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Discourses on Witchcraft and Uses of Witchcraft Discourse

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Abstract: Based on field research, this article discusses various discourses that the inhabitants of the Eastern Slovenian region could use when discussing witchcraft. Further on it focuses on various possible uses of the witchcraft discourse: as long as witchcraft discourse had enough open support in the region, it constituted the context in which witchcraft narratives were “shared with licence”, which enabled people to draw upon and mobilize them for various purposes and with various intentions. This paper gives examples of how bewitchment narratives served as a strategy that individuals could appropriate and use to their benefit in everyday life.

Résumé: Cet article aborde diverses techniques narratives élaborées par les habitants de l’Est de la Slovénie pour parler de sorcellerie. L’accent est mis sur l’utilité sociale et culturelle de ce discours : aussi longtemps que les récits sur la sorcellerie étaient acceptés comme « vrais » par la majeure partie des habitants de cette région, ils pouvaient être diffusés ouvertement, avec l’« autorisation » de tous. Cette acceptation permettait un recours stratégique aux discours sur la sorcellerie et leur mobilisation dans des intentions variées. À l’aide d’une série d’exemples caractéristiques, on montrera le succès de tels récits comme stratégie d’explication et d’appropriation du quotidien.


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One of the first things I got to learn about when I became interested in folklore studies, was *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. The words sounded magical on the one hand, and grandiose on the other, as if capturing all human knowledge on folklore in it, and the row of books standing on the shelf of the library where I studied looked awe-inspiring. In fact, it was precisely the reputation of *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* that, after I defended my PhD, led me to apply for a Humboldt fellowship to be able to come to study at the Institute, which to me sounded like a wonderland, a centre where worldwide knowledge in folkloristics is being stored. When in 2002 I first came to Göttingen, Hans-Jörg Uther was just in the middle of yet another great achievement for the history of folkloristics – the new edition of *Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* – and the Institute indeed looked like a meeting centre of folklorists and a store of folklore records from all over the world. Both (series of) books doubtless constitute milestones in the history of folkloristics, capturing hundreds of years of folklore and knowledge into crystallised units of information to serve as an indispensable tool for all prospective students of folklore. Yet, as is only to be expected, even if an encyclopaedic entry presents an “ideal” core of all possible information one could possibly obtain on a certain issue, for instance a particular type of narrative, one cannot expect it to capture the whole “reality” of the narrative that one comes across in the field. This seems especially so when witchcraft, the topic of my particular and long-standing interest, is concerned – the topic which, incidentally, has been closely intertwined with my own study at the institute of the Encyclopedia of Fairy Tales (*Enzyklopädie des Märchens*) throughout the years. As it turned out, it was the topic of my first and also of my latest research stay in Göttingen in 2015. As witchcraft in the field is strongly embedded in people’s everyday reality, its social context, relations between a witch, her victim and the unwitcher, and the social function that narratives on witchcraft fulfil in the community are of primary importance. One can hardly expect that an encyclopaedic entry could ever capture all the intricacies of social reality of witchcraft, or encompass all varieties of social contexts, especially as these can vary considerably.

These, moreover, have for a long time remained outside the centre of the attention of the folklorists studying witchcraft narratives too. While they have continuously recorded witchcraft narratives, these were usually published devoid of their context, mostly presented as polished stories (cf. de Blécourt 1999, 153, 160), revealing nothing of the social reality in which they were embedded. Although the interests of some folklorists have been directed towards narrators and contexts of narrations already in the first half of the twentieth century, and more strongly from the 1970s onwards, the focus of folklorists writing about witchcraft was never-
theless basically on legends as such and their comparison. In addition, they were interested in the representations of witches in legends, rather than the perspective of the “victims”, or people believing in witchcraft. Yet, the approach that focuses on research of the textual units can never capture all the possible meanings that witchcraft has for people thinking, talking and acting from within the witchcraft discourse, or the various possible ways in which narratives about witches could be used by the narrators in their everyday life.

