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SYMBOLIC HEALING IN HUNGARIAN ETHNOMEDICINE

Mihály Hoppál. Budapest, Hungary

To understand the attitude of traditional folk medicine it is necessary for us to review the main types of the methods of healing. In the literature we find two approaches. One holds that, at a specified historical moment, the empirically based knowledge receives ritual reinforcement; while according to the other view, only about a quarter of the herbs used in folk medicine possessed any real curative property; the real effect was exerted by the process of healing, by the rite itself, the power of psychic influence. It must be clearly seen, however, that traditional folk medicine is an area of culture where methods of healing based on the accumulated experience of generations and the apparently irrational flairs and notions dictated by beliefs blend in almost equal proportion. Only when looked at from outside does the belief system, with its own inner dynamics, appear incomprehensible; the internal connections organise the elements into a pattern, and, once the connections are understood, the elements

seem evident - especially in the eyes of the users. Ethnographic research is interested in the system as a whole, and so it views folk medicine too as a part of the system of culture - a part that is a characteristic blend of rational and symbolic elements.

Analogic Thinking in Ethnomedicine

Hungarian people applied magic or symbolic 'medical' treatment mostly to curing diseases whose causes were unknown or were not directly identified. In the material so far collected the informants have named several causes of illness, but unfortunately that rich material has not yet received systematic analysis. The most frequent causes of illness are the following: God, the 'evil ones', who can be supernatural (unknown) beings or humans possessing supernatural power. This latter group is made up of *boszorkányok* ('witches'), *bábák* ('midwives'), wise men, *bübájosok* ('magicians'), *javasok* ('medicine women'), *kuruzslók* ('healers'); while the former group includes the *lidérc* ('incubus') that causes an oppressive sensation at night, and the invisible *szépasszony* ('beautiful lady'), with her 'bowl', which makes anyone stepping into it come out in a rash¹.

Among the causes of disease the so-called sickness-demons (such as the *csúz* ('joint gout'), *íz* (roughly the same), *süly* ('scurvy'), *guta* ('apoplexy'), *nyavalya* ('falling sickness'), etc.) used to be regarded as dominant, but probably more important than these elusive 'beings' are the many kinds of bewitchment. Thus, in the old days, bewitching was known as something done through some action or with the help of some objects; moreover, by looking (*igézés - igizis*) or by word or curse. A common form of bewitching was, for example, pouring: they made a brew from nine kinds of cereals and poured it out or sprinkled it on the ground at a busy cross-roads or outside the house of the person they wanted to bewitch. Whoever entered the bewitching fell ill, coming out in boils or nasty pimples.² That, incidentally, was also one of the ways of getting rid of the disease.

According to Mrs. Sándor Hegyi, 77, of Mezötur, small sticks were bound with rags at one end and with them they rubbed the wounds of patients suffering from bad wounds. Having rubbed them in, they threw these small bound sticks onto the cross-roads, and if someone stepped on them he caught the disease and carried it away.³

The making of such *rontóbábu* ('bewitching dolls') was known all over the country, thus these simple healing instruments - after all, they served both purposes - can be found in the ethnographic collections of several museums in Hungary. During a field trip to Tiszalgar, Vilmos Diószegi collected nine such

dolls, which he placed in the Ethnographic Museum of Budapest. We quote from his notes:

They cut nine identical pieces of branches and then they tear two pieces of rag. One of these they fold in two for the head, placing the other one on it. When all nine are ready they make hands for them. They make a circle over the boil with the head of each doll and then they throw them into the basket. At the cross-roads they throw the dolls away with their left hand over their left shoulder.⁴

The collector also added that the discarding had to be done at midnight or at dawn; no doubt, the practice of bewitchery was, in most cases, strictly secret, as against the generally public character of healing magic or magic with a positive purpose.⁵

Similar disease-averting dolls were made when a child had lip sores;

The child slavers and they take him when the herd of pigs is returning from the fields. Then he stands by the roadside, turning those dolls, twelve of them, in his mouth. He turns them in his mouth ... then he throws them away ... behind his back ... then he says, 'sores go away, herd come, sores go away, herd come!'⁶

The example shows that the essence of the healing is to remove the sickness - that is to say, after touching, it the object that has been infected with it must be discarded. In other words, what happened was a symbolic removal. The purpose of throwing into water is clear in the following example:

In Göcsej (district in south-western Hungary, in the county Zala) a woman suffering from whites (leucorrhoea) makes nine small dolls from nine pieces of white cloth, hides them under her skirt, goes to a river, and there slipping each doll into the water, says the following: Only then let this malady come back when I take these dolls out of the water!⁷

In the above texts and healing procedures there is a common basic principle of magic healing - namely, that if I perform a certain action, that is, I remove an object that has been in contact with the patient, it analogically implies that I have also removed the malady. The custom of throwing into water was practised in connection with a variety of diseases (e.g. freckles were washed in a stream at dawn on Good Friday).

