

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN ACCUSATIONS OF WITCHCRAFT: THE CASE OF EASTERN SLOVENIA

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Abstract: The paper deals with the role of gender in the context of witchcraft. It focuses on the situation in a rural area in eastern Slovenia, where the author and her students researched witchcraft in 2000 and 2001. The meaning of a gender in witchcraft accusations is presented with respect to various levels and types of witch (social level – neighborhood witches, village witches; supernatural level – night witches; counterwitches). Among neighborhood witches (about whom people believe that they perform some kind of magic: placing eggs etc. in the hope that they will hurt neighbors; intentional praise), women are typically assumed to be guilty; men appear only in the subcategory of people with evil eye. Similar holds for all the subcategories of village witches, except for those who earned their reputation because of the assumption of their possession of a book of magic (where men predominate). Night witches (in the form of lights or vague presences which make it difficult for people to find their way) are always female (they are spoken about using the feminine gender; when they are recognized as people from the village, they are always women). In contrast, the ratio of men to women among counterwitches, to whom people turned for help against witches, rises dramatically. The most influential counterwitch whom people visited in this area was a men. The relationship between the sexes can also be seen through an analysis of (migratory) legends about witches whereby many of them reveal a concealed misogyny.

Key words: witchcraft, Slovenia, gender relations, folk religion and beliefs, field research.

Introduction

Throughout the entire period of the witch craze, which began approximately in the middle of the 15th century and lasted in some places into the 18th century,¹ the number of victims of the trials in the majority of countries was as a rule heavily weighted towards women. Men were usually, as Kieckhefer says, merely “second class” suspects, generally accused because they were related to female suspects (Kieckhefer 1994: 39–40). Thus according to the findings of English historian Alan Macfarlane, of the 291 people accused of witchcraft in Essex between 1560 and 1650, only 23 were men (of whom 11 were married to accused women) (Macfarlane 1970: 160). In England as a whole the accused in witchcraft trials were 70% women (according to other data 90%), and the majority of male suspects were related to the accused women (Simpson 1996: 7; Briggs 2002: 226). In Hungary and Denmark 90% of the accused were women (Henningesen 1982: 135; Briggs 2002: 226). In Germany and Scotland 80% of the accused were female (Larner 1984: 61). In Slovenia 68.6% of the accused were female, while only 12.5% were male (the sex of the other accused people is unknown) (Košir 1995: 188).

On the other hand, Briggs states that men were not such rare victims as it would seem, even though it remains true that most accused witches were women – in the period from 1450 to 1750 some 40,000 – 50,000 executions are supposed to have occurred in Europe as a whole, of whom male victims are supposed to have accounted for 20–25% (Briggs 2002: 6). One of the countries in which men were actually the majority (90%) of those accused of witchcraft and where the word for witch (*galdramaður*) implicated men was Iceland (Hastrup 1990: 227–228; Aðalsteinsson 1996: 49), 60% of the accused in Estonia and 50% in Finland were also men (Briggs 2002: 226). A larger number of men than women were accused in the 17th century in Russia and northern Livonia under Swedish rule, but a large proportion of them were healers (Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999: 157); men constituted the majority in several parts of France too (Briggs 2002: 17). In some countries or regions gender was not a significant factor in the accusations, such as e.g. in the majority of France witchcraft had no obvious link with gender (Briggs 2002: 225).

In this paper, however, I am not going to focus on the meaning of gender in witchcraft accusations in the period of witch craze, and I am not going to approach the topic from historical perspective. I’m rather interested in researching the meaning of gender in witchcraft accusations in the area where witchcraft beliefs still persist, even at the beginning of 21st century. The aim of this paper is

¹ The last witch was put to death in Poland in 1793 (Košir 1995: 235).

therefore to establish whether the gender and the relationship between genders as such have any particular role in the accusations within a system of witchcraft in village communities or not.

Slovenia – case study

The fieldwork was done in a rural area of eastern Slovenia on the Croatian border. The region where we were doing the fieldwork is a hilly, mostly remote and difficult to reach area with poor traffic connections. During our research the people were involved mainly in subsistence agriculture, particularly with wine growing and fruit growing, and herding. There is practically no industry in the area, the farms are small, the land divided into small parcels. High unemployment and poverty are predominant, owing to which many even before the First World War, as well as later on, went abroad to look for work, as a result of which the majority of the population are elderly. It is one of the poorest areas in Slovenia and the suicide rate is extremely high. The inhabitants of the area are mostly Catholic.

