

WHICH WOMAN IS A WITCH? THE STEREOTYPIC NOTIONS ABOUT WITCHES IN CROATIAN TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

LUKA ŠEŠO

Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti

Odsjek za etnologiju

10000 Zagreb, Andrije Hebranga 1

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The results of a recent field research showed that the breaking of taboos or social, moral or religious values, causes women to “become” witches. It all starts with a rumor and gossip about some ugly, unmarried, divorced, promiscuous, old or too pretty women in the village. But they are still not branded as witches until a certain negative incident or misfortunate event occurs. Then those women next-door, who were previously marked as undesirable, are accused for the disaster and the accusers are hence resolved of all responsibility.

Key words: *traditional beliefs, witches, Croatia, Dalmatian hinterland, modernity*

The title of this paper may serve as one of many possible answers to the question Elliot Rose raised in his book *A Razor for a Goat*. In the first chapter titled *Which Witch is Which?* Rose asks the question of the meaning of the word “witch” and should this word have a meaning at all because “everything written about them [witches] is so vague, contradictory, or conjectural, we have not even a steady peg to hang the word ‘witch’ on. In default of such a peg, the word is free to wander, and does wander, among a bewildering variety of mental associations.” (Rose 1989:3). Before and since Rose’s book numerous scholars have tried to explain or sometimes just describe what or who can be identified by this word. Today I will try to do something similar by using ethnographic data, which I gathered during my recent fieldwork in the Dalmatian hinterland.¹ Therefore, for this occasion I would like to show today’s belief in witches and *mòras* in

¹ This paper is based on my periodical field researches conducted in the Dalmatian hinterland. In past several years (2003 – 2008) I contacted 42 informants from almost

the Dalmatian hinterland and try to understand why certain women are accused of witchcraft. While doing so, I will be guided by the analysis of two scholars who have, in my opinion, managed to adequately portray the notion of a witch. The first analysis was done by Brian P. Levack who stressed that in early modern Europe the notion of a witch was strongly influenced by the sex, age, marital status, social and economic status and personality of certain women who did not fit the expected social norms (Levack 1995:125–160). Similar conclusions were drawn by Mirjam Mencej who used the same type of data I will employ in my investigation while she was researching the contemporary traditional beliefs in witches in west Slovenia (Mencej 2006:111–117).

Indeed, at the very beginning of collecting the data on the existence, appearance, actions and meaning of supernatural beings it was clear that in the Dalmatian hinterland we have groups and individuals who still tell vivid stories, and some even believe in supernatural beings. A witch is the most frequent of supernatural beings mentioned by almost every informant. It is believed that a witch can kill persons and domestic animals or make them ill, mostly using her “evil eye”. She causes storms and hail, destroys crops and can transform into an animal, usually black or nocturnal. The demonological notion of sabbath is also present in these beliefs, therefore, interlocutors often talked about gatherings of witches on top of a mountain or in the woods. It is believed that the witch is a person born in black or red caul (placenta) and when she gets older she obtains evil supernatural powers, which she uses to hurt people. She is usually described as an old, ugly, blind (having strange eyes), and an unattractive woman from the community (from the interlocutor’s or nearby village). Everyone knows that such a person is a (potential) witch, and she is usually called so among

every part of the region including the Bukovica region, Ravni Kotari, Zagora, Sinjska and Imotska counties. The research was mainly focused on small rural communities (no more than thousand inhabitants). The age of the informants was between 42 and 80 and they were equally represented by gender. Hence, for the purpose of the research I developed a questionnaire containing questions that could be asked about the appearance, origin, activities and protection from supernatural beings such as witches, and *mòras*, but also werewolves, fairies and other supernatural beings that can be found in the local belief system.

the villagers, but is not publically accused of witchcraft until some incident or undesirable moment occurs (see later). After the accusations, the witch is usually beaten by the damaged party or people call for a priest to break the spell and to persuade the witch to take the sacrament of confession. Equally, after the incident, the accused person is stigmatized and sanctioned by marginalization.² To prevent themselves from the *maleficium* of potential witches people have resorted to many means of protection such as chants, votives, crosses, garlic, blessed items, etc.

