who had hidden among its leaves [Annenkov 1876: 7].

The dominant feature of the stinging nettle is obviously its ability to sting; hence it is often used for illnesses associated with colds such as fevers, coughs and rheumatism. For example, in Vologda province an infusion of the leaves of the common nettle (*Urtica dioica*) was used for a fever, and of the seeds as cough medicine, while rheumatic patients were beaten with fresh plants on their joints [Ivanitskii 1890: 153]. In Ukraine people who suffered rheumatic pain would take steam baths and use switches made of nettles, or drink the flower heads infused in vodka, while juvenile patients were beaten with the fresh stems [Gornitskii 1887: 174]. The plant also had prophylactic functions: “Dig up some nettle roots, dry them, pound and sieve them, then rub them on your face, hands and feet, and they won’t be cold” [Zabylin 1996: 424, 430]. In Kazan’ province a nettle root decoction was drunk for fever [Krylov 1882: 32]. In Novgorod province nettle decoction was a medicine for a cough with catarrh [Toren 1996: 161]. In Tobol’sk province nettle tea was taken for colds [Skalozubov 1913: 74]. In Siberia the roots of *Urtica cannabina* were popularly used for colds and chills [Vinogradov 1915: 405]. According to a herbal compendium, nettle seeds pounded and mixed with honey and

wine helped a cough [TOA f.1409.Op. 1, D.590, l.144-5]. In Novgorod province nettle flower tea was drunk for rheumatism, while in the Kuban' it was made from the roots [Toren 1996: 158].

The second most important folk remedy for fever was artemisia.(4) All three of the best known kinds (*abrotanum*, *absinthium*, *vulgaris*) were employed in folk medicine, though mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) was the most widely used. It was mainly taken in the form of a drink, but Stanislav Gazhtovt's Herbal, translated into Russian from Polish around the seventeenth century, for example, recommends massaging the patient with it "while he is shivering from a feverish cold" [Zubov 1887: 13]; apart from this, it could be drunk as juice or infused in vodka. The use of artemisia for fever is very widely attested: in the provinces of Vologda, Voronezh and Tobol'sk [Toren 1996: 76-77], Kazan' [Krylov 1882: 51-52, 57-58] and Perm' [Krylov 1876: 80]; in Ukraine [Arandarenko 1849: 232; Avgustinovich 1853: 17; Minkh 1890: 54; Markovich 1891: 427; Ivanov 1898: 6, 189, 603, 929]; in Poland [Zubov 1887: 6, 13] and Serbia [Čajkanović 1985: 190].

Artemisia was also helpful in treating associated disorders: in Kazan' province it was used in baths "for rheumatic pain resulting from a chill" [Krylov 1882: 68]. It was also believed effective against a high temperature [Chubinskii 1872, I, 1: 83; Franko 1898: 206; Niebrzegowska 2000: 157], and in Kostroma province it was drunk for fevers [Toren 1996: 82].

Since nettle can leave a rash on the body, to it was attributed the power to clear a rash. In Kazan' province nettle rash (urticaria) was treated with the seeds of the nettle [Krylov 1882: 32]; in Tobol'sk province people rubbed nettles over themselves in the bathhouse as a remedy [Skalozubov 1913: 74]. In Tomsk province it was much the same [Prihod'ko 1927: 116]. Perhaps, in these cases, as often happens in folk medicine, "like cures like," as the symptoms of urticaria do indeed look like the rash caused by stinging nettles.

Nettle could treat other skin diseases as well. Thus, in Bukovina in the north eastern Carpathians people who had a rash drank nettle broth or washed in it. Women and girls used nettle as a peculiar form of cosmetics; "a broth made from dried leaves was drunk in winter 'so the skin wouldn't fade and the waist not expand too far,'" while fresh sap was rubbed into the scalp as a remedy for dandruff [Makovii 1993: 45, 52]. In Siberia *Urtica cannabina* (known in English as Kentucky hemp), was dried and ground then mixed with cream and used as an ointment for scrofulous sores [Toren 1996: 69-70]. Old herbal compendiums recommend "nettle dried and crushed to sprinkle on sores" [TOA f.1409. Op. 1, D. 470, 37], and to apply it "to old suppurating ulcers." A scab would be moistened with nettle that had been boiled in water or stewed in lamp-oil (an inferior olive oil) [TOA f.1409.Op. 1, D. 590, 144-5].

