

Folk Stories of the Saints as Explanation of Healing

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In the article I would like to analyse Slavonic etiological legends as an instrument of explaining choice of this or that herb for healing a disease. One may say that in traditional culture – at least implicitly – illness is considered not only as an abnormal state, but also a situation close to the mythological time, and the sick person is placed into the mythological space where he uses as a remedy the herbs which “appeared” thanks to the personages of the Christian mythology; the situation is repeated eternally in the process of healing every new patient.

Let’s analyse an example: “For kids not to be scared, *adam-golova*¹ [lit. Adam’s head] is necessary under the pillow” (Konovalova 2000: 18). Here the phytonym is a kind of a pressed, compact motif of Adam’s head located under Golgotha; so, the herb with the same name is put under the pillow.

In this connection between a sick person and his sacral “patron” a plant plays a very important role thanks to its special feature which reminds about this or that personage. For example, names with the component *golova* [head] (*adamova golova* [Adam’s head], *ivanova golova* [Ivan’s head]) are generally used for plants that have some spherical parts (flower heads, seeds etc.). So, in Kursk *ivanova golova* [Ivan’s head] is a name for the peach-leaved campanula, *Campanula persicifolia*; in Ukraine, *adamova golova* [Adam’s head] is the name given to field eryngo, *Eryngium campestre* (Annenkov 1876: 90-91; Bulashev 1909: 349). But the equation between roundness and medical application is also true of the plants used for curing a headache. Sometimes the two groups overlap: “tall and slender, it has two or three white heads, *adamova golova* helps with a headache, here, look, on the slope, blue, prickly round heads” (Rodionova 2002: 38). Some folk legends explain these or those healing powers of mugwort: according to Polish materials, the cut off head by St. John fell among mugwort, that is why mugwort helps for cuts (Morawski 1884: 14).

The situation is the same with plant names like *egor’evo* (*egor’evskoe*, *georgievo*) *kop’e* [St. George’s spear], such names being given to plants with elongated or sharp parts, with thorns, and they are used “for colic”, i.e. abdominal pain. These names reflect the plot of St. George’s fighting against a dragon; on the other hand, the usage is also based on the feature: for example, in the Urals the name of *egor’evo kop’e* is given to the maiden pink with serrate petals (*Dianthus deltoides*) or to meadow cranesbill, *Geranium pratense*, sharp sprouts in the form of a which “is drunk for colic in the belly” (Konovalova 2000: 61, 80); in Tomsk region “*egor’evo kop’e* is used for stomach ache, for washing wounds” (Arjanova 2006: 132). In this case the connection between the phytonym and the motif is also supported with the iconographical tradition: St. George’s killing a dragon with his spear. So, a feature of a plant serves as the basis for connecting an episode of the saint’s life with symptoms of a disease.

In another example the phytonym *trava Iisusa Hrista* [Jesus Christ’s herb] ‘red helleborine *Cephalanthera rubra* Rich.’ reminds of Christ’s bleeding during crucifying: “Jesus Christ’s herb stops any bleeding, one may chant any illness with it” (Konovalova 2000: 193).

Among the Biblical personages concerned with herbs, the Mother of God seems the most popular. So, in Ohrid (Macedonia) rose of Jericho *Anastatica hierochuntica* L. was known as *raka od Prechista* [Our Lady’s hand]. The herb was believed to appear in Nazareth, where Maria gave birth to Christ and touched the earth with her hand. Both Turkish and Macedonian women

¹ Pale globe-thistle *Echinops spaeocephalus*.

put a dried plant in water and, after opening twigs, gave the water to the woman in childbirth (Dzordzević 1958: 126); in Plovdiv region the same was practiced with a plant having five flowers – *rachichka na sv. Bogoroditsa* [the hand of Saint Virgin] (Kableshkova 2002: 95-96).

A plant autumn Lady's tresses *Spiranthes spiralis* with Polish name *łzy Matki Boskiej* was a dream of pilgrims coming for absolution on Our Lady's Ascension Day (August 15). According to a legend, they rose up from the Virgin's tears dripping from her face. Here again, the phytonym is connected not only with an etiological story but also with usage: "these 'tears' must heal any pain" (Seweryn 1946: 307).

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

Plants resembling the color of blood often had the root *krov-* [blood] in their names and were supposed to be able to stop bleeding. The considerable number of names for St John's wort (Rus. *krovavnik*, *ivanova krov'*; Ukr. *krivtsa*, *bozha krivtsa*, *Hristova krivtsa*, *krov sv. Ivana*; Belarus. *kryvawnik*, *kryvavets*, Cz. *krevniček*, *krvavník*) [lit. blood herb, St. John's blood, hare blood etc.] results from the red spots that the leaves of some species have, while the sap is red in color, just like the petals when they are crushed. Another etiological legend says that while the executioner was carrying the head of John the Baptist to Herod's palace, several drops of blood fell on the ground. On that spot there grew a plant that had absorbed the blood – St. John's wort (Kuznetsova, Reznikova 1992: 86). One more legend says that it grew beneath the cross on which Christ was crucified, and received its healing powers from his blood (Mandel'shtam 1882: 316). Here legends about the genesis of St John's wort from St. John's or Jesus' blood explain not only the genesis of a plant but also its usage in folk medicine: in Transcarpathia it was used for stopping hemorrhages and bloody flux, while in the Kubanj part of southern Russia it was prescribed for someone spitting blood, or with blood in the urine and for wounds (Toren 1996: 67), and in Bulgaria for diseases of the blood (Sofijski kraj 1993: 178-179, 187, 180).

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

But a feature is not the only basis for a possible shifting of codes. The role of another mediator – natural language – is no less important for connections between different codes in traditional culture (Baiburin, Levinton 1983: 28-29). A plant name becomes linked to words and objects, thereby acquiring secondary associations. So, the name *son bogoroditsy* [Our Lady's dream] 'snowdrop anemone *Anemone sylvestris* L.' is based on the drooping form of the plant (Annenkov 1876: 34-35) – a cliché, existing in the language before, was transferred to the plant (an apocryphal story "Our Lady's dream" existed in a hand-written form and was used as an amulet). The usage of a plant and the text with the same name is also close: in Perm region, for example, the herb *son Presviatoj Bogoroditsy* [Our Lady's dream] 'field larkspur *Delphinium elatum* L.' was given to a patient: "if after having the medicine he falls asleep and will sleep calmly, he will recover, otherwise he will die" (Annenkov 1876: 398); on the other hand, the text of the apocrypha, written on a sheet of paper, was given under a patient's pillow, also in hope to help him.

Connections like these demonstrate the importance of objective, real plant features in the creation of its symbolic image. To interpret them one must consider lexical and folkloric information that allows us to clarify the ties of a given plant with mythological ideas, which cannot be revealed simply by analyzing the ethnographic data. Hence, the features of plants play

a decisive role in forming notions about them and therefore in their usage in ritual and everyday life, in particular in folk medicine.

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