A *mòra* has similar abilities as the witch, but the main difference is that the *mòra* is described as a young (pretty) woman who becomes a witch after marriage. She is mostly seen as a black cat that sucks on its victim's breasts and suffocates him or her during the night while they are asleep.³ The largest number of interlocutors claimed that during their lifetime they had encountered a *mòra* and they were pretty convinced that this being existed while fewer number of interlocutors stressed the real existence of witches today.⁴

Frano Ivanišević, a Croatian folk collector from the 19th century, also stated that the witches are old hags, toothless, ugly, evil-blooded and bad-tempered (Ivanišević 1987:563). More than a hundred years later in the same region we can find interlocutors making, almost exact claims that Ivanišević made, that witches are old, ugly, lonely women and widows. When I asked my interlocutor why he thought so, he replied that women had always been accused of being witches because of their appearance – “When someone is ugly and old, then you know she could be a witch” (J. K.).⁵

² The community does not socialize and trade with the accused person and avoids her in public.

³ For a detailed description of appearance and abilities of supernatural being from Dalmatian and South Slavic traditional beliefs in witches and *mòras* cf. eg: Đorđević 1953; Bošković-Stulli 1967/68; Vukanović 1989; Marjanić 1999; Čiča 2002; Šešo 2007.

⁴ For more on classification of interlocutors' views and explanations of existence of witches and *mòras* cf. Šešo: 2011.

⁵ The initials in the brackets will stand for the names of my interlocutors. The transcripts of interviews and full names of my interlocutors are archived in Croatian Academy of Arts And Sciences, Ethnology Department, under signature NZ 195.

As it can be seen, the person the community would call a witch is stereotyped as an old, ugly and visually unattractive woman, i.e. their look deviates from commonly accepted norms. However, besides an old and ugly woman, a young woman can also be called a witch (usually *mòra*) due to her “unusual” appearance:

“Mòra is a younger female that is torturing a man out of jealousy. Mòras have always been connected with the unusual looks of younger women, especially spinsters with long eyelashes.” (P. U.)⁶

The above examples show that we are talking about the person whose looks deviate from the customary norms. Just like the looks of ugly, messy old women, the looks of too pretty, good-looking women who dress in attractive clothes and wear bags, and who go out at night (Mencej 2006:115) indicate that this person is also different. Therefore, every woman different in appearance is subject to the reputation of being a witch (or *mòra*) since any deviation from customary norms indicates a suspicion that we are dealing with witchcraft (Schöck 1978:121; Mencej 2006:115). Although the appearance that deviates from customary norms is one of the initial detonators for calling someone a witch or a *mòra*, we still need some other signs that would turn gossip and rumours into allegations. Besides physical appearance the significant indicator for accusing someone of being a witch or a *mòra* is the person’s character, social reputation and marital status:

“Witches are women whose children die on them. Some of them lost up to four children. They burn laurel and olive leafs so that they could abort. And then this whore that aborted, she was the witch!” (A. Ž.)

“The witch is a whore who doesn’t have place near God so the devil takes her to his side. She got what she deserved and that’s the way it has to be. [...] A witch is a girl, and when she marries she becomes demon, and it’s even worse is if she is a widow. Widows have always

⁶ The men are rarely accused of being a witch (or a warlock) although such examples do exist. However, men are rarely called a witch based on their appearance itself. In a few examples men were considered a witch during the life due to immoral and aggressive behavior, but it is more frequently believed that such person will turn into a werewolf after the death.

been described as something bad, they are always guilty – and that’s what people felt towards them.” (M. P.)

Displayed examples clearly show that by the term ‘witches’ people considered whores, or women who have miscarried, who are not married or, as one interlocutor explained, women who had sex with more than one man and didn’t want to marry (I. K.). Besides these, the widows also had a bad reputation and they always served as scapegoats. The marital status and sexual behaviour are even more accentuated in the cases of *mòras* because, as it is believed, the *mòras* are young girls from the community who show their malicious, supernatural powers after an episode of unrequited love or jealousy:

“A *mòra* is born out of unrequited love. One man, Nikola was his name, had a *mòra* – a girl that he avoided. But she harassed him and wouldn’t leave him alone so then he caught her with his belt, as the priest told him to. The next day she brought him a present so that he won’t tell on her to the others. And then she married some other fellow and he was free.” (S. P.)

“A *mòra* is a girl who lives in the village or somewhere near it. When her boyfriend doesn’t want to marry her, she harasses him. The *mòra* suffocates a boy if he is unwilling to marry her or her daughter.” (M. Š.)