On the other hand, while the social dimension of witchcraft, missing in the folkloristic research, has indeed been more suitably addressed in anthropological studies of witchcraft, these often lacked sensibility for those witchcraft narratives that did not necessarily reflect social tensions and were not, at first glance at least, involved in social relationships in the community. In addition, many aspects of folklore that folklorists have long learned to comprehend have rarely been tackled in anthropological studies of witchcraft, for instance the relevance of genres, the recognition of the types of (migratory) legends, the importance of individuals as participants in the conduits, the importance of their repertoires, the understanding of actions as ostensive practices, the understanding of the performative aspects of narration, the understanding of discursive practices, etc.

Joint discussion of narratives as such, as well as of their social dimension and joint consideration of textual as well as contextual approach, thus seem crucial if one wants to account for the complexity of witchcraft. In this particular paper, I will address but one aspect of witchcraft narratives recorded in the field research – the various ways in which the witchcraft discourse could be used by people in their everyday communication.

In summer 2000 I first arrived, together with a group of students, in a secluded rural region of eastern Slovenia to conduct field research. As part of a joint project between the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana and a regional institution, our aim was to record folklore that could serve the institution’s mission to promote the local heritage. What I hoped for were etiological legends about various features of the landscape and legends related to various places in the region, yet knowing that these tend to be rarer than so-called “belief legends”, I also instructed my students to inquire about narratives on the dead, witchcraft, and the supernatural in general – just in case. However, when the groups met in the evening to share the results after the first day of fieldwork, as well as on the following evenings, one thing became clear: the topic in the region was witchcraft. Narratives on witchcraft were abundant and clearly predominating – one could say that witchcraft was the dominant tradition (cf. Honko 1962, 127–128) in the region.
The region in which we were doing our research\(^1\) is mostly remote and hard to reach, with poor traffic connections.\(^2\) The farms are small, the land divided into small parcels, and the people mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture, particularly with fruit and wine growing, and perhaps keeping a cow or two, a few pigs and some hens. The inhabitants of the area are mostly Roman Catholic. This was an extremely impoverished region until at least the beginning of the 1970s, when it experienced changes in economic development and the living conditions became somewhat less harsh: electricity and water supply became available to more households than before, many houses were rebuilt, free medical care became available even to farmers, who made up the majority of the population, and several factories and tourism facilities were established at the periphery of the region and offered job opportunities. This, consequently, improved the standard of living of at least part of the population and, due to daily migrations, triggered the improvement of the roads and traffic facilities; better roads also allowed the use of tractors, which improved agricultural yields. Furthermore, this was also the time when television started to make its way into the rural households in the region.

All these changes consequently triggered the loosening of the bonds of the close village communities (cf. Sok 2003, 39–40) and changes in the communities’ social life. In the research area, the key setting for the communication and evaluation of witchcraft narratives, and the basic context which allowed for the maintenance of witchcraft discourse and the persistence of witchcraft as a social institution, had been always shared work, particularly in the autumn and winter evenings, when people gathered in this or that house to husk corn, shell beans, and pluck feathers, but also during crop harvests, wine harvests, pig slaughtering and other domestic activities related to rural economy that brought villagers together (cf. also Devlin 1987, 198; Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1991, 13–14). However, due to the economic changes and, in particular, daily migrations, but also the improvement of agricultural machinery, the evenings of shared work more or less ended in the 1970s (Sok 2003, 116).

Once the main setting for the communication of witchcraft narratives was no longer there, witchcraft discourse inevitably started losing its adherents and communal support. Those who were still thinking within its framework were no longer in a position to estimate public opinion and could no longer rely on having support for witchcraft accusations and actions within the village community as a

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2 Due to the delicate nature of the topic the exact location of the region is not given.
whole. This must have ultimately led to the withdrawal of their beliefs and actions
to within the family unit and the restricted circles of those who still communicated
among themselves and on whose support they could rely.