## Milk

Dandelion sap, which has a milky appearance, prompted not only a number of its folk names – Rus. *molochnai*, *molochnik* (Vologda province), *molokanka*, *molokovnik*, *molokoed*; Belarus. *malachai* (Minsk province); Ukr. *molochnai*; Serb. *mlječnjak*, *mljekača*; Czech *mléč* [Annenkov 1876: 349; Ivanitskii 1890: 151; Gancharyk 1927: 6; Čajkanović 1985: 172; Dubrovina 1999: 62] – but also its medical usage. In Arzamas in the Nizhnii Novgorod area, dandelion, known locally as *molochnai*, was used by women shortly after childbirth to help with lactation [Demich 1889: 38]. Similar characteristics were attributed to other plants with milky sap, so,

in Kazan' province women drank a decoction of spurge (*Euphorbia virgata*) "when their breast milk was 'spoiling'" [Krylov 1882: 40].

### Taste

Bitter-tasting plants, as a rule, were a remedy for digestive illnesses. For example, the name *glistnik* (worm-herb; Rus. *glist* = worm) for wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) bears witness to its vermifugal powers [Dal', 3: 267]. This particular species was most often used for this purpose, for example, in the Ukrainian province of Poltava [Avgustinovich 1853: 17] and in Belarus [Chubinskii 1872 I, 1: 112; Krachkovskii 1874: 192]. In Kazan' province people used *Artemisia cina* [Krylov 1882: 70]; in the Pirinskii region of Bulgaria children were given boiled or fresh leaves of the plant known here as *glistavo bilje* (lit. worm plant) [Pirinski krai 1980: 484]. And in Poland it was used in the same way [Zubov 1887: 13].

Apart from this, other problems of the alimentary canal could be treated: an infusion of *Artemisia* in *khlebnoe vino* (alcoholic drink made from wheat) was drunk for stomach diseases [Arandarenko 1848: 38; 1849: 232]. In Novgorod province it was an appetite stimulant [Toren 1996: 82] and in Serbia taken both for poor appetite and stomach problems [Čajkanović 1985: 190]. In Bulgaria it was also prescribed for stomach disease, abdominal pain and for stimulating the appetite [Pirinski krai 1980: 481; Sofiiski krai 1993: 179-180]. In eastern Poland it was children with these problems who were given it [Niebrzegowska 2000: 157].

According to M. A. Nosal', in this sphere "in its use of *Artemisia absinthium* folk medicine does not differ from academic medicine and uses all its methods," as it "strengthens the stomach, drives out round worms, stops diarrhea and strengthens intestinal peristalsis." *Artemisia vulgaris* and *Artemisia abrotanum* were used in the same way but only in Ukrainian folk medicine [Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 32, 35, 193].(5)

### Time

Frequently the time a plant appeared, bloomed or was picked also had an influence on its usage. The magic associations of "the first" played a considerable role here: thus, in Serbia when you saw the first violet (*Viola odorata*) in the spring you should "tear off its corolla and eat it so as to be young and healthy the whole year through" [Čajkanović 1985: 169-170]; in Bulgaria St Vlasii's Day (11<sup>th</sup> Feb.) or *Gerg'ovden* (St George's Day) is the day of the first ritual consumption of nettles: people would boil young nettles before sunrise and then eat a spoonful as a tonic for the blood. When women collect nettles for the first time that year, they lash themselves with the nettles "to protect themselves from illness" [Stoinev 1994: 27-28].

Healing properties were attributed to plants picked on a particular holiday, most often St. John's Day. These properties could be reinforced by consecrating the herb in church, putting it into holy water, and so on. The Czechs, for example, picked St John's wort and other herbs and left them for two days under the table, believing that they would miraculously acquire healing powers. In the Jablonec area (southern Czech lands) people put St John's wort on the bed on St. John's Eve, hoping that at night St. John would come and lay his head on the bed made for him. If the mark of his head was visible on the herbs they were held to have acquired curative powers [Sobotka 1879: 294-295].