The research was done together with the students from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana, in the period of 2000–2001. We conducted more than 150 interviews with inhabitants, mostly with the older population who told us about the experiences involving witches particularly during their childhoods, i.e. up to around World War II, sometimes even up to seventies. However, although people talked about their experiences in the past tense,² they nevertheless talked about their *own* experiences and many of them clearly still believed in the power of witches. Witchcraft definitely turned out to be the *dominant tradition* (cf. Honko 1962: 127–128) in the region.

Intermittent field research with students, without an extended period of residence within the researched community, did not allow for a deep exploration of the social relations among the villagers – and, since the experiences and accusations were more or less the matter of the past, even if the beliefs in witchcraft have lingered on, we couldn't hope to penetrate the social context of accusations, even if we stayed there for a longer time. But even if we were not involved into situations, in which suspicions, accusations, fear, avenges etc. took place, one could feel and comprehend such social relationships behind the words, explanations, doubts, and confessions expressed by people (for more on social relations in the context of witchcraft accusations see Mencej 2006: 41–186; 2012).

² On the use of the past tense in witchcraft beliefs see Favret-Saada 1980: 64–65.

Terms

At first glance the research of village witchcraft in Slovenia evinces a similar picture of the relations between male and female witchcraft suspects to that seen in the period of the witch craze in most of Europe. Even though the local inhabitants do have expressions for male witches, as there are several terms that are masculine equivalents (*coprnik*, *cuprjak*, *cuprek*, *cupernk*, and *coprjek*) for the usual term for the female witch (*coprnica*)³, people still use the feminine gender as a rule in their narratives about witchcraft. Only when they were asked directly whether they knew of any male witches did we receive six positive, but also a full twenty negative responses.⁴

*F:*⁵ *Who were the witches?*

I: *Who were they? **Just women. Not men.***

F: *What, there were no male witches?*

I: *No, no, no.*

F: *Just women?*

I: *We women are wickeder. /laughs/ Women have a more evil power. Their power is more evil, you know. So they can use it. (56)*

F: *What about male witches, were there any? Or just female witches?*

I: ***I only know about female ones** /laughs/, **I don't know about any male ones.***

I know this, that there were only hags. Yes, just female witches, yes. I don't know that there were any male witches. Jesus, all sorts of things went on. (60)

Levels of witchcraft

However, it soon became clear that the witchcraft in the area was not a unified system, that the word “witch” had many different meanings and that there were different levels of witchcraft and different categories of witches. In this paper I will specifically argue that it is precisely the *level of witchcraft* (and the

³ The word comes from the German *zaubern* = to perform magic.

⁴ The sex of the informant was not significant. Not all our informants commented on the gender.

⁵ The letter F here and below refers to the folklorist (researcher), and I to the informant (see the List of the informants below). Due to the delicate topic I do not disclose either the exact location of the fieldwork or the names of the informants. The language has been partly modified through both transcription and translation; unfortunately, most of the nuances did not survive translation.

category of witch), within which a certain person functioned as a witch, i.e. was labelled as such, which is of primary importance for understanding the role of gender in witchcraft.

Let us first see what witchcraft in the area of fieldwork actually entails. On the basis of the materials collected it was possible to more or less clearly distinguish between several layers of witchcraft, which partially overlapped, but could still be more or less clearly differentiated. Each of the categories of witches had its own function and its own specific properties. They also differed with regard to the manner of defense and the attitude of people towards the various types of witches, and finally the discourses about the various types of witches also differed (cf. Mencej 2006; 2008).

The first, social layer of witchcraft, concerned social tensions within the community, particularly between neighbors: here I refer especially to those accusations which directly affected relations between people. The main driving force in the background of some harm that was done was considered to be envy, jealousy, and the wickedness of a neighbor who I called a “neighborhood witch”; the tensions here were limited to the relationship between neighbors. The second category of witch, still in the “social layer”, but with somewhat different characteristics, were the so-called “village witches”, who had the reputation of being witches more or less throughout the village and mainly had the role of the scapegoat within the community (Mencej 2012).

