

# THE NIGHT IS YOURS, THE DAY IS MINE! FUNCTIONS OF STORIES OF NIGHT-TIME ENCOUNTERS WITH WITCHES IN EASTERN SLOVENIA

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## Abstract

This paper considers the possible functions of memorates about night-time encounters with witches, recorded in 2000-2001 in the rural environment of eastern Slovenia.

The witches appeared as lights and/or led people astray, prevented them from continuing on their way or “transferred” them to another place.

Stories of people being carried away by supernatural beings could provide a culturally acceptable excuse for deviant behavior, as for instance a state of drunkenness. It is clear from several memorates that such experiences often occurred on the way back from fairs or work, and in connection with drinking bouts. At least in some cases the descriptions of such encounters would have served to conceal the sexual experiences or sexual fantasies of young males excited by sexual tension.

The women could tell such stories as a “weapon” against jealous husbands, and these memorates also had an economic function: people stopped working earlier and went to sleep in order not to meet witches, so they were well rested for work the next day.

But the most important function of the memorates about encounters with “night witches” was their demarcation of boundary places and boundary times – places that became dangerous at certain times of the day.

Finally, the memorates had a psychological function: telling stories about such experiences (place, time, form) allowed people to have a safe means of orientation in space, made them aware of permissible and impermissible movements in space and time and –if they failed to follow these rules– made them familiar with the consequences that they could expect from such behavior.

## Resumo

Este artigo debruça-se sobre as possíveis funções de *memorates* sobre encontros nocturnos com bruxas recolhidos em 2001-2002 em zonas rurais da Eslovénia oriental.

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As bruxas apareciam sob a forma de luzes e/ou faziam as pessoas extraviar-se, impediam-nas de prosseguir o seu caminho ou “transferiam-nas” para outro lugar.

As histórias sobre pessoas levadas por seres sobrenaturais poderiam fornecer uma desculpa culturalmente aceitável para um comportamento desviante, por exemplo num estado de embriaguez. Certos *memorates* mostram claramente que essas experiências vezes davam-se muitas vezes no regresso das feiras ou do trabalho e em ligação com bebedeiras. Pelo menos em certos casos, as descrições desses encontros serviam talvez para ocultar experiências sexuais ou fantasias sexuais de jovens do sexo masculino excitados pela tensão sexual.

As mulheres poderiam contar estas histórias como uma “arma” contra maridos ciumentos, e estes *memorates* tinham também uma função económica: as pessoas largavam do trabalho mais cedo e iam para a cama, de forma a não encontrar as bruxas, para estarem bem descansados para o trabalho no dia seguinte.

Mas a mais importante função dos *memorates* sobre encontros com “bruxas nocturnas” era a demarcação de espaços-fronteira e tempos-fronteira, lugares que se tornavam perigosos em certos momentos do dia.

Por fim, os *memorates* tinham uma função psicológica: contar histórias sobre essas experiências (lugar, tempo, forma) proporcionava às pessoas um modo seguro de se orientarem no espaço, tornava-as conscientes de quais os movimentos no espaço e no tempo que eram ou não permitidos e –se não seguiam tais regras– mostravam-lhes as consequências do seu comportamento.

It has been stated in several places that stories of encounters with supernatural beings support behavior which is in accordance with social values and norms. The violation of such norms can result in the unexpected and surprising appearance of supernatural beings which punish the person who violated the norms or taboos. Thus norms are reinforced through sanctions (ghosts or supernatural beings), and in a folk milieu ghosts act as a kind of monitor of social life and behavior in accordance with norms (Honko 1962: 96-99, 118; Halpert 1978: 226; Grambo 1970: 269). Grambo listed a series of actions in Norwegian folklore which are considered prohibited and for which a punishment is administered by supernatural beings: playing cards; making fun of supernatural beings; working at night; moving boundary stones during one's life; dancing etc. are only some of the activities which appear in the stories as actions which trigger the appearance of supernatural beings (Grambo 1970: 253-270). The sum of the taboos is therefore, as emphasized by Halpert, a code of behavior which one must follow in order to avoid punishments by the supernatural world (Halpert 1978: 227). Supernatural beings in the Norwegian tradition (the so-called *huldrefolk*, “hidden people”) can thus be interpreted as “the guardians and upholders of collective norms and rules in a society’. The relationship between the members of a society, and their relationship to nature and their surroundings [...] parallels on a supernatural level, the relationship