## Space

The plantain (Rus. *podorozhnik*) (*plantago*), which grows along the verges of roads, was believed to possess magical powers to help exhausted travelers: “rub your feet with plantain and you will never get tired while walking” [Tereshchenko 1848: 93], and even any illness contracted on the journey: “whoever sets out should take it with him; if illness strikes on the journey, imbibe it with water – it will help; that is why it is called *poputnik*” [Samolechenie 1884: 441]. Here, the plant name also shows where it grows (Rus. *put*’, *doroga* = way, road). Sometimes the distance between the human domain (the village) and the territory of the wild (where herbs were picked) was important as well; in Chernigov province herbs “which do not hear the cockerel’s voice,” that is, grow in the places where the cockcrow is not heard, were supposed more effective [Grinchenko 1895: 36].

## Special features

The ability of some plants to affect the human psyche prompted their usage in the sphere of mental illness – hysteria, falling sickness (epilepsy, Rus. *chernaiia nemoch*’, literally *black sickness*), as well as cramps and convulsions [Dal’ , 4: 595; Nosal’ , Nosal’ 1960: 34]. The word *chernobyl*’ itself (Common Slavic \**čьrnobyľ*) is known in many Slavic languages: Ukr. *čornobyl*, Belarus. *charnabył*’, *charnabul*’, *charnabył’nik*, Czech *černobýl*, Serb. *crnobil*, *crnobilnik*, Slovene *črna bil*. It is possible that the name itself results from the plant’s use in the treatment for falling sickness; compare: “*black sickness*, falling sickness; paralysis” [Dal’ , 4: 594], and: “the herb *Chernobylets* ... is good for black sickness” [Florinskii 1879-1880: 10]. In the Vinnitsa district of Ukraine the following story has been recorded; after seeing a Tatar sorcerer eating snake meat, his captive, a Cossack, did the same and began to understand the language of the plants. Amongst other herbs he heard the voice of artemisia saying: “I am for the black sickness” [Chubinskii 1872 I, 1: 210]. In Priargunie and Tomsk regions artemisia was “used for this disease ... even by many doctors” [Toren 1996: 82]. Epilepsy was treated with artemisia in Perm’ [Krylov 1876: 93] and Vologda provinces [Ivanitskii 1890: 151]. In Mogilev province “mugwort root powder, *Artemisia vulgaris*, three times a day” was the prescription for falling sickness and hysteria [Demich 1889: 37]. Similarly in Poltava province we learn that “since olden times Artemisia has been known for healing hysteria and other nervous disorders... the roots are ascribed the power to stop attacks of the falling sickness...” [Avgustinovich 1853: 18]. Artemisia baths “for curing the sufferings of hysterics” were known [Arandarenko 1848: 38; 1849: 232].

However, folk medicine also knew the negative effects of one kind of artemisia, wormwood or *Artemisia absinthium*: “use over a prolonged period is avoided as it causes nervous disorders” [Ivanitskii 1890: 151]. Overdoses could “cause cramps and convulsions, hallucinations, and madness” [Nosal’ , Nosal’ 1960: 32].

\* \* \* \* \*

It seems clear that traditional ideas about the magical or healing properties of the plants mentioned in this article are based on objective features reflected in the plants’ names, medicinal uses and legends about them. Furthermore, the same plant may be given different names and used for different purposes in one or another

local tradition, depending on which particular feature has been observed and picked out. And vice versa, different plants that have identical features may be used in similar ways.

But sometimes the same function may be assigned to plants with different features. This has occurred with a whole group of plants considered to act as amulets – it may include both stinging and thorny plants, as well as those with a sharp smell and taste. The group might also include other protective objects: for example, in Belarus, to defend themselves from witches on St John’s Eve “peasants pour poppy seed on the cattle sheds, or hang on the windows and gates prickly thistles, the accursed aspen tree,(6) nettles, a thunder candle (a candle consecrated on Holy Thursday and lit as a defense against thunder) or herbs, which had been blessed on Whitsunday, or else they might put a covered bench with bread and salt near the gates or draw crosses on the door-posts with tar, so that witches do not erase them, etc.” [Romanov 1912: 207-08]. Another example of similar roles in folk ideas for plants with different features is a Serbian magic “wish” (addressed to a vampire): “Na putu mu broć i glogovo trnje!” (Let him meet European madder and the thorns of the hawthorn on his way!) [Karadžić 1965: 190, no. 3239]. Here the red color of European madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) and thorns of the hawthorn (*Crataegus*) are taken as functionally equal.