A kind of symbolic throwing into water was the throwing of sty (*hordeolum*) into a well⁸; but generally all magic healing methods which contain the gesture of washing can be regarded as an analogical throwing into water (thus, for instance, in the Zemplén region, a child *aki nézésben van* (who was under the influence of an evil eye) was washed in water mixed with hot charcoal - the author's collection). Then the bath water was poured out in a place where peo-

ple were unlikely to step into it. The pouring out symbolises the removal of the malady.

Imitative magic based on analogy is even better illustrated by the symbolic reaping of sty (*hordeolum*) with the bent index finger. (The popular name of hordeolum in Hungarian is *árpa* ('barley'), which suggests a linguistic transfer of the symbolic healing power.) This 'therapy' was practised in the Zemplén region in the early 1960s. Coming still nearer to reality is the action of the *csángós* of Moldavia, who used incantation to reinforce the power of healing:

*He took a sickle in his left hand and went up to the person who had sty in his eye, and with his left hand he pressed it nine times with the sickle and cut nine times with the sickle, saying: 'Sty, sty (barley), I show you and I reap you, I take you home, I thrash you, winnow you, grind you, knead you, bake bread from you and eat you.'*⁹

Here the accompanying text, too, talks about the methods of the multiple annihilation, the repetition of removal; and it does so at the level of symbolic action and oral text.

Commonly known in the Hungarian tradition of ethnomedicine is the hanging on trees or bushes of the items of clothing that have been in contact with the patient. Underlying the motif of giving it to the wind - where the shirt of the person who had the shivers was hung on a rosebush out in the fields for the wind to blow it away - is also the idea that the malady must be removed. A few decades ago this was still a living practice in the Zemplén region, as the custom of leaving small pieces of clothes beside the gouty wells is also probably traceable to the same belief.¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here that, whereas in the early 60's one could still take pictures of small rags fluttering in the wind, by the early 80s this custom had disappeared (Abaújszántó, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén district).

In ethnomedicine a magic healing custom resting on analogy was the slipping-through. The sick child (suffering from heart disease, for example) was slipped through a cleft tree with its parts drawn apart or through a naturally formed hole in a tree trunk. The same purpose was served by one parent handing the baby through the window to the other parent or through the so-called '*frászkarika*', for which flour was borrowed from nine houses (the Janos Arany Museum of Nagykörös has in its possession such a *frászkarika*;¹¹ a pretzel baked in Abaújdevceser and used for the same purpose can be found in Budapest's Ethnographic Museum, under inventory number 62.59.2 - Vilmos Diószegi collection, 1962). Both kinds of slipping-through were symbolic rebirths according to folk beliefs.

This outlook permeated folk thinking. For example, it is on record in Mezőtúr that when a child got a whooping cough (*szamár köhögés* in Hungarian, liter-

ally 'donkey cough') from an evil eye, he was slipped through under a donkey three times.¹² In Moldavia they recall that whooping cough was cured by giving donkey's milk to the child. And if that did not help, the patient was smoked with a flowery branch consecrated on Palm Sunday and with donkey manure¹³.

The same way of thinking based on symbolic actions pervaded the analogous therapy in the course of which a small sick child was being 'boiled'. This procedure was known in all parts of country:

*My godmother had a daughter who was very thin and did not grow. she was about six or seven years old. She remained very small up to the age of twelve. She did not put on weight, nor did she grow; she was like a skeleton. The doctors were unable to help her. Nobody knew what the trouble was. They sent for the wise woman who said to my godmother: 'I tell you what you should do; carry a big kettle in from the kitchen and act as if you were making a fire under it. But there should be no fire burning. Put some wood under it, but do not light it; then make the girl sit in the kettle. 'And so it happened. The wise woman came round to us at night. When my godmother had made the girl sit in the kettle, the wise woman asked her: 'Neighbour, what are you cooking?' 'Some meat onto the bone!' This they repeated twelve times. It happened at midnight. My godmother ran around the house twelve times, with a broom in her hand, and when she came to the kitchen, she made some threatening gestures with the broom. Thereafter the little girl began to develop and put on weight. This girl is still alive.'*¹⁴