between humans and the hidden people.” Those who followed the general rules of behavior in relation to the hidden people were rewarded with wealth and progress, but when the norms were broken and values trampled people could expect sanctions from these people, e.g. sickness and misfortune (Mathisen 1993: 26, 23). Halpert emphasized that stories also regulate people’s relationships with supernatural beings, and define the moral code which regulates human behavior in relation to the divine. The taboo which warns against the imitation of supernatural beings is extremely widespread – anyone who breaks this taboo will summon the beings which he or she is mocking, and they shall punish him or her (Halpert 1978: 226). In Ireland there are many rules in relation to supernatural beings which people must follow or otherwise suffer punishment from these beings through paralysis and other types of diseases, and also by being “taken away”: it was forbidden e.g. to interrupt supernatural beings when they were moving, to disturb trees which belonged to them, to build a house on a spot which would be on their path and would disturb their journeys, etc. (Jenkins 1991: 316-7).

Many of the functions of folklore pointed out by folklorists can also be confirmed in the case of stories and memorates recorded in rural eastern Slovenia, where the fieldwork was done in 2000 and 2001. There are many stories which regulate the relations towards the dead, prohibit gambling and swearing, reinforce just behavior with the threat of punishment after death, etc. One can establish several other more or less explicit functions of the stories in this area, however I shall focus on memorates about night-time experiences, the functions of which are not always as obvious at first sight as we could claim for some other legends. The large majority of memorates in this area tell of night-time encounters with witches. These appear as lights and/or confuse people so that they cannot find their way, prevent them from continuing on their way or “transfer” them to another place (for more see Mencej 2006):

I:<sup>1</sup> And there was a little house there as well, up that hill, and we had to go to a language class and our neighbor was also with us. She took one way home, and the two of us took another. When she got to the crossroads, she saw something walking in front of her, and she went up to that little house, all the way to that valley. And she walked all night – she came to a garden and she did not find a way out until she could see, until the dawn broke. And there were a lot of such fairytales. They could not do this to everybody, but they could mix some people up. I do not know whether this is true.

F: How did they mix people up?

I: She just kept on walking. She says she saw some kind of a light and she just followed that light. And she entered the garden of that house, and there was nobody there. (34)

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<sup>1</sup> I stands for informant, and F for the folklorist who recorded the story.

I: He married into our family, you know. And he lived further down there at the foot of this hill, you know. In order to come up he had to go through a forest, and he said: "You know, the witches mixed me up." He just walked through the forest, and he didn't know where the path was. When they were... there was a meadow down there, you know, and there was a forest in between, and up here was this, our hill. And he said that he just kept on walking and did not find the path in the forest. When he went through the forest up the hill, you know. Yes, supposedly it was the witches. I don't know. (81)

Stories of witchcraft are a "dominant tradition" here, i.e. a topic which in the area subordinated others and is markedly dominant here. The appearance of night witches is a part of the social institution of witchcraft in this area. However, despite being included into the witchcraft paradigm, the motifs and other elements of these stories represent a relatively independent, separate and recognizable theme within witchcraft which differs from the themes of neighborhood or village witchcraft not only according to place, time, actions, functions and defense mechanisms but also according to the typical diction used by storytellers when describing such experiences (the use of the plural). Light phenomena and actions which people in our research area interpret as actions caused by (night) witches can be recognized as phenomena and activities which stem from conceptions of the souls of the (unclean) dead or supernatural beings which developed on the basis of ideas connected with the souls of the unclean dead, and were included into the witchcraft paradigm at a certain moment in time.

It is not my intention to discuss the (un)true nature of such experiences. I will therefore not deal here with different hypotheses on the origin of such stories. Maybe these are real experiences triggered by sensory deprivation (night, silence), alcohol, hunger or other stimulants which have been proved to cause an altered state of consciousness (ASC), or hallucinations, or explanations of different psychic disorders and mental depression, or a combination of an external cause (darkness, wind, fog, storm etc.) and internal disposition (fear, stress, anxiety etc.) which may lead to a feeling of experiencing such an occurrence (cf. Röhrich 1971: 4-5; Winkelmann 1999; Hartmann 1936: 100; Kvideland 1988: 10), or disease, as argued by Friedrich Ranke, who explained the story of a man who was carried away by a wild hunt (*divja jaga*) as a description of an epileptic seizure (Ranke 1971: 245-254), or perhaps completely made-up stories. I am interested exclusively in the cases and intentions, i.e. functions, in which the tradition of being led astray (in all of its forms), which in accordance with the prevailing interpretation in this area is supposed to be caused by witches, can be mobilized.