The second layer of witchcraft should be distinguished from the first in our research area, since in contrast to the first layer it concerned tensions with the “supernatural world”: here I refer especially to all allegedly supernatural experiences, which usually occurred at night or at the transitions from day to night and night to day, most often in a liminal, dangerous place (at the edge of or outside the village, in the forest, near water) which people as a rule interpreted as encounters (result of the encounter) with witches. These “witches” I termed “night witches”; they were reminiscent of demonic, supernatural beings and were only occasionally explicitly connected with concrete individuals from the village (Mencej 2007; 2007/2008).

It is therefore obviously not possible to talk about gender in witchcraft accusations in general. In order to understand the meaning of gender and gender relations on each particular level and within each particular category of witches / witchcraft we should, instead, scrutinize each level and each category of witches / witchcraft separately.

Social layer – neighborhood witch

The neighborhood witch was usually accused that in the desire to damage someone's crops or livestock, she or he assumingly buried in a neighbor's or villager's field, under a threshold, in a barn etc. various objects – most often eggs and bones. Other methods of causing harm also originated from lack of control over the destructive power of envy. The general consensus among the inhabitants was also that it was possible to cause harm just by giving intentional praise (especially of small children or animals). Beside releasing itself through 'evil speech', envy could also work through an 'evil eye'. This method of doing harm was limited only to a certain number of individuals who had such powers, and did harm mainly to small children and animals.⁶

In the context of tensions between neighbors, women clearly predominated and men appeared rarely in this role⁷ – it was usually assumed that it was a *female* neighbor who buried an object and it was a woman who usually praised a neighbor's child or domestic animals.

I: Oh my, yes..., oh my, yes! My mother and father were ploughing, and they found an egg beneath a furrow, deep down they found a totally fresh egg. And I said: Maybe a hen put it there? And they said that people buried eggs too!

F: Who was supposed to have done it?

*I: Yes, those **women who are envious** or something, so that eggs or chickens wouldn't hatch or something. (84)*

When people turned for help to a counterwitches and they identified the witch, it was their most usual suggestion that the witch was a *female* neighbour who buried an evil object in their property.

Women were those who were always accused of evil speech (intentional praise) too.

There is only one category where one could find a higher number of men in this layer – this was the category of people with the **evil eye**:

⁶ Only very seldom (a few instances) we encountered also evildoing through an 'evil gift', i.e. a gift which was supposed to have harmful effects on an individual, or through an 'evil touch', the consequence of which was the illness or death of animals.

⁷ Same stands for the Alto Minho region in Portugal: women there are accused more frequently than men, as their envy is supposed to be stronger (de Pina-Cabral 1986: 178, 180).

I1: When those little pigs, right, if one of them saw them, they would just spin around.

F: The pig started spinning around in circles?

I2: Yes, yes.

*F: After **he** had looked at it?*

I1: Yes.

I2: Yes, of course.

I1: Cause they mustn't, they say, see them. (63)

*I: They used to say that, yes. There was someone named L. here, but mother didn't allow **him** to see the pigs. When he saw the pigs, they got sick. Well, if that's really true. I don't know.*

F: Was he one of those who could harm the pigs or what?

I: Well, mother always said so, right? Also when he saw cows, they didn't have any more milk. But that's a damned lie, right? Those things used to happen, right? Nowadays there's no more of that, right? (82)

Social layer – village witch

The second subcategory of witches, still 'social' beings, but with somewhat different characteristics, were the so-called '*village witches*', i.e. women who had the reputation of being a witch throughout the entire community. The reasons for accusations of neighborhood witch and a village witch partly overlapped⁸, however, there were also other, more common reasons for the existence of the reputation of being a village witch which were not directly connected with the evildoing of such women which was born of the envy of their neighbors. One of the categories of village witch were women who were said to possess unusually large amounts of wealth (more precisely: unusually large amounts of milk or butter) in relation to their circumstances, i.e. the number of cows they own. Another reason for women acquiring such a reputation was, as appeared in a number of cases, also their involvement with healing, herbalism and similar.