However, while witchcraft as a generally accepted and more or less publicly
supported social institution lost its value due to the economic and social changes
in the 1970s, it had not yet died out completely. While people may not have had the
opportunity to speak about it as openly and as often as they used to, and could not
always expect to receive public support if they spoke and acted openly from within
the witchcraft discourse, their personal belief may nevertheless have continued,
albeit in a restricted form and limited in expression. Bewitchment practices too
have continued to be practiced, although not by everyone and certainly less fre-
quently than in the past, and witchcraft as a social institution has, to a limited
extent at least, continued to provide a means for the explanation of misfortune and
to regulate social relationships for at least part of the population.

Witchcraft as a discourse

While we often heard narrations about practices and behaviour related to
witchcraft during our fieldwork, we never witnessed any. The narratives in which
these practices and behaviour were interpreted in terms of witchcraft were the only
available source of information about witchcraft in the region and were thus the
only means for the researcher to be able to grasp the underlying experience and
understand the narrators’ underlying propositions. On the other hand, they were
also an essential means for people to structure, interpret and share their expe-
riences: while people may have witnessed and performed countermeasures
against witchcraft and participated in the identification procedures, or even per-
formed bewitchments themselves, the narratives were a prerequisite for their
proper understanding in the framework of witchcraft discourse, in the upholding
and maintaining of witchcraft as a social system, and were also the main means of
providing people with strategies about how to respond to witchcraft assaults (cf.
Stark 2004, 86; Eilola 2006, 33). Through these narratives, the inhabitants of the
region were socialised in terms of a particular discursive construction of the world
which informed their experiences and helped them make sense of them (cf. Rap-
port and Overing 2007, 137–138, 142).

Indeed, scholars of traditional witchcraft have often understood witchcraft as a
particular sort of discourse used by the narrators, and even claimed that cases of
bewitchment were not only expressed, but manifested especially or solely in
narratives. Jeanne Favret-Saada, who had first planned to research witchcraft
practices in the Bocage, France, soon realised that the only empirical facts she was
able to record were words. Consequently, she concentrated solely on narratives: the facts of witchcraft cases are a speech process, she claimed, and a witch a person referred to by people who utter the discourse on witchcraft (Favret-Saada 1980, 24–25). While Favret-Saada reduced witchcraft solely to narratives, de Blécourt broadened the understanding of witchcraft discourse to also include concepts and actions and defined witchcraft discourse as “a coherent system of concepts, stories, and actions” (1990, 2013, 363, 369). In the framework of witchcraft discourse, people therefore relied on concepts, exchanged stories, and performed actions that conveyed specific meanings and carried specific messages which could only be properly understood from within this discourse, i.e. the “speech in habitual situations of social exchange” (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 134).

Witchcraft discourse

When one is thinking, talking and acting from within the witchcraft discourse, objects, acts, words, behaviour etc. acquire a particular connotation, other that they have for people thinking, talking or acting from outside of witchcraft discourse. When people thought they were bewitched, the typical expression referring to bewitchment was “This was done”:

Yes, they said that if you found an egg [placed on your property], that your hens wouldn’t lay anymore, that this was done. That was heard.

(95)

When referring to an experience of losing one’s way, believed to have been caused by witches, people would typically use expressions such as “witches carried me”, “witches chased me” or “witches led me astray”, “witches mixed me up”, or “witches drove me”:

I2: That neighbour, well, he was drunk and he mixed it all up. He went there, here … there is a path he often used on his way from … and it was night. He said he was walking there for a while when suddenly there was no road and nothing [any more]. He had to fight his way through the thicket and thorny bushes, but still he didn’t wake up before… when he did wake up, above the

3 Yet while concepts are part of the discourse, they pertain to the level of conceptual reality, whereas stories and actions articulate, express the concepts.
4 The transcriptions of the interviews are done verbatim. Due to space limitations I have omitted the parts of the texts in which authors were discussing topics that were not relevant for the present topic, explaining local words and expressions etc. Numerous archaisms and aspects of the local dialect which are evident in the Slovenian transcriptions have been rendered in modern or standard English in translation. F in the transcriptions indicates a folklorist and I the informant. All of the tape-recordings and transcriptions are stored in the Archives of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana.
road there is a field and those farmers there they had ... planted cabbage, so he grabbed one cabbage head and woke up. Then he said that the witches carried him [laughter]... (68)

“To know” is another typical expression which only within the discourse refers [only] to the knowledge of witchcraft, ascribed to either witches or unwitchers.