What, then, is the function of such stories? In his research of the function of supernatural beings in Ingria, Honko took into consideration what Von Sydow (1948: 12ff) stated before him, which is that when researching

tradition it is very important to pay attention to the bearers of tradition, i.e. to those who uphold such beliefs – conceptions of supernatural beings depend on social roles, values and norms (Honko 1969: 299). Can we identify any specific bearers of this tradition in our research area? Folklorists who recorded such stories in other regions in Slovenia usually did not take into consideration the bearers of tradition. However, from our field notes it is clear that such experiences are more typical for men. It also seems like that they were to a large extent spread further mainly by women. While men are “the subjects” of such memorates, women love to tell these stories: they speak about the experiences of their fathers, husbands, neighbors, etc. Yet it should be acknowledged that the majority of our informants were female, therefore we cannot state with certainty that women actually have a more important role in spreading these memorates. However, the fact remains that women really do enjoy talking about them. How can the prevailing proportion of men with such experiences be explained? The simplest reason might be the fact that men left home more often than women and therefore more easily entered the “border” area which according to the tradition triggered such experiences. One could use such a story in cases when one needed a reason, an excuse for returning home late due to drinking, partying or cheating on one’s wife etc. Lindow points out that it is possible to use memorates about how a person was led into the mountains by supernatural beings (*bergtaigning* in Scandinavia) also in order to explain the disappearance or long delay of someone who is taking a walk in the woods or mountains (Lindow 1978: 45). Devlin, who researched such traditions in rural France in the 19th century in a society where, according to her, periods of malnutrition alternated with major bouts of drinking (especially at fairs, celebrations etc.), points out that “the convenience of this imaginative tradition was that it could be mobilized to excuse one’s behavior – whether caused through laziness, lack of concentration, drunkenness or foolhardiness” (Devlin 1987: 88). Tales of people being carried away by supernatural beings could as well provide a culturally acceptable excuse for deviant behavior – and thus save people from awkward situations and embarrassment (Narváez 1991: 354).

One cannot search for direct proofs which would substantiate such claims in the stories themselves, since the disclosure of the background would discredit the person who claims that they experienced an encounter with a witch. However, it is clearly visible from some memorates at least that such experiences actually often occur after fairs or work and in connection with drinking bouts.

I: This is how it happened ... down there, a little way from home, I do not know how many meters exactly [...] they used to go to there to get stakes [...] And then you know what it’s like, I mean, to put in stakes, *this was a custom back then, and people used to drink a lot*, and everybody used to sing, and men gathered and then they said: Well, now we are going to sing a song [...]

and they sang... this used to be something wonderful when one could hear a song from one village to the next, when they sang... and then suddenly [...] the late father disappeared from that circle and could not be found anywhere, and then he said that he found himself somewhere, that he was led somewhere up into the forest. Then at night... they searched for him, and my husband used to tell this a lot, that is your father [she turns towards her son]. Of course, children being children, well my son was already older: "Father, where are you?" they called, what happened, did he fall somewhere, what if it was a stroke, or... One starts thinking all kinds of things, whether one is old or young... And then he answered: Yes, yes, I am up here [she imitates him]. Well, what are you doing up there? [she imitates] Well, I don't know, maybe the devil brought me up here [she imitates], this is exactly what he said [laughter].

F: What did he think, why did he find himself there?

I: Well, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing.

I I: ... he said that it was as if he...

I: ... that it was this witch, you know...

I I: ...hypnotized, yes this is what he said.

I: That the witch got him... (15)

On many occasions even second-hand storytellers expressed the opinion that the man who encountered a night witch was drunk, or it is explicitly or implicitly obvious from the story (by stressing the soberness) that people themselves often ascribed experiences like this to consequences of drinking.

I: And we had here one older guy who believed in witches and he sometimes explained things like this. That he was going home from some place and that witches mixed him up so that he went exactly in the opposite direction and walked all night and so forth. I remember this. That he used to explain it but we took it as... We laughed at him, we thought "*he was drunk, wasn't he, and he couldn't find his way home*". ( 97)

I: My father used to say that on one occasion he was going home from some place, *and that he was not drunk, since he used to say that this only happens to drunk people*. He said he went through some thicket and he came to a place where he absolutely did not know that he had ever been there, he had never been there before. And there were some lights that went around him, which were very bright, and they circled him and he could not find his way, he could only find his way in the morning, I mean, he came to his senses and realized where he was. All he was saying was that he was in some terrible thicket. (105)

On the basis of the following story one might think that the woman which the story is about used her experience as a "weapon" against her jealous husband who did not let her spend a night at her friends' home, and she therefore had to go home at night through deep snow. The jealous husband who did not let his wife spend the night elsewhere could be told

this story as a lesson so that next time he would not prevent her from doing so.<sup>2</sup> If this story was spread further by other women the same message was intended for their husbands as well.