On the other hand such labels were often applied to women who simply conformed to the idea of a stereotypical witch. When people talked about witches in

⁸ The line between an envious neighbour and a village witch is not always easy to determine; at least in some cases it is better to speak of different levels of reputation, which can gradually increase from conflicts between two families or individuals to a wider levelling of accusations among the community. The same evildoing which was ascribed to envious and jealous neighbours was sometimes also ascribed to the women who had the reputation of being village witches in this area.

general, they described their external appearance stereotypically: it was a *woman*, who was supposed to be old, ugly, filthy, dirty, with a large, hooked nose, warts, thin, she had an evil look with the eyebrows that meet, often she was physically handicapped, dressed in a long black dress and a shawl which covered her body and face etc. This description matched the actual village witches' appearance perfectly. However, such an abstract stereotype of the physical appearance of a witch corresponded (at least to a substantial degree) only with the village witch; in no way can it be connected with the 'neighborhood witch', much less with the night witch.

In terms of behavior, the village witches were described as quarrelsome, inquisitive *women*, who did not conform to feminine standards (one of them, for instance, "smoked a pipe like a man"), they were asocial etc. Their social status was low, they were usually poor, solitary, had no or few social contacts, usually lived alone at the edge of the village (cf. also Macfarlane 1970: 158–164; Lerner 1984: 50; Hall 1989: 191; Schöck 1978: 117; Petzoldt 1989: 97–98).

Only in rare cases did the designation of village witch refer to a *man*. In the case that a man would earn such a reputation, his description would correspond to the physical (he had a limp and stooped) and social (he cursed the cross = forbidden behavior) stereotype of a witch that applied in that area (as well as elsewhere in Europe):

F: But were witches only women, or men as well?

*I: There was one man here, who walked with **a limp**, and **was stooped**, like that; before, when I didn't have any children yet, I knew him... They also said that he knew how to cast spells, [and] that they were afraid of him. He drank like a fish, too... And he went up to the cross, and looked up at the cross up there, and **cursed** ... (58)*

A more usual way of earning such a reputation for men was through their relationship with a woman who bore that designation:

*F: **What about that man who you said also cast spells**, did everybody else know?*

*I: Yes, yes, there was one, yes, a man, and about a woman [they knew about (her) too]. **They were brother and sister**. They knew how to do that /.../*

F: Did they live together?

I: One on one end [of the village], one on the other, right /laughs/, yes, yes. Right around here, yes. And they knew about themselves, each about the other, right? (2)

However, in one subcategory of village witch the number of male suspect jumps dramatically. These are people who earned their reputation due to their possessing of a book of magic, in our research area in particular Kolomon's Blessing, in short, Kolomon.⁹ People ascribed ownership of this book significantly more often to men than to women. As many as nine of our informants mentioned male owners of this book and only four women, and of those four only two narratives referred to particular women from the village, while the other two referred more abstractly to witches in general.

*I: That's why they have that Kolomon, mostly priests have that. **My father had a Kolomon**, but he was smart and before he knew, he hid it in a drawer or burned it. Then one time someone from the castle came and he had somehow found out that we had a Kolomon. He told mother that he would pay us a lot for the book, but mother said that upon her life there was no such book in our house. He probably burned it because of the children. (35)*

But even when someone's father or other male relative had a book of magic, the reputation that they earned by possessing this book was passed on to his female descendants and/or relatives:

*F: So you say that **Fanika's father** was supposed to have had special powers?*

I: He was supposed to have a Kolomon, the Kolomon book, they said, right? That book.

F: Where is that book now?

⁹ Magical books were known all over Europe: In France it was *Le Dragon Noir*, *Le Dragon Rouge*, *Le petit Albert*, *Le grand Albert* (Favret-Saada 1980: 133–135; Devlin 1987: 165–171), *Cyprianus* and *Henrik Smidth* in Denmark (Henningsen 1982: 131; Rockwell 1978: 90–92), a *Book of St. Cyprian* in Portugal (Rockwell 1978; Pina-Cabral 1986: 178), *Double Ambrosius* in Belgium (de Blécourt 1999: 189), *Black Book of Magic* and the *Sixth or Seventh Book of Moses* in Germany, Norway and the Netherlands (Schöck 1978: 101–103; de Blécourt 1999: 189); subsequently the *Black Book of Magic* was composed from these books (Mathisen 1993: 21–22). In Iceland books called *Rauðskinna* and two different books called *Gráskinna* were known (Hastrup 1990: 204–205).

*I: Yes, now they /.../, I don't know if [she] had that book, but she said that she had never seen it and she didn't know anything about it, **but people said that she did..., that she was a witch.** (47)*

F: Was there any man or woman in the village who was considered something special whom you were afraid of or whom you thought of as kind of strange, or who had done anything bad to any of the villagers?