II: Yes, they said there were witches. It is true that they knew. This is correct, this could be [true]. (...) Up there, close to where we had a vineyard, there was one such [woman]. That one really knew. (25)

Within the discourse, certain behaviour also acquired specific connotations. Not to respond to somebody, not to look someone in the eye, and not to give or accept a gift or a loan from someone communicated a clear message to the addressee that they were considered witches. Praising, dragging sheets over another person’s wheat on certain days in the annual cycle (usually Pentecost), borrowing something on particular days, burying objects on a neighbour’s property too were actions that were understood as bewitchments only within the witchcraft discourse. Outside it, they would be either meaningless or they would trigger questions regarding their aim and meaning.

While a discourse can be understood as “an authoritarian and coherent web of ideas and statements, prescribing a normative worldview, and upholding certain social norms and values” (Valk 2011, 850), discursive exchange is not fixed: different personal meanings can be imparted to discourses by individuals, and it is their personalisation of discursive structures that keeps them alive (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 141–142). According to the following narrative, the “accused” person (who was not being responded to, which was, as a rule, understood as an accusation of bewitchment) transformed the interpretation of the silence of his neighbours into evidence of the opposite: a proof of their bewitching act.

And he said that his father came, his younger son drove him by car to the place where they had dug out the foundations to build a house, and they arrived by car. And he said that they went to that place and the old man stood there and uttered no sound. He asked them what they were doing and he said that they kept totally quiet. And he said that they had managed to build their house in no time. While he was struggling with building his house, it only took them one year to build their house. He said that it was like they took his success⁵ away, everything went wrong afterwards. (53)

Witchcraft discourse, however, was not the only possible discourse people in our region could employ when narrating about witchcraft. Several discourses coexisted in the region and were available to people in order to build a functional model for their lives and, moreover, there were various ways of combining them

⁵ The narrator used a rather unusual dialect word, explaining it in standard Slovene as “success, effect, speed”; the meaning more or less coincides with the word “luck” (cf. Honko 1962, 119–120; Schiffmann 1987, 161; Stark-Arola 1998, 116).
One could choose to talk from within a “rational” (scientific) discourse, supported and propagated by the educational system and by various media: although not a majority, many people would take a rational stance, proclaiming those that believed in the reality of witchcraft to be “superstitious”, “stupid”, “foolish” and the like. This discourse was often endorsed by the representatives of the Church, too, even though clergy could also draw upon “Christian” discourse which does not deny the reality of the effect of malevolent magic deeds, but ultimately ascribes it to the agency of the devil. This discourse, however, was only extremely rarely used in our region. Lately, but very seldom, New Age discourse is also starting to affect the ways in which witchcraft is being conceptualised and talked about, and words such as energy, bioenergy, and chakras, typical of New Age discourse (Heelas 2003, 1; Valk 2011, 862; Mencej 2015, 47, 57), occasionally cropped up in the conversation, particularly with a descendant of a family of unwitchers. Moreover, New Age and witchcraft discourse, and rational and witchcraft discourse could be used by the same narrator, and even intermingled in the course of the same narration, with the narrator slipping from talking from within the “rational”, or New Age discourse, to talking from within the witchcraft discourse and back again.

The choice of a discourse, however, does not necessary reveal the narrator’s true attitude toward the reality of witchcraft. The use of a rational discourse could just as well be a strategy to conceal one’s personal attitude toward witchcraft from the researcher, a way narrators protected themselves from being considered credulous and superstitious in the eyes of the researcher (cf. Favret-Saada 1980, 42–43, 51–52; Correll 2005, 8). On the other hand, witchcraft discourse too could be applied strategically in communication with insiders.