I: My husband used to tell this story, that he went with his mother who as a child lived in V., as they say here, if you know where V. is [...] *And they walked home one night because her husband was very jealous and did not allow her stay there that night and sleep over there, and they went home on foot in winter, and it snowed as well.* And she said, how are we going to make it when there is so much snow? And two men went, they came and then they...

I2: ...they came to G. and they got completely lost, and they did not know where they were.

I: ... and two men... yes two men went through the snow ahead of them. And they just followed those two men, and they just walked and walked and they came very, very close to here, to a spring [...] And there they did not... what... they did not know where to go anymore. And then they finally came, after all they came to a house at half past one or something like that at night. And they stayed there, didn't they?

I2: Yes, the point is they followed two men, didn't they?

I: Through the entire forest, the entire B. they followed the two men, you know. And those two led the way, and they followed them close behind, didn't they?

F: Did those two men mix them up?

I: Yes, yes. And this is let's say unusual here that two men would go like this and in winter...

I2: Yes, and at night.

I: And at the evening, at night, and through the forest, up the hill, don't you know. (53)

At least in some cases the descriptions of such encounters perhaps serve to conceal the *sexual experiences* or *sexual fantasies* of young males excited by sexual tension before their weddings. According to Lindow, one of the possible explanations for stories about abductions performed by supernatural beings looking for a partner from the other world are erotic experiences which are projected onto representatives of the other world, especially in the case of people who were forced into long-term isolation due to the nature of their work (e.g. charcoal-burning, etc.). He emphasizes that the period of highest vulnerability is before weddings or during the protagonist's wedding (Lindow 1978: 45). In general, periods of transition from one social status into another are periods when the vulnerability to attacks by witches is the highest (Blécourt 1999: 208). Narváez also allows a possibility that stories from Newfoundland about people being carried away by supernatural

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<sup>2</sup> Similar findings have been established by Schiffmann in her research on witchcraft in Poland, where she describes how a woman used her "witch powers" in her marital conflicts as a weapon against her husband (Schiffmann 1987: 160-1).



beings (which are similar to the experiences described by people in the area of eastern Slovenia almost to the last detail) expressed youthful tensions with regard to courtship and illicit sexual relations, or they even served to cover up sexual assaults, the sexual harassment of children, etc. (Narváez 1991: 354, 357).

The following two cases could support such explanations: in the first case a female phantasm is without a doubt connected with a man's thoughts about his wedding and his bachelorhood, while for the second situation which happened while serving in the army we could assume tensions due to forced sexual abstinence:

I: All I can tell is that when my father-in-law, I mean my mother's husband came home from B. he used to say that he met an unknown woman who said: Francek, be careful not to get lost. He said how did she know my name, and then he said suddenly after she left he went forward but did not know where he was anymore, he said, and that he was wandering in circles for about two hours until he could see again that he recognized the place.

F: Where did this happen to him?

I: In B., now I do not know...

I: ... he said *when he was still single he met a pretty woman, and she said: I was at your wedding. And he tried to figure out how that could be since he was still single...* and then that woman said: Be careful where you go home, that's all.

F: What did this woman look like?

I: Father said she looked perfectly normal, just like us, just a little bit... well, she said that. She supposedly said to him – when he was still single, and she said to him: Be careful where you walk home [...] and then she pointed into the forest, he said, and then he could not get out for all the world. He only came out after about two hours. (8)

I2: My neighbor *went into the army*, he is dead now. He was born the same year as I was, 1912, and went into the army in Serbia. One night he was keeping watch and he saw some blue lights flying back and forth. And then I don't know how it went, but he fired a shot and then went to see what it was, and *it was a completely naked woman, and he found her there then*. And then he said that that was a witch [laughter].

I: Was that A. K.?

I2: Yes, and he said it's the truth. He said, if I saw that woman I would not just shoot her, and maybe it could be something else but it was not anything else but a woman who flew here and there with some blue lights.