I: Yes, /laughs/ you know, when they spoke about Katra, that she knows how to do it?

I2: Who?

I: The mother of that Marica?

I2: Grandmother, grandmother.

I: Marica's grandmother?

*I2: And they said that **she knew how**, and that on top of that [**her**] **uncle had some kind of Kolomon book**, they said. (48)*

A counterwitch

In the case of long lasting misfortunes, people often turned for help to a **counterwitch** (cunning folk, unwitcher, witchbuster), sometimes also just called "a witch". This would be a fortune-teller, whose role was not restricted to telling fortunes, as the name implies, but included – or was mainly – the identification of witches, protection against their actions and elimination of the harmful effects; and, if necessary, redirecting their evildoing back towards the witch. People believed that going to such a specialist was necessary above all at times when the source of the evil was unknown or unidentified. By far the most commonly stated reasons for visiting a counterwitch was the dying, becoming ill or loss of appetite of livestock, and cows not giving milk. Frequently the duration of such difficulties was emphasized: the pigs kept dying, their livestock never succeeded, everything has been going wrong in the house for a long time etc.¹⁰

Although the suspects were preponderantly female, the situation regarding *counterwitches* was considerably different. Our informants and / or their friends or relatives about whom they told us turned to women for help against witches in seventeen cases and to men in fourteen. These were, of course, only described cases, which in fact do not say much about how many male and female fortune-tellers who functioned as counterwitches actually worked in the area during the approximate time that our research covered (the middle and second half of the

¹⁰ Similar has been established in France (Favret-Saada 1980: 6).

20th c.) – the informants rarely provided actual data, i.e. the name of such a specialist, and the place was often described only vaguely. Based on testimony about counterwitches where data was given about the area of operation of a counterwitch, people obviously mentioned 5 men and 7 or 8 women who worked as counterwitches in that area. However, the situation regarding the roles of men and women changes further when we know that the fortune-teller who clearly enjoyed the best reputation in the area and was by far the best-known and patronized, was a man.¹¹ While others had merely local influence and were considered to be some sort of “on-call” fortune-tellers, this fortune-teller (and to a certain extent another male fortune-teller from Croatia) played by far the most important role in identifying witches in the area.

Other research of witchcraft in Europe has produced similar results – everywhere the ratio of men to women, when speaking about counterwitches, drastically increases on the male side (in comparison with the gender structure of witches proper). In certain regions where counterwitches have been systematically researched in the 20th century, it has been shown that the majority of them are men. The same difference can be seen in the Alto Minho region in Portugal: while witches proper are always women, counterwitches can be women or men (de Pina-Cabral 1986). In the Spanish province of La Coruña people more often turned to “wise men” than to women (Rey-Henningsen 1994: 200). Inge Schöck writes that the majority of counterwitches in southern Germany, where she did her fieldwork, were men (Schöck 1978: 141). Furthermore the role of counterwitches is also sometimes performed by Catholic priests (de Blécourt 1999: 165), by definition men, which of course tilts the male-female ratio even further towards men. During our fieldwork, however, we only came across such a case once.

Supernatural level – night witch

Witches in the layer were most often presented in the form of lights or as an invisible presence which people identified as witches only after having experienced unpleasant consequences (having been led astray, having their way blocked, wandering, having been transferred to a different place). The witches’ gender is therefore hard to determine, however, people always spoke about them in the feminine plural (which in Slovene can be seen from the case marking),

¹¹ This fortune-teller worked in the period between the wars. However, before him that function had been performed by his mother and after his death during the war it was taken over by his wife, who worked for many years after the Second World War.

e.g. “coprnice so me nosile”, “coprnice so me vodile” (“witches led me astray”). Also, whenever the night witches were subsequently identified as people from the village, they were recognised exclusively as women.

*I: Well, it happened like this, when I was down in K. Down here they had..., well, there was a stall, a barn, but it was empty, they had already died off. But, he had servants, hired hands. They had a lot of livestock down there. And they went into the stalls to the cows. And there was one nearby. At that time there were those witches, those hired hands or servants, well, hands as we would call them, well, they went, and they led him astray. Through the night, until the light of day. But, they are all dead by now, they and also she who was a witch, are dead. Everyone is already dead. I still knew them. And then came the light of day, and they let him go. **But he recognised her, that witch.** Yes, he went after her... They had even taken his boots off. But he went after her and said to her: “I recognised you. Do that one more time and I’ll set you on fire and burn you to a husk.” /.../ And after that there was peace. (115)*

Whenever people described nighttime encounters with witches in human form, which was seldom – as apparitions who were washing clothes by the water or at a well – they were always female.