**Uses of witchcraft discourse**

As long as witchcraft discourse had enough open support in the region, it constituted the context in which witchcraft narratives were “shared with licence” (cf.

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6 I use the word “rational” not as my personal evaluation of the discourse, in the sense that I find this discourse more rational than witchcraft discourse, or that I implicitly claim that witchcraft discourse is irrational. Witchcraft discourse represents just another sort of rationality, based on a set of beliefs which are culturally valid albeit not compatible with the Western elite’s views. The “rationality” of the discourse thus refers exclusively to the emic position of those who used it as an opposition to the perspective of narrators who employed the perspective of witchcraft. I would like to thank Kaarina Koski for her remarks on rationality and the use of the term. (On the cultural grounds of rationality, see Tambiah 1993; Eze 2008.)
Ellis 1988, 66) and were imparted an authority that could not easily be shaken. This enabled people to draw upon and mobilize them for various purposes and with various intentions. Not necessarily related to one’s personal belief or disbelief in the proposition, these narratives could serve as a strategy that individuals could appropriate and use to their benefit in everyday life – usually not as calculated and manipulative acts but rather as a strategy based on the habitus (Argyrou 1993, 267–268).

A few examples can give us a glimpse into the various uses of witchcraft discourse in the region. When a young man suddenly withdrew himself from society and was then unable to find a job – probably suffering depression or a more serious mental illness – ascribing his failure to witchcraft was a convenient and handy explanation. On the one hand, witchcraft explanation helped the family cope with the sudden change in their son’s behaviour and, on the other hand, it offered an acceptable explanation of their son’s behaviour to the community at large, which, not acknowledging depression as a serious mental state, would likely proclaim him an idler and disapprove of his behaviour. Moreover, it could affect the reputation and consequently lower the social position of the family if the son’s behaviour was ascribed to inappropriate upbringing. Ascribing the source of problems to witchcraft thus also gave the family an opportunity to offer a suitable interpretation to the community which prevented its reputation from being destroyed (cf. Hesz 2007, 30–31).

I: Now let me tell you something else. When I was very small, we were husking corn, and we had an early apple-tree and we always went to shake that tree, these were the first fruits. And my cousin was very, very diligent and very smart, and he ran there before me. And he found seven small pads made from various pieces of cloth on the ground. And he picked them up. That boy stopped working, he shut himself away, and even nowadays there is nothing of him!

F: Did she [the village witch] put them there?

I: She wasn’t there, I have no clue where these small nicely made-up pads that he put in his pocket came from... [...] He brought them home. Threw them away immediately! His mother was a bit superstitious and she said: Janez, why did you pick them up? He picked them up so that I wouldn’t take them before him. And he picked them up, but – the boy finished school, but he hasn’t done any work, never got a job, he’s on the dole, in short – nothing, he shut himself away... F: Did this start immediately after?

I: Immediately afterwards! He was 16, or 18 at the time when he did this. This I strongly believe, that this did him harm, this I strongly believe! (53)

The interpretation of marital quarrels as a consequence of bewitchment likewise offered an excuse for their behaviour to the family and the community, and, at the same time, helped the partners unite against the threat of malevolent powers and redefine their relationship (cf. Argyrou 1993, 264):

I: She fought with her husband at home, she threw him out of bed, and she said: The moment I threw him out of bed, a witch in a shape of a toad jumped out from the bed [...] She said: You
won’t [succeed]! And I stabbed her [the toad], she said: I destroyed her, I trampled her! She said: Kaja K. lost her leg at just the same time! [laughs] And they have quarrelled with her about that ever since. (11)

If a mother interpreted the unacceptable behaviour of her son towards her as a result of bewitchment, this possibly helped her forgive her son for physically abusing her and at the same time clear his son’s name as well as her own from reproaches for her failed upbringing:

I knew one [witch]... she lived in that house, she was old... her mother left her... and she lived there, unmarried, she still isn’t married. And her son pretty much hated her and beat her and everything. So one day she paid a visit to the fortune-teller. She went there and she [the fortune-teller] told her it was done so that he was behaving badly, that this was done by... [...] and she gave her some remedy so that this son then started to beat his mother-in-law, and not her anymore. (142)

As the unwitchers (fortune-tellers) never identified the witches themselves, but only offered vague notions about their identity which were completed by the clients (cf. Mencej 2015 a), the identity of mother-in-law as the witch must have been either unconsciously invoked by his mother, or else she had consciously concocted her identity herself, perhaps due to the jealousy she must have felt when her son seemed to prefer his mother-in-law to her.

Many narratives that presented misfortune as being a result of witchcraft can be understood as narrative strategies used by people when they transgressed the social norms. In these cases witchcraft was invoked to vindicate their behaviour, justify their actions and redirect or annihilate suspicions of illicit deeds that the community would not sanction. The employment of narratives accusing a woman, whom one was supposed to marry, of being a witch could serve as an excuse for men who wanted to break off an engagement, as the identifying of their betrothed as a witch seemed to be a comprehensible and sanctioned reason for the cancellation of a marriage (cf. Devlin 1987, 199).

I know that down here, my grandfather told me this, there were two neighbours who didn’t have the best relationship. And my grandfather was supposed to marry that woman and [they said] she was a witch. Well, this I can tell you about. That she was a witch and she went to her neighbour’s byre and people found her doing some witchcraft there. That she was doing witchcraft. Then my grandfather said, my grandpa, he said: I shall not take this witch, I shall marry another! And this is how it happened. (79)

While it seems reasonable to assume that in many cases memorates about night encounters with witches who led people astray were intentionally invoked when one needed an excuse for behaviour that would not meet the approval of their family or the community, one cannot search for direct proofs that would substantiate such assumptions in the narratives themselves, since they obviously had to be presented in such a way that the disclosure of what the narratives were
aiming to conceal would not compromise the narrator. Nevertheless, some narratives about night witches indicate that they were likely used when one needed an excuse for returning home late due to excessive drinking and using the notion of witches’ work as an excuse for having spent a night in the forest after a night’s drinking was certainly a suitable explanation that would have discharged the drunken men of any guilt and shame.

II: This is how it happened ... down there, a little ways from home, I do not know how many metres 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 [...] your late father disappeared from that circle and could not be found anywhere, and then he said that he found himself somewhere, that he was carried 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 [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 [imitating him]. Well, what are you doing up there? [imitating] Well, I don’t know, maybe the devil brought me up here [imitating], this is exactly what he said [laughs].

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

II: Well, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing... he said that it was as if he...

I2: ... that it was this witch, you know...

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

I2: That the witch got him... (15)

Narváez argued that narratives from Newfoundland about people being carried away by fairies, similar to the narratives on night witches in our region, expressed youthful tensions with regard to courtship and illicit sexual relations and served to cover up sexual assaults, to conceal sexual encounters or the sexual harassment of children, and similar (1991, 354, 357; cf. Lindow 1978, 45). Nakedness in the following narrative, otherwise exceptional in the bewitchment narratives might indicate that the witchcraft discourse may have indeed served to conceal a sexual experience. The narrative about a daughter-in-law being a witch who tries to make an attempt on her father-in-law’s life seems to refer to the situation in which a rape, or perhaps a consensual, but illicit sexual relationship between the father and daughter-in-law was either attempted or indeed took place.