F: Did this naked woman fly?

I2: Yes, she was completely naked.

F: And she was flying?

I2: Yes, yes. (38)

An encounter with women –witches who drag a man all over the place– through bushes, streams, forests, so that he comes home all in rags, wet and filthy, also seems conditioned by sexual fantasies in the next story:



I: Dammit. [laughter] There was one man, they called him J. Š. and he was from B. He was the kind of guy who was always dirty and greasy, which is why they called him Š. And he went to S. down into the valley, for a day's work. He was poor, maybe he had kids and a wife, and there was no food, and so he went and helped cutting wood or grass, and things like that. And then down here, a little bit further from our mill - now it is a road but before it was a lane, a muddy farm lane, and another footpath crossed this lane so that you did not have to go through the mud, so that you could walk a little bit better, you know. And then one night, he was a little drunk and in a good mood and he went home in the evening. And he saw that at a crossroads of this lane and the footpath there was a fire. What could that be? And he goes closer and closer, and he saw four women roasting something. He said: *I bet my head that they were roasting pig shit.* [laughter] *Whether they were or not I do not know. And he said: Yes, what else. And he knew them. Well, you fucking hags, what are you doing here? What are you doing here? I'll show you. You are witches. And he gave a detailed account of who those four women were. Shame on you! And on top of everything you are naked too! I'll show you! And he had to pee, and he peed into their fire* [laughter], *so that the fire went out. Then the hags grabbed him and dragged him to B., into the stream below us. And they gave him a terrible bath: You wait, Š., we will show you, we will give you a little wash, so that you won't be so greasy. They bathed him all over his body, and they* [laughter] *they took all his clothes off and then they whipped him with thorn branches, he said, with sticks they beat him on his behind.* Of course. And they disappeared. They were gone. And he was left there and he woke up only at the break of dawn... (130)

The prevailing role of men in such situations could also be understood differently. The purpose of such stories of one's experiences outside the home could also be to scare women into not leaving home. By sharing their own experiences in as scary a manner as possible they scared them and thus controlled them. Why these stories are further spread so enthusiastically by women is another question, but as we know the majority of women subject themselves to such a role and such expectations of men and society, and is willing to defend it as eagerly as men – in order to indoctrinate other women (cf. Larner 1984: 62). However, from the texts of memorates as told to folklorists outside of their normal context we cannot discern any direct educational intent. There is another possible explanation: that in these stories women took delight in the helplessness of their men who were outwitted by women (interpreted as witches).

It has been demonstrated in several places that stories with a critical attitude towards other people could be used also as a means for spreading rumors (cf. Gustavsson 1979). In such a sense Devlin points out the function of stories about encountering the supernatural as tools for discrediting a neighbor, friend, former female partners, etc. (Devlin 1987: 199) – a person can discredit a hated female neighbor by spreading a story of a supposed encounter with this woman in the form of a witch. In our research area, night witches were mostly not recognized as real people, yet several stories confirm this:

I: Well, this happened when I was down in K. Down here they had... well, a barn is still standing there but it is empty, they already died. Yes, he had servants come in. They had a lot of livestock down there. And they went into barn to tend the cows. But there was one in the vicinity. Then there were witches, and they led those servants. Always at night, till the break of day. Ah, they are dead now, that one and that woman who was a witch is dead now, too. They all died. But I knew them. And when daylight came they let him go. And he... he recognized her, this witch. Yes, he tried to oppose her... They even took his boots off. And he went after her and told her: I recognized you. You do this one more time I will hit you and leave you there. [...] And since then there have been no more problems. (115)