F: Did the people here ever talk about witches, did you ever hear anything?

I: Yes, sometimes you would hear... about things.

F: What did they say?

*I: My husband said that he once brought piglets to a fair. Then in that manor he saw **three women**, who ... there was no water anywhere, but he heard them washing something. And ... they warned him that if he betrayed them he wouldn’t be able to leave the house after the sun went down. Well, then, then he didn’t. He was afraid to tell anyone. Then, after those women had died, then he said that **she, and she, and she** /smacks her fist on the table three times/ was [a witch]. (83)*

On the other hand, it was clear that it was mostly men who had such night experiences with witches. Nevertheless the narratives about these experiences were to a large extent spread further mainly by women. While men were “the subjects” of such memorates, women loved to tell them: they spoke about the experiences

of their fathers, husbands, neighbours etc.¹² The prevailing proportion of men with such experiences can be explained by the fact that men left home more often than women and therefore more easily entered the “border” area which according to the tradition triggered supernatural experiences. They could also well use such a story in cases when they needed an excuse for returning home late due to drinking, partying, cheating on their wives etc. (cf. Mencej 2007/2008)

However, these narratives nevertheless expose more about the relations between the genders than one might conclude at first glance. There are indications that memorates about nighttime experiences could also be some sort of channel for releasing repressed sexual tension (in some of them there were sexual allusions which are otherwise absent), whereas men were usually presented as victims and women as the “guilty” party:

*I: Dammit. /Laughs/ 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! /laughs/ 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 /Laughs/, 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 washing, so that you won't be so greasy. They bathed him all over his body, and they /Laughs/ **they took all his clothes off and then they whipped him with thorn branches, he said, with sticks they beat him***

¹² Yet it should be acknowledged that the majority of our informants were female, therefore we cannot state with certainty that women actually had a more important role in spreading these memorates.

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)

*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 /laughs/.*

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)

Migratory legends

In addition to these two layers of witchcraft we should also mention various migratory and local legends about witches (e.g. the Witch Riding legend – cf. Hand 1973; the Following the Witch legend – Christiansen 1958: ML 3045 etc.), which were told in this area, but for which I argued that they were not really a part of the complex of beliefs about witches. They were not supported by accounts or personal experiences (and were not told as memorates) and people usually considered them to be more or less some sort of amusing anecdotes (cf. Mencej 2006: 243–262). In some of these narratives it is definitely possible to discern a concealed misogyny – men beat their wives and daughters to teach them a lesson etc.

I: This bloke married this girl, right? Then, when they were married, in those times there was, well, no such thing as getting divorced or anything. The one you got was the one you had (laughs). Then he heard, when they were married, that she was a witch's daughter. So then he wanted to see how he could get her on her own to start doing like her mother. He said: "You know, we don't have any milk or anything," he said, "I don't know, so that we could arrange something ... Is there any way that milk could come from somewhere, so that you could make

cheese?”, see? And she said: “Yes, if you want, I can show you.” Then she set up a large pot in the kitchen ... /sighs/, and said: “Now follow me!” Then they went one behind the other around the pot. And she said: “I believe in this pot, but I do not believe in God, I believe in this pot, but I do not believe in God.” /laughs/ And he said: “I do not believe in this pot, but I do believe in God!” He was the opposite, see? Then a whole pile of cheese fell from the ceiling into the pot. The whole pot was full. ‘Cause she knew how to do that, see? Then he realized that she really was a witch, see? **And then he grabbed a stick, and he beat her hard...** And he said: “Never do anything like that again!” /laughs/¹³ (59)

Ní Dhuibhne wrote that based on an analysis of symbols, certain legends can be interpreted as an expression of the war between the sexes, like for instance *The Old Woman as a Hare*, the Irish version of the typical migratory legend *The Witch that was Hurt* (ML 3055). The legend tells of an old woman who turned herself into a hare and went into another person’s barn in order to steal milk – a man followed her and at the last moment, just before she crawled into her hole and back into her own house he shot her. When he enters the old woman’s house, he sees her lying on the bed wounded – in the same place that he shot the hare.¹⁴ Houses, holes in the wall, broken windows, milk jugs, and milk (the elements that appear in the legend) have a clear feminine symbolism, as ní Dhuibhne argues, while bullets, rifles, dogs, shovels, in other words everything which is used against women in the legend, are standard phallic (male) symbols. In his interpretation, this legend could therefore be read as the man’s attempt to rape or violate the old woman (ní Dhuibhne 1993: 79–81).