Examples listed above indicate that the inhabitants of Dalmatian hinterland were likely to call *mòras* those girls who were too forward or who aggressively urged boys to marry them or to engage in sexual relations with them. It is worth mentioning that in the patriarchal region of the Dalmatian hinterland premarital and extramarital sexual relations, as well as sexual activity of the widows, are not welcome. Such attitude makes us conclude that precisely this category of women was always accused of witchcraft. The importance of sexual experience in forming witchcraft allegations was stated by next interlocutor who said:

“All people who still haven’t had sexual relations have a special glow to them. The woman who learned how to have sex doesn’t glow any more. Then you can recognize her.” (G. V.-P.)

Therefore, the loss of virginity in premarital sexual relations, as well as extramarital sexual practice is not allowed among the people of the Dalmatian hinterland. People who have engaged in such activities become an object of rumours and gossip, they become suspicious and they are immediately linked to witchcraft. “Then you can recognize them”.

Beside repulsive old age, ugliness, flamboyant appearance, unacceptable ‘free’ behaviour, the neighbours could just as easily be accused of witchcraft. Especially if the accuser is quarrelling with his neighbour. At this point it is necessary to take into consideration that, women are more often socializing with each other than men which gives them plenty of opportunity for conflict and for accusing each other of witchcraft (Kennedy 1967:217). It is probably for this reason that many of my interlocutors stated that until recently their village was full of women who were known as witches and who were very quarrelsome:

“The witches are causing quarrels. When women fight, they call each other a witch. Afterwards those witches are avoiding the church and they don’t want to do the housework or to work in the field.” (P. U.)

“Women in the village used to call each other a witch so that they don’t say ‘whore’.” (M. LJ.)

“A *mòra* has a bad tongue; she answers to older people and says horrible, nasty things.” (P. U.)

How accusations work in the Dalmatian hinterland today may be explained by the story told by J. K. from Staševica. The interlocutor is the grandfather of a ten-year-old boy who was ran over by a car in front of his house. The interlocutor refused to believe that death of his grandson was merely an accident and was convinced that his old and quarrelsome neighbour cast a spell. Everyone in the village knew that she was a potential witch, and now everyone knew for sure because my interlocutor accused her publicly in front of the local priest. The priest said that it was unlikely that the neighbour was a witch, but he did bless the house of my interlocutor immediately after the incident to break the spell and thus contributed to the validity of the accusations. The interlocutor did not say what happened to

the accused neighbour afterwards, but according to the statements of other interlocutors we should conclude that she was avoided in public or perhaps even beaten.

The explanation of the described case can be found in Pamela Stewart's and Andrew Strathern's *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip* where they pointed out that despite the stereotypical features we mentioned above this does not mean that the neighbours or the community will publicly accuse such a person of witchcraft. The person will remain the subject of rumours and gossip – up until the moment when some conflicting, dramatic and inexplicable event in the community results in direct accusations of witchcraft. The villagers do not like to accuse someone of witchcraft publicly without good reason because they could as easily become suspects and eventually be accused of witchcraft because of defamation (Stewart and Strathern 2004:37–39). In other words, in the Dalmatian hinterland the reasons for publicly accusing a person of witchcraft are most often incomprehensible serious bodily injuries, child illnesses, and illnesses of domestic animals, a sudden death or a poor harvest. A person can be accused of witchcraft as a result of life's disappointments, such as losing money, unrequited love, the reduction of sexual power. Even when such situations can be explained medically, it is believed that the illness or the injury is caused by witches from the village, usually after a recent meeting between a potential witch and the damaged party. Therefore, after such an occurrence, people start searching for a culprit, a witch, among the above-mentioned categories of people, thus seeking satisfaction for their own personal/communal misfortune.