Even more illustrative examples of analogical thinking can be found in certain cases where the instruments of healing are chosen according to the external symptoms of the disease, symptoms that also manifest themselves in colours. Thus jaundice, for example - from which, incidentally, there is spontaneous recovery, which takes six weeks - literally attracted the healing methods based on magic colour analogy. In the early 60s, it was known and repeated in many villages in the Zemplén region that, in the old days, jaundice sufferers were 'allowed to drink water off a gold ring' (*arany gyűrűről hagytak vizet innya*). Moreover, plants of yellow colour played a role in curing the disease. For instance, they made a bath from the flower of the plant *sárga nyestike* for the patient to bathe in. In addition, he was made to eat plenty of carrots, egg-yolk and brown (yellow) sugar.

The disease Saint Anthony's fire, known to be characterised by a deep-red inflammation of the skin, was treated by smoke from red or grilled maize; moreover, the patient's face was covered with a red kerchief. When a boil had turned blue, they pulled through it a dark thread; one could go on and on listing

the examples, but even the ones mentioned so far seem sufficient to prove that Hungarian ethnomedicine does bear some traces of a certain folk signature theory, on the basis of which they sought to cure a disease associated with a particular colour by the use of medicinal herbs or substances of a similar colour.

A peculiar form of manifestation of ethnomedicine's view based on analogy is the faith in the power of reverse actions. Thus, for instance, the child, after it was bathed in a 'magic' bath made from nine herbs, was dried with the reverse side of an undershirt (Abaújkér¹⁵). In case of an evil eye, the child must be washed in water mixed with hot charcoal with the back of the left hand, and the remaining water must be poured out from below upwards, against the backside of the door. The use of the left hand or incantations involving counting backwards seek to achieve the desired effect through inversion; they symbolically restore the life order upended by the disease.

Finally, mention must be made of casting, a procedure supposed to cure children suffering from fright, evil eye or some other malady of unidentifiable origin. The procedure is based in the principle of analogy of shape, which can be summarised as follows: nine different objects, including a plate with water in it, were placed in a sieve; then they melted wax (or occasionally tin) and poured it into the cold water in the plate. According to ancient belief, the forms of the suddenly solidifying material showed or assumed the shape of the thing or person that had put a spell on the patient. (This method of healing was recorded in several photos, based on reconstruction.¹⁶)

The principle that the listed healing procedures share is the idea of 'like can be cured with like', whose functioning we have seen. In our last example, casting had not only a diagnostic function, but also a therapeutic one, which is reinforced by the use of the sieve as an instrument replacing the ancient drums. In casting - similarly to water mixed with hot charcoal - there is a meeting of fire (a hot substance) and cold water, both possessing special power according to popular belief.¹⁷ It is understandable therefore that a casting woman from the Zselic region said: 'Casting is prayer, it has great power!'¹⁸ And indeed, in ethnomedicine action is a prayer that has the power to cure and the word uttered becomes a healing action.

The Power of the Word in Ethnomedicine

In ethnomedicine, one of the characteristic forms of the symbolic way of thinking was the faith in the magic power of the word. All over the world people have believed, and still believe, in the magic healing power of the spoken word. This was possibly one of the most ancient curative methods of mankind, and one of the easiest to apply as well. Since it requires no direct bodily

intervention and thus it inflicts no pain, either, its effect is primarily psychic; and, as it has emerged, psychological conditioning is one of the most active forces in modern healing.

Looking at the Hungarian material, we may say that it has survived almost to our own days in the memory of the older generation - and in some regions, in practice as well (r.h. in some remote villages in the Zemplén region; for instance, in Fony, a film was made as late as 1970 about an old woman using incantations to cure thrush). The first historical data, the first Hungarian-language records come from the 15th-16th centuries.¹⁹ (As there is a detailed discussion of incantations and prayers in two chapters of the other folklore volume of *A Magyarorság Néprajza* [The Ethnography of the Hungarians], here we only give a brief outline.) The records of the witchcraft trials and subsequently the 20th century collections show that this healing practice has continuously weathered the social changes of the past centuries. This is probably related to the fact that the incantation was always or in most cases known only to the healing specialists. A knowledge of the texts, therefore, was part of the secret knowledge - if only because, according to the beliefs, the incantation loses its power if it is told to someone else. It was a rule that the text could only be uttered on the occasion of healing, and the chanting of the formula was itself equivalent to performing the healing; hence incantation is a genuine speech-act.