¹³ Similar legends are found elsewhere in Slovenia: in Velenje in the thirties e.g. Mlinšek recorded the following legend about the causing of a hailstorm, which in its structure is very similar to the one we recorded in our fieldwork: *A man suspected that his wife was a witch and wanted to make sure of it – his wife told him to bring a pot of coals, set it on a chair in the middle of the house and recited some magic words, which had to be repeated twice: “I believe in this pot, but I do not believe in God.” When they had recited it three times, it began to hail. The man beat his wife hard and forbade her to do it again.* (Hudales – Stropnik 1991: 81, m. 321)

¹⁴ The typical variant goes as follows: “Long ago the people used to turn themselves into hares by witchcraft and go around from house to house sucking the milk from the cows. These people could not be done away with only by shooting them with a crooked sixpence. I know a woman who turned herself into a hare. Her name was Mrs. Hutchinson, a Protestant woman who lived in the township of Ryeforth, Co. Cavan. She went to my grandfathers’, Ennie Goldrick RIP, and sucked the milk from the cows. Grandfather saw her; he got his gun, loaded it with a crooked sixpence, fired at the hare and hit her on the head. She ran away, and he ran after her to her house, where he found the woman in bed with her head bleeding. He made her promise never to do that again and she did not.” (ní Dhuibhne 1993: 77)

In the majority of Europe we find legends about shooting witches in animal form, and – as de Blécourt also points out – shooting was always considered a male domain (de Blécourt 1999: 173). Although in the area that we researched the typical belief was that it was the Devil (thus having more of a male than a female connotation) that turns himself into a hare which bullets cannot kill, we can find parallels to the legend which ní Dhuibhne cites in narratives about a female witch who turned herself into a toad and stole milk in that form (such legends are very widespread in this area):

*I: Yes, I can tell you one. There was a neighbor here, but she has been dead for a long time. She lived down in the center, she was alone. Every morning a toad would come to me. And there it was on the threshold again. “Well, what am I to do with the Devil?” And father said: “Be quiet, heat the stove, burn the toad. You mustn’t say any words. **Tomorrow morning you will see the woman who is a toad, who is a witch, in bandages.**” And it was true, she was all bandaged, she was all burned. And father foretold it.*

F: You burned it and the woman was really burned the next day?

*I: Yes, **that woman, who was turned into a toad.** That’s what father said.*

/.../ Father said that you’ll see, tomorrow you’ll see her bandaged up. And I did see her like that.

F: And she turned herself into a toad?

I: That’s what they said, that she turned herself. You aren’t allowed to say anything when you burn them.

F: Did you see how the toad died?

I: I didn’t see anything, I put it on the fire, and burned it. She burned up. And on the next day I saw that woman, how she was bandaged, and all burned. (116)

However, more frequently than burning witches in the shape of toads, we encountered a habit that was at least until recently very widespread, which was to impale toads on pitchforks, sharp sticks or stakes. These in accordance with the above Freudian interpretation could be understood as phallic symbols, but it should be pointed out that this was not done only by men, but by women as well. Of course this fact, in view of the role of women in supporting male stereotypes of “real women” and the enmity of other women towards those who did not correspond to that role (cf. Lerner 1984: 61–62, 83–86), doesn’t change anything.

I: Each witch had her own toad. And sometimes, when they crawled across the threshold of the barn a lot, well, they said so, my father said many times, that's a witch who had such a toad.

F: And what did you do with the toads?

*I: Nothing, **we stuck them on the pitchforks. Or on stakes.** And they dried up. Yeah.*

F: And then, when you stuck the toads on the pitchforks...