He knew that their daughter-in-law was a witch, right, he knew that she can bewitch, and she hated him, and she pushed him in [the water] when he was fishing, when he was drunk, to drown him. But he was so strong that he destroyed that, so that she didn’t have power over him anymore. And he kept her there until the dawn. When the sun was rising, she was already naked in front of him. And then she asked him to let her. That is what my mother was telling me that it really happened. (4)
The detail of the nakedness of the daughter-in-law as a proof of her witchcraft could serve as a strategy to offer a suitable explanation to the people who caught them naked together, or, more likely, an answer to the silenced woman's accusation of her father-in-law of an attempted rape which she might have tried to prevent by pushing him into the water. In the latter case, the obviously widespread acknowledgment of the father's version by the fellow villagers seems to reflect the powerlessness of a woman's voice against a man's in the traditional community. The accusation of bewitchment in this case might have thus served as a strategy to interpret the situation in such way as to avert socially damaging consequences (cf. Argyrou 1993, 267; Hesz 2007, 31–32), in this case for the father-in-law at least.

Not to be successful in domestic work, especially for women who were under strong family and social pressure to work hard, was considered intolerable behaviour and inevitably ruined their social position (cf. Mencej 2015 a). When the results of their work were assessed as insufficient, attributing their ineffectiveness to witchcraft seemed a suitable way to explain it, as is evident from the following narrative:

One girl was reaping, without success. Nothing, nothing was... the more she was hurrying on with the reaping, the less she ended up doing. Well, she went to reap a small parcel for three days. And then she finally noticed the toad. And then I don't know who told her that she should grab it by the leg and stick it into the ground with a stake, to stab it with a stake and stick the toad to the ground. And she did this. In the afternoon, toward the evening. And the next day the neighbour was bound there where she stuck that toad. (125)

The threat of nocturnal witches could also be evoked intentionally by workers in order to have an excuse to stop working after long hours of exhausting work:

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. 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)

In addition, witchcraft discourse could be strategically employed in discouraging people from leaving their homes at night to do illicit things, like meeting others’ wives or men, thieving and so one (cf. Stewart 1991). It was also employed as an educational means in the upbringing of children, to serve a pedagogic function of scaring children from wandering through the forests at night (cf. similarly in Lindow 1978, 44; Widdowson 1978, 35; Devlin 1987, 77):

F: Did they ever scare you, when you were young, not to walk around at night?
I1: Oh, you bet they did!
F: What did they scare you with?
I2: Well, that there are witches, right?
I1: That witches walk around... (127)
Conclusion

To understand misfortune in terms of witchcraft certainly helped people to explain it, and thus find some consolation and release of their tensions. Moreover, interpretations within the framework of witchcraft discourse helped people understand, and even forgive others’ intolerable behaviour, united them in the struggle against witchcraft and thus redefined their relationship. As long as witchcraft discourse was prevalent and had enough support in a community, the application of witchcraft discourse could be used strategically for various reasons and with various intentions, not always as a conscious, but rather as an intuitive and spontaneous act which provided people with a communicative framework within which they could offer an acceptable interpretation of a situation or an action to the public when socially damaging consequences needed to be averted. However, when bewitchment narratives did not relate a personal misfortune but were based on the gossip of others, these could be intentionally applied to manipulate public opinion (Hesz 2007, 32). As rumours and gossip are constitutive of, rather than simply reflect, social reality, they could be effectively used in competitive situations against other members of the community, to forward and protect an individual’s interests, or they will be employed in order to redefine a social hierarchy, lowering the social prestige of another member and strengthening one’s own position in the community (cf. Bleek 1976, 527, 540; Gustavsson 1979, 49; Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999, 175; Stewart and Strathern 2004, 33–d35, 56).

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Informants:
4/ a woman, born 1933.
11/ a man, a farmer.
15/
I1: a woman, born 1928, a housewife.
I2: a man, born in 1949 (her son).
25/ I1: a woman, born 1938, a housewife.
53/ A woman, born 1955, a housewife.
68/ female, b. 1941, finished six years of primary school, wife of I1.
79/ a woman, born 1923.
95/ a woman, born 1932.
125/ a woman, born 1925.
127/
I1: a woman.
I2: a woman.
142/ a woman, a hairdresser.