Perhaps because some plants were linked together because of their protective functions, they came to be equated for other purposes as well. So, on St John’s Eve, instead of jumping over a bonfire, people might instead leap over nettles, thistles or artemisia (a single bush or a heap). It was a similar group of plants that the South Slavs would put in a new-born baby’s bathwater to protect the child: basil, nettle, garlic, hawthorn and sweetbriar [Vinogradova 2002: 48]. In spite of a wide variety of roles and functions for each plant, when one compares the range of plants, it is clear that roles and functions are duplicated. Duplication is conditioned by the fact that the choice of plant for this or that purpose is based on a finite number of objective features and properties – taste, smell, color – which inevitably repeat and hence may serve as a basis for grouping the plants.

In the “relations” between man and plants two models are possible: man tries either to take the properties he needs from a plant or rid himself of a property/symptom with the help of a plant that has the same property. For example, fever in one local tradition (in Ukraine) was treated with mouse-ear hawkweed, which does not sway in the wind, in another the Belarusians “gave” the fever to an aspen tree, which, by contrast, is distinguished by the constant trembling of its leaves. Side by side with the general practice of treating jaundice with yellow plants, in Serbia, for example, a patient with jaundice took a yellow silk thread and twined it round his or her neck, while another thread, a red one, was hung on a red rose in the garden. In the morning the yellow thread was removed and hung on the rose, while the red one was put on the patient’s neck with the following words: “*Ružice, Bogom sestrice, daj mi tvoje rumenilo, a uzmi moje žutilo!*” (Oh rose, my sister-in-God, give me your red, and take my yellow!) [Milićević 1894: 271].

Stepping outside the frame of folk botany we can see that very often not only plants but also other objects with the same feature may be used for the same purpose; that is to say, the same principle is applied to medicines of non-floral genesis, thereby demonstrating the systematic character of traditional ideas. Thus, not only yellow flowers but also other yellow objects were used for treating jaundice; the Slovenes covered the cradle of a sick baby with a yellow silk shawl and sewed a gold ring on his/her shirt [Radenković 1996: 311-

312]. In charms for stopping bleeding red objects are often enumerated: “There on the mountain aurochs were ploughing, sowing red roses; the red roses didn’t grow; a girl was standing there; near the blue sea a ribless sheep was standing; near the red sea a red stone lies. Where the sun goes, there the blood stops; where the sun sets, there the blood clots” [Efimenko 1874: 13], as well as in Serbian charms against *crveni vetar* (erysipelas, lit. “red wind”). Etiological legends about the genesis of plants (or, even more often, their features) from other objects also point to the “opportunity to shift to another code,” as T. V. Tsiv’ian notes [1990: 45].

But a feature is not the only basis for a possible shifting of codes. The role of another mediator – natural language – is no less important for connections between different codes in traditional culture [Baiburin, Levinton 1983: 28-29]. A plant name becomes linked to words and objects, thereby acquiring secondary associations. We have already discussed one whole set of actions and motivations associated with the root *strel-* (= shoot). Let us analyze a further example.

Some plants are so thorny that cattle other than donkeys find them inedible. This is reflected in some dialectal plant names: in Voevodina (Jugoslavija) the Scottish thistle *Onopordon acanthium* is called *magarećiji trn*, *magareća boda*, *magareća boca* (lit. donkey’s thorn; Serb. *magarac* = donkey): “we were guarding the sheep, and a donkey passed by; nothing eats it, but it takes a bite, and that is why it is called donkey’s thorn.” It is said of someone who is curious: “Why did you open your mouth like a donkey for thistles!” [Špis-Ćulum 1995: 413, 464]. See also Bulg. *magareški trŭni* (the welched thistle or *Carduus acanthoides*) which means donkey’s thorns.