I: That it's like you had stabbed a witch's belly.¹⁵ /laughs/ (119)

Conclusion

In general, therefore, women were the most often suspected practitioners of witchcraft in the rural area of eastern Slovenia where the fieldwork was done. However, after a detailed analysis of the data, differences in gender appear with respect to the different (sub)categories of witches. While women predominated among neighborhood witches (except in the subcategory of people with the evil eye), the category of village witches includes a larger number of male suspects, especially within the subcategory of those who had earned their reputation by possessing a book of magic. The ratio of men to women – in comparison with the preceding categories – increases dramatically in the group of counterwitches (fortune-tellers). In memorates about nighttime encounters with witches most often men appear as victims of witches' attack, while witches are always spoken about in the feminine plural. When they are identified as particular people from the village, it always turned out that they are women.

Concealed misogyny could be furthermore deduced through an analysis of memorates about encounters with witches as well as in certain legends, which were not really a part of the witchcraft system in this area. Nevertheless, the fact that people kept telling them indicates that they must have had a function in the community. In certain cases at least it was obvious that one of their basic functions was precisely to release feelings of hatred towards women and the "battle of the sexes", as ní Dhuibhne put it, could well find its way into some of these narratives.

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¹⁵ Our informants often told of witches then having holes in their aprons, by which one could identify them.

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- A List of Informants:*
- 2: A man, born in 1928, a miner and a doorkeeper. Taped in July 2000.
- 35: A woman, born in 1930, finished six classes of primary school, lives alone. Taped in October 2000.
- 38: A man, born in 1912. Taped in October 2000.
- 47: A woman, born in 1928, a farmer. Taped in October 2000.
- 48: I1: A woman, born in 1929, finished six classes of primary school; I2: A man, born in 1923, finished primary school. Taped in October 2000.
- 56: A man, born in 1932, farmer. Taped in October 2000.
- 58: A woman, born in 1923, a maidservant and housewife. Taped in July 2000.
- 59: A man, born in 1923. Taped in October 2000.
- 60: A woman, born in 1931, a housewife. Taped in October 2000.
- 63: I1: A woman, born in 1930, a housewife. I2: A man, born in 1925. Taped in October 2000.
- 82: A man, born in 1921. Taped in October 2000.
- 83: A woman, born in 1941 in Croatia, married to Slovenia, a widow. Taped in March 2001.
- 84: A woman, born in 1919, a housewife. Taped in March 2001.
- 115: A man, born in 1921. Taped in March 2001.
- 116: A man, born in 1933, a housekeeper. Taped in March 2001.
- 119: A woman, born in 1934. Taped in March 2001.
- 130: A man, born in 1950, a farmer and a miller. Taped in July 2001.

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Úloha genderu v obvinění z čarodějnictví: případ východního Slovinska

Resumé: Článek se věnuje úloze genderu v kontextu čarodějnictví. Soustředí se na venkovské prostředí východního Slovinska, kde autorka a její studenti v letech 2000 a 2001 studovali čarodějnictví. Význam genderu v obviněních z čarodějnictví je prezentován ve vztahu k různým úrovním a typům čarodějnictví (rovina sociální – čarodějnice ze sousedství, vesnická čarodějnice; rovina nadpřirozená – noční čarodějnice, obrana proti čarodějnictví). Z praktikování čarodějnictví v sousedství (magické úkony, jako například pokládání vajec na taková místa a takovým způsobem, že mohou magicky poškodit sousedy; cílené vynášení vlastních schopností) jsou obvykle obviňovány ženy; muži se objevují pouze v podskupině osob se zlým pohledem. Totéž platí pro čarodějnictví v rovině vesnice, s výjimkou jedinců, kteří si pověst čarodějů vysloužili údajným vlastnictvím magické knihy (v této kategorii převažují muži). Čarodějnictví provozované v noci (v podobě světla nebo zjevení, která zabraňují lidem najít správnou cestu) je vždy přisuzováno ženám (hovoří se o nich vždy v ženském rodě a pokud jsou obyvateli vesnice poznány, jedná se vždy o ženy). Na druhé straně poměr mužů a žen mezi osobami bojujícími proti čarodějnictví, k nimž se poškození obracejí o pomoc, dramaticky narůstá. Nejvlivnějším bojovníkem proti čarodějnictví byl muž. Tento genderový aspekt je také patrný v analýze pověstí o čarodějnicích, které často obsahují skrytý misogynní prvek.

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