Von Sydow pointed out that when researching beliefs one should first conduct a genre analysis, since not all genres are equally useful for researching beliefs in a region. He stated that one genre which cannot be used as a source for research of beliefs is the pedagogic “fict”: a story told by adults with the purpose of e.g. preventing children from walking on wheat and trampling it, etc. (Von Sydow 1948: 79-88, 170-5). They refer to beings that were not an object of belief, and in general people did not have an idea of their appearance since they were intended merely to scare children and were not related to any tradition of memorates (as stated by Honko, memorates are the main source for the research of beliefs – Honko 1969: 295). Beings like this are various bogeymen, and the *teleba* which was used to scare children in order to keep them out of vineyards and not to steal grapes before they were ripe, is clearly an example of such a being; such beings also include “underwater men” which were used to scare children so that they would not fall into wells or rivers, etc. But even though fictitious supernatural beings fit into the belief field of children, their socio-psychological function is the same as with those who are considered to be real: they also help to reinforce norms (Honko 1969: 298). Lindow also sees such a social role in the telling of stories about *bergtaining* in order to scare children from going into dangerous areas (1978: 44). Devlin writes that stories about some beings known in rural France in the 19th century were intended to discourage children from wandering into dangerous areas – e.g. stories about monsters who eat children who pick hazelnuts in the woods; about a wild man who steals milk from shepherds, etc.; about the *vouivre*, a winged snake or dragon, which boasted a magical garnet instead of eyes and was supposed to live near or in fountains; etc. (Devlin 1987: 77). When listing types of parental threats to children, in addition to scaring children with the help of various persons and animals, objects, locations and natural phenomena, Widdowson also mentions the category of “supernatural, mythological, invented” (Widdowson 1978: 35). We can only wonder whether telling stories about encountering witches during the night had this type of pedagogic function in our research area: the children present at the common evening work during which people told these stories most likely became afraid of wandering through the forests at

night. Yet there is an important difference between stories most often told in the first or third person, i.e. as memorates, and ficts about e.g. underwater men in wells (which we find in this area): the first case is a description of a personal experience of the supernatural, a narrative about a personal encounter with witches. Even if telling these stories had a positive pedagogic effect on children who might come home earlier in the evening than they would otherwise and did not wander far from the village because of their fear, such a function was nevertheless merely secondary.

The experiences about which the stories speak scared not only children but adults as well. Devlin states that the central problem of such experiences is psychological, and that folklore has always attempted to address precisely this dimension and was rooted in man's real inner conflicts and problems. It is not, therefore, an explanation of natural phenomena so much as an interpretation of the feelings which the natural environment has caused: "forests, misty bogs and nights unilluminated by electricity were conducive to strange visions, and people interpreted their reactions with an inherited vocabulary." (Devlin 1987: 80-1). This psychological need for storytelling of course is not tied exclusively to experiences of the supernatural. Bendix found a similar function of storytelling in the days after the earthquake, and concluded that personal narratives are "the primary means at an individual's disposal to regain order out of chaos" and that the "rapidity with which order is restored out of chaos [...] is linked to (our) capability of recasting the experience in narrative form" (Bendix 1990: 333-4).

#### THE ROLE OF STORIES ABOUT NIGHT-TIME ENCOUNTERS WITH WITCHES IN THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPACE AND TIME

Although it is characteristic of such experiences that they are usually experienced alone, this "individuality" of the experience is not as individual as it would seem at first glance. People interpret their experiences and visions with an inherited vocabulary (Honko 1969: 295-6; Devlin 1987: 80; Kvideland 1988: 20). Individual experiences and collective traditions become interwoven in memorates: supernatural experiences do not arise out of nothing. Knowledge of a tradition of the supernatural is always in the background. The explanation and the judgment of it often do not come from the person who lived through the experience, but are taken from someone else. This experience can then be adjusted, rejected or corrected in accordance with the tradition (Honko 1962: 92, 125-6; 1969: 304).

I: But another time [...] another time I went right there on my way home from work, but then I went at twelve o'clock. I walked there many times, many times every day [...] to work and back, you know, but suddenly I can't find my way home, suddenly I can't find my way home, I don't know which

is the right path. There was this path and another path, I saw, the paths met, a little way ahead, I saw a house, I saw our home, but I couldn't get to it. And I was twenty years old.

F: But how, what did your parents ...?

I 1: *They told me that the witches led me astray.* (128)

It is clear that in the area which we researched, such experiences are common and at the same time relatively uniform with respect to both the description of the experience itself and with respect to how it is interpreted – as well as with respect to its temporal and spatial coordinates.

As Devlin points out, it has frequently been shown that both the time and the place of the appearance of supernatural beings can often be predicted. Supernatural beings do not appear just anywhere, and mystical experiences do not occur just anywhere; they require an appropriate setting: usually remote, isolated from everyday life (Devlin 1987: 72). There is no culture in which place is something homogenous, something which would have the same properties in all of its aspects. People have always conceptualized place by separating ordered, safe places from disordered, chaotic places, places inhabited by dangers, monsters, the unclean dead, witches etc. – this division gave them a feeling of safety, coordinates in their lives. It has been demonstrated over and over again that place does not have the same values in traditional belief: the “sacredness” of a place is gradually reduced in isohips in the direction from the most sacred place (the fireplace, etc.) in the house, over the threshold (as the first border marker) and so on to the fence or the edge of the yard, the end of the village and onward into the forests, uninhabited areas, marshes, etc. Yet, as Devlin claims, “the tendency to differentiate between natural settings not only reflects man’s vulnerability in a hostile environment but also points to the cultural complexity of visions – to describe their aberrant experiences, men could draw on an enormous repertoire of legendary creatures and phenomena, all of which had their specific properties and haunts.” (Devlin 1987: 72).