According to some folklorists, a large nose, false teeth, a hump on someone's back, untidiness, and other stereotypical attributes of the witch actually correspond to her inner character. Witches – who are the embodiment of evil - have external attributes which are equal to the internal ones, making it possible for people to recognize them due to their ugly appearance (Gerlach 1999:965; Mencej 2006:113). According to some Slavic beliefs, each anomaly and difference is interpreted as a result of the supernatural, or even as a replica of the supernatural (Tolstaja 1998:224; Mencej 2006:113). Consequently, why old and ugly people are often suspected of witchcraft can be explained through the lenses of these Slavic

beliefs. However, folklorist Inge Schöck does not agree that the accusations of witchcraft should be linked to the belief that physical anomalies reveal the presence of the supernatural in a person. She argues that accusing old and ugly women of witchcraft is primarily connected to their social position and reputation. In so doing, she stresses that there exist no examples of police officers, spiritual leaders or teachers being accused of witchcraft – one can find only examples of ordinary peasant women and girls accused of being witches (Schöck 1978:122–125; Mencej 2006:113). In addition to the old, ugly, untidy women who are often alone and helpless, examples show that widows, spinsters and women of dubious morals are often accused of witchcraft. All of these categories, apart from belonging to the “weaker” sex, usually bear the common denominator of lower social status. The accused women usually do not have the support of powerful men who could possibly defend them, or who would make their status in the community stronger. These patterns of accusations of witchcraft were already noted in 1937 by anthropologist Evans-Pritchard while exploring the Azande of southern Sudan. The Azande, for whom witchcraft represented the answer to all (unexplained) troubles, were inclined to look for culprits among similar categories of people as did the residents of the Dalmatian hinterland. Evans-Pritchard noted that the relatives, the rich or members of the nobility are never accused of witchcraft, and that men do not accuse each other of witchcraft either. On the other hand, the poor, the defenceless, or those who are a threat to the society can be suspected of witchcraft. According to Evans-Pritchard, the Azande do not accuse their relatives of witchcraft because witchcraft is considered to be hereditary and consequently, such accusations would also imply their own association to witchcraft. The rich and the noble are also never accused due to their power in the society and the legitimate fear that the accuser may get involved in a conflict with a more influential opponent. Therefore, the scapegoats are persons without much influence in the community or women who cannot easily get out of an accusation of witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1976:52–53).

But what about those people who fall under the category of “strange” women, or those that are more beautiful or are better dressed? The answer to this question certainly lies in the concept of envy. Such persons are envied because they gained a greater portion of common good (beauty) than they should have, and this means that somebody else, or everyone, has lost (cf.

Foster 1965:299–301). According to some ethnologists and anthropologists, envy is a state to which people attribute great destructive power and often connect it to witchcraft (cf. Mencej 2006:101). Evans-Pritchard mentions that envy is one of the main reasons why enemies or neighbours are blamed of witchcraft in the case of the Azande tribe (Evans-Pritchard 1976:33–53). In the Dalmatian hinterland, as we have seen, a strange appearance, as well as extraordinary beauty, may be the reason why someone is believed to be a witch. Likewise, overly rich peasants, as well as those who stand out in other ways, have been accused of witchcraft during the European witch hunt (Luhmann 2006:43; Levack 2006:1010). Such peasants can hardly be categorized as socially weak individuals. However, wealthy farmers do not hold the same positions as nobles, gentlemen and spiritual teachers, who were never accused of witchcraft - their status is equal to other members of the community, except for being distinguished by their wealth. The same goes for the overly beautiful girls, who exceed the acceptable social norms due to their looks and their poise, and it is precisely these social norms that determine (through mechanisms of envy) who can be a potential witch or *mòra*.

Therefore, it seems that all persons in the community are subject to two basic mechanisms of selection, and these are envy and dislike. Although envy and dislike should not perhaps be separated because envy includes dislike, there are, in my opinion, persons who are only disliked and not envied as well. Under this category I assume those who are old, ugly, bad-tempered and as such represent the burden to the community or someone who is not welcome to be seen. In those particular cases, I believe, we are not talking about envy but rather about dislike. Those individuals who are disliked due to their looks and behaviour are subject to rumours and subsequent allegations of witchcraft. Such accusations function as a “vent” for social tensions in small, closed rural communities. Following the accusations, the accused are expected to start acting in accordance with acceptable standards or they are made to fit these boxes through certain sanctions and penalties. If this is impossible, then the result is elimination (the same happened during the period of persecution, when this was done through trials and executions).

According to the American anthropologist George Foster, the main parameters that need to be understood in order to understand the accusations

of witchcraft are the concepts of happiness and the limited good of a peasant society. According to Foster, the cognitive concept which implies limited goods that cannot be increased dominates in such communities. Consequently, this results in hostility between members of the community, as all strive to obtain as much of the limited resources in order to ensure their own happiness, not taking into consideration the misfortune of others (Foster 1965:296). At the same time, one individual will get more and another less, which results in the already mentioned envy directed at those who acquire more. Animosity towards these individuals will rise, leading into accusations of witchcraft. The accused will be sanctioned, hence, relationships in the community will be in the balance again.