Then, South Slavs associate the braying of a donkey with a heavy cough, which is why whooping-cough is known in Bulgarian as *magareška kashlitsa*, Serbian as *magareći kašalj*, *magarica*, and Slovene as *oslovski kašelj* (lit. donkey’s cough). Associating a donkey on the one hand with an illness, and on the other hand with some plants, prompted the use of some medicines; thus, the Bulgarians give children with whooping-cough a broth made from *Carduus acanthoides* [Sofiiski kraj 1993: 192]; the Serbs and Bulgarians give sick children donkey milk to drink [SD 3: 567-568]; for example, in Kratov they would make a flat cake of flour, ashes, tar, nettle and black she-ass’s milk for the patient, because another name for this illness is *crna kašlica*, lit. black cough [Radenković 1996: 129].

Connections like these confirm the importance of objective, real plant features in the creation of its symbolic image. To interpret them one must consider lexical and folkloric information that allows us to clarify the ties of a given plant with mythological ideas, which cannot be revealed simply by analyzing the ethnographic data. Hence, the features of plants play a decisive role in forming notions about them and therefore in their usage in ritual and everyday life, in particular in folk medicine.

## NOTES

1 Throughout, the Slavic name for a plant is given in transliterated form, with its meaning in brackets, if relevant, its English name (where possible) and its botanical name in Latin.

2 Among the various species of artemisia it is mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) that almost exclusively is used for curing different female disorders. It differs from the other kinds by having reddish inflorescences. There exists an opinion that mugwort bears the name *chernobyl'nik* (black grass), in contrast to common wormwood, *Artemisia absinthium*, because of the reddish (rather than white) color of its panicles [Merkulova 1967: 122]. It may be taken as corroboration of the hypothesis about the influence of plant color on usage. It cannot be excluded that first mugwort was used in healing menstrual disorders and hemorrhage, then later applied more widely in folk gynecology as a whole: “In Poltava province problems with the womb are cured by bathing in mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) which plays an important role in midwifery and gynecology” [Demich 1889: 19]; the root of mugwort “in folk medicine is a remedy for all female diseases, caused by menstrual disorders”; a tea or infusion of Breckland wormwood, *Artemisia campestris*, “for female ailments...” [Annenkov 1876: 48, 50]. Generally speaking, practically all over the Slav territory artemisia was used very widely in the female sphere to treat a difficult birth, weak contractions, uterine and menstrual disorders, painful periods, induced miscarriage, barrenness or hemorrhage. The medicine took various forms: a decoction made from leaves, roots and/or flower heads, or a herbal bath [Avgustinovich 1853: 18; Morawski 1884: 14; Zubov 1887: 13; Nikiforovskii 1897: 9; Nosal', Nosal' 1960: 34-35; Čajkanović 1985: 190].

3 The plant in question is probably *Eryngium planum*.

4 In this case the connection between use and appearance is not self-evident. It is known, however, firstly, that plants with a strong, sharp taste and smell were used first of all as defense from evil forces, and that fever in folk conception could be envisaged as an actual mythological personage, the personification of the illness. For example, Belarusians in Poles'e prescribed a mugwort drink for fever, which was imagined as “angry, ugly old woman” who appears from under the ground in spring and attacks someone sleeping out in the open [Dovnar-Zapol'skii 1909: 284]. Secondly, in the opinion of some etymologists, the Slavic name for artemisia reflects one of its features – its bitter burning taste - as the word is cognate to the verb *palit'* (to burn): Old Rus. *pelynъ*, *pelynъ*, Rus. *Polyn'*, Ukr. *polyn*, Bel. *palyń*, *palyńka*, Bulg., Sloven., Serb. and Croat. *pelin*, Czech *pelyn*, *pelyněk*, Pol. *piołun*, Upper Lusatian *połon*, Lower Lusatian *polyń*, *poluń* [Potebnia 2000: 16; Mladenov 1941: 417; Brückner 1970: 414; Fasmer 1996 (3): 320].

5 Wormwood medicines are applied “to stimulate the appetite, improve the digestion and strengthen the digestive juices. Both common wormwood and mugwort are included in almost all stomach and liver herbal compounds, and doctors prescribe them for colitis, gastritis, meteorism, and as a light soporific... Wormwood is contra-indicated for pregnant women” [Valiagina-Maliutina 1996: 139].

6 The East and some West Slavs believe the aspen tree is cursed for letting Judas hang himself on it, providing the wood for the Cross, and betraying Mary when she was trying to escape to Egypt, etc.

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