Narvez showed that in the materials on stories from Newfoundland about being led astray by supernatural beings, stories about such experiences (which men had mainly in forests and women had mainly in berry patches) are characterized by places which represent boundaries between geographical areas of cleanliness, liminality and danger (Narvez 1991: 338). These boundaries in the conceptualization of space are very clearly shown in our research area with respect to the locations of encounters with witches. The place closest to the house where witches can be seen is the *threshold* – one of our informants e.g. mentioned that lights came up to the threshold, but they quickly shut the door on them, and then they flew around the manure pile. The threshold marked the boundary between the house (which is conceptualized as a safe place, “our” place) and outside places. Manure is also a place of contact between the dead and the living, to which

supernatural beings can attach themselves (Radenković 1996: 188-191). Other typical places of encounter with witches are crossroads, the place of encounter with demons, ghosts, supernatural beings, etc. par excellence, and the most typical location, as stated, the forest. The forest in this area obviously functions as the most dangerous place, and the most typical location for encounters with supernatural forces, which is typical of folk beliefs. It is very difficult to say whether the forest functions as a boundary marker which marks the end of the village or the border between villages, since the villages in this area are often spread out, so the borders are difficult to determine accurately. However, a typical situation of a close encounter with a witch, i.e. on the way home from a communal job, from work, from a fair etc., probably implies a crossing through the forest as a crossing between villages or crossing over village borders. In any case the forest represents a liminal area, and entering it means entering into a magical, dangerous, unpredictable world, which makes possible unwanted and unsought contact with the other world, the intrusion of the otherworld into this world. The other world in traditional belief is not removed to somewhere at the end of the world, but penetrates into human reality into people's immediate vicinity. Locations in which encounters with the supernatural occur include, in addition to forests, above all water (streams, springs), which however are most often located in forests. This is not always apparent just from the statement of the location, but is more frequently implicitly recognizable from the experience itself: witches drag people along *streams*, they *wash* their entire body, they make them *fall into streams*, people come home completely *soaked*, etc. In some cases this involves a river which is at the same time a national border; in one story it is a stream that is at the same time the official border between two forests which belong to different owners.

Of course all of these places become dangerous only at certain times during the day. Thus, like place, time is also not homogenous, despite the fact that it is conceptualized in folklore as continual and cyclical. One of the basic prohibitions which regulate relations with supernatural beings was the temporal division of the day: the night belonged to the supernatural beings, and the day to people. "The night is mine, the day is yours" is in the Slovene tradition a sort of trademark of supernatural beings who encounter people in the middle of the night. In time as well as space, there are border, liminal moments, critical points which allow the intrusion of the other side. In general the entire night half of the day has this character, while within it there is an especially dangerous period, the still of the night, a time which lasts from around eleven in the evening to two or three in the morning (Tolstoj 2003: 33-5; Tolstaja 1995: 30; Briggs 1967: 106). The majority of the negative experiences with witches in the memorates which we recorded in our research area occurred during this time.

Of course notions about the night belonging to supernatural beings and prohibitions on leaving home or returning home late at night also have an

economic function: people must be well rested for work the next day, this is the only way the work will be done well and the only way the farm will succeed, etc. (cf. Grambo 1970: 261) – the following story shows this:

One time we went to do a harvest at night, when it was too hot during the day, but at two o'clock one woman said that she was going home. But I said that we should harvest until two, but she said that she was going home, because the witches would come. Soon we saw light after light. *Then the woman said that we shouldn't work anymore, because the witches would do something to us. Every night we stopped working at two, and then we went for tea and brandy, and to sleep.* (127)