These theses certainly coincide with the interpretations of social anthropology, which explains witchcraft as an institution that regulates the conflicts in the community (Pócs 1999:9). Previously reported cases, as well as those noted during the recent field study, also indicate that the accusations of witchcraft in the Dalmatian hinterland mainly occur as an explanation of human misfortune. In the example previously presented, accusations of witchcraft do not occur only because someone is rich or he/she deviates from the social norms due to their appearance or behaviour. They almost always occur after something troublesome happens, something that is difficult to explain or, rather, after an event which cannot be easily accepted, such as the death of loved ones. Only then, people tend to believe in the work of witches and *mòras*, who they identify within their own closed community where people know each other, where they know other people's intentions as well as reasons why someone would hurt them.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the information we can find today is similar to mechanisms of accusations of women in the early modern era that led to mass witchcraft trials and so-called witchcraft madness. The most common stereotype of the witch, that of an old woman, can also be found in the persecutions of the early modern period when the majority of the accused witches were more than fifty years old, which was considered to be a much more advanced age than it is today (Levack 1995:141). In his book *Witches and Neighbours* Robin Briggs vividly describes the stereotypical portrayal of a witch, according to which:

“Every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue,

having a rugged coat on her back, a skull-cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, and a dog or cat by her side, is not only suspected but pronounced for a witch.” (Briggs 1996:21)

This description formed in the 17th century among the witch prosecutors in England resembles the data recorded by Frano Ivanišević in the 19th century as well as those given by my interlocutors. The data gathered by Brian P. Levack also shows that in early modern Europe the percentage of unmarried witches (widowed or never married) was higher than the percentage of such persons in the general female population. Hence, the triggers that started the accusations were the sudden death of a child or a family member, the contraction of a disease, the loss of a farm animal, impotence, fire, hail, etc. (1995:146, 167). In other words, they were almost the same as those we find in the Dalmatian hinterland today. However, the prosecution and the persecution of witches in European societies in the early modern period were marked by the developments such as market competition, increasing population, and other economic parameters mentioned by Alan Macfarlane (1970) and Keith Thomas (1971). As Clarke Garrett explained

“the accusations, they contended, were directly related to the breakdown of the village community and the emergence of a newer set of individual values in place of older communal ones. English society was undergoing profound social changes; and women, as the most dependent members of that society, were the most vulnerable to the effects of those changes. [...] When older ties of relationship and responsibility began to erode, it was women’s power and social status that suffered; and their accusations of witchcraft against each other may have been a response to their sense of loss.” (1977:463–464)

It cannot be ruled out that in the Dalmatian hinterland, in the early modern era, accusations of witchcraft were also constructed due to mutual financial competitiveness. Unfortunately, the data from that period is pretty scarce and therefore we can only guess how accusations worked in the Dalmatian hinterland three or four hundred years ago. Nonetheless, we can say that in the Dalmatian hinterland stereotypical notions of potential witches as well as triggers that started the accusations are almost the same

as those that led to mass witchcraft trials. Fortunately, today those issues remain limited to small rural communities and neighbourhoods. We can only feel sorry for those few women who will perhaps be beaten because someone has recognized them as witches.

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Luka Šešo

KOJA JE ŽENA VJEŠTICA? STEREOTIPNE PREDODŽBE O VJEŠTICAMA U HRVATSKIM TRADICIJSKIM VJEROVANJIMA

Nedavna terenska istraživanja pokazuju da se vješticama gotovo uvijek optužuju žene koje su prekršile određene tabue ili ne poštuju društvene, moralne ili vjerske norme. Sve započinje glasinama i govorkanjem o nekim ružnim, neoženjenim, razvedenim, promiskuitetnim, starim ili previše lijepim ženama u selu. No one još uvijek nisu označene vješticama sve dok se u selu ne dogodi neki incident ili teško prihvatljiv događaj. Tada se za nastalu nevolju optužuju upravo žene iz susjedstva koje su već otprije označene nepoželjnim, a optužitelji se na taj način oslobađaju eventualne krivnje.

Ključne riječi: tradicijska vjeronanja, vještice, Hrvatska, unutrašnjost Dalmacije, suvremenost