As regards the time of the appearance of witches, in response to our abstract questions about witches or about what times of the year witches are dangerous, when they gather, etc. (i.e. in general, not only in the form of lights), people mentioned Christmas and Advent, Midsummer's Eve, Ember Week and Whitsuntide. Informants only occasionally defined the time of experiencing night-time encounters with witches or seeing witches in the form of lights with respect to the time of year, and there is practically no consensus among them: Midsummer's Eve, June, the full moon at the end of November, spring and autumn, Advent and Ember Week stand out as the times when such occurrences are supposedly most common. To the question of whether the phases of the moon affect the appearance of witches, we received very different responses: from the moon having no effect to a response that they are supposed to gather during the full moon and another that they gather only during new moons, but not during full moons. Obviously the time of the year and time defined by the phases of the moon are only of peripheral importance to encounters with witches. The time which actually is of decisive importance in these memorates is the time of day. Here people's responses to abstract questions and their concrete experiences are consistent: they refer to the time which in the evening is limited by the first appearance of dusk and ends at the latest in the morning at dawn, the first crowing of a cock, the ringing of church bells etc. During this part of the night, the time from eleven to midnight or one or two in the morning is especially emphasized, especially around midnight.

I 1: ... [We heard] that witches had mixed someone up, and that he couldn't drive home at all, you know... it just happened to K. L., you know. He went out of the vineyard, and he came up to D. at the crossroads, and he saw some lights there. Then there was a road, and he took it but he went the other way, you know. Then he couldn't find his way at all, and he spent the entire night in the forest.

F: How did he get out in the morning?

I 1: Then in the morning... in the morning, after dawn, *you know, only then did he realize where he was*, and he was way over there on the other hilltop, above S.



I: ... you know, and they mixed him up so bad that he went to the left... instead of going the right way. Well, then he... then he went into the bushes and couldn't get out, and had to wait until morning. (21)

Time and space are to a great degree interconnected: a certain place has different values depending on the different times of the day or night. Things that are safe to do during the day are dangerous at critical times (noon, dusk, from midnight to the first crowing of a cock, dawn). Thus entering the forest at night (especially near water or at a crossroads) represented heightened danger for people in this area, especially during the period from the beginning of dusk to the morning. Although we never encountered an example of such injunctions against going into the forest during this time as being an explicitly stated prohibition (except in the sense that "If you don't want to see witches, don't go out at night"), this was obviously an action which would be sanctioned by encounters with witches. However, this sanction applied, as stated, mainly to men, since, as stated, it was mainly men who experienced these encounters.<sup>3</sup>

Besides all the different social functions of the folklore tradition of supernatural beings, there is obviously a general consensus with regard to the conceptualization of time and space, some definite division of time and space which remains the same every time such folklore is used in one or another function. The store of knowledge about space and time and their division is to a great extent uniform throughout Europe, including the Slavic regions, with the only difference being the names and partially also the descriptions of the supernatural beings which determine these spatial and temporal fragments (their actions or functions are usually very similar everywhere). Where does this nearly universal concept of space and time come from? In his explanation of taboo, Leach begins with the assumption that our conception of the world is a representation of our linguistic categories, and not the other way around. Over time, a child who interprets his physical and social environment as a continuum which has no internally separate parts learns to apply a network of differentiation to that environment which is intended to divide the world into a large number of separate things, each of which is conceptualized differently – he therefore must learn to construct his environment in such a way that the basic differences within it are clear and unambiguous, and through his perception to distinguish a discontinuous environment. But in this manner he "suppresses" the perception of the empty spaces between these different categories, "nothings, which fill the interstices, which become especially interesting – whatever is taboo is sacred, valuable, important, powerful, dangerous, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable." (Leach 1964: 37-8) In this

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<sup>3</sup> Narváez came to the same conclusion on the basis of stories from the thirties from Newfoundland – for women, on the contrary, the most dangerous places were near berries, i.e. marshes, unfertile land, swamps – Narváez 1991: 338.



sense the rift between the two separate categories, between this world and the other world, is filled with supernatural and other beings which have the attributes of both categories – of this and the other world (Leach 1964: 39).

The numerous memorates thus reveal that in our research area “night witches” through their actions function as markers of boundary places and boundary time, or, as Narváez established in the case of Newfoundland experiences, as “folkloric mechanisms for the erection and maintenance of spatial and temporal boundaries” and “as geographical markers on the cognitive maps of community residents” (cf. Narváez 1991: 336, 354). In the final analysis in our definition of space and time using night witches we can also establish a psychological function: telling stories about such experiences (place, time, form) allows people to have a safe means of orientation in space, makes them aware of permissible and impermissible movements in space and time and –if they fail to follow these rules– makes them familiar with the consequences that they can expect from such behavior.

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