Naturally, verbal texts were, in most cases, accompanied by gestures (e.g. laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, encircling, etc.), by the application of objects (e.g. serpentine or), and possibly the use of medicinal herbs.

Incantation is a type of magical healing in which the text, the spoken word, the uttering itself (Hung. *ráolvasás, ráimádkozás*) was the most important element. The multiplicity of texts, the incredible wealth of textual variants hardly allows a uniform classification of types,²⁰ for this remedial process was used in a wide variety of diseases (most frequently in the case of evil eye, *szemölcs* ('wart'), fright, sty, *kelés* ('boil'), sore throat, etc.); for this reason any classification or typologising according to function also runs into difficulty.

Nonetheless, there are some general principles that are present in incantation formulas: in the text, the process of the disappearance of the disease is likened to something (e.g. to the waning moon); a constant element is the threatening of the illness ('... if I find you here, I will dirty you!') or its dismissal:

*Elindult a Boldogságos Szüz Mária
az ő áldott szent fiavál.
Talákozott hetvenhittéle gonosz igézetvel.
Hová mész, te gonosz igézet?
Én megyek ennek az Erzsinek,*

*piros vérit megiszom, szállkás husát hasogatni.
Nem engedem, hogy a piros vérét megigyad,
szállkás husát hasogajjad.
Te menny ei oda ahol a fekete kutyák
nem ugatnak, a fekete lovak nem nyerítnek,
a szent harangok nem szólnak
kovászosa kenyérrrel nem élnek.
Manny el fekete földnek színnyére
kösziklák gyomrába.
Én ezt a szenet azzal vetem bele,
ezer angyal járjon vigasztalására.
(‘The Blessed Virgin Mary set off
with her blessed son.
She met seventy-seven kinds of evil charm.
Where are you going, you evil charm?
I am on my way to drink
the red blood of this Liz, to send pains in her stringy flesh.
I will not let you drink her red blood,
send pains in her stringy flesh.
You had better go to some place where there are
no black dogs barking, no black horses neighing,
where the sacred bells do not ring,
and they do not eat leavened bread.
Go to where the earth is black,
into the bowels of rocks.
I throw this piece of coal into her with the wish
that a thousand angels may come to comfort her.’)²¹*

The Time and Place of Healing

According to folk belief, it was not at all indifferent when and where the magic actions of curative power were performed. Naturally, there were injuries requiring immediate attention (such as open wounds, burns, scalds), but in most cases the time and the location were chosen in accordance with tradition.²²

For example, there was a list of so-called unlucky days, which has come down to us in a 19th century manuscript book. In it we can read the following: ‘*kik Ezekben a megirt napokban születnek Erőtlen Betegesek lesznek és valósággal hijjasok és elebbeni eggéssógerke Vissza nem hozatnak...*’ (‘those born on those days here set forth will be feeble and sickly and virtually invalids - they will not be brought back to their former health...’)²³

Moreover, not every day was suitable for healing, particularly not for phle-

botomy or cupping (we know from as early as the 15th century a blood-letting calendar printed specially for the use in Hungary).²⁴ Folk medicine has, to a certain extent, preserved this belief, which more generally linked the things of health and illness with the course of the sun and the moon. (It is worth mentioning here that only in our days is modern medicine paying attention again to the link between the patient's condition and meteorological phenomena.)

It is also presumably the functioning of the symbol-creating force of analogous conceptions and of the contrasted lines of antitheses that we can detect in the following pair of opposites: dawn was linked with the notion of purity and beginning, while evening was linked with the notion of mortality and passing. The rising of the *sun* might have a beneficial influence, and the coming up of the *moon* is coupled with the dismissal of the disease. In the course of the healing process, the points of the compass may have had a role too, for in the Zemplén region (in Fony, even as late as 1959) there was a healing woman using incantations to cure jaundice, who, in the evening, made the patient sit facing west, and in the morning, facing east, and, holding his head, she chanted her words to cure the disease (the author's collection²⁵).

The role of the celestial bodies seems important,²⁶ since everyday healing was made to conform to the rhythm of these, as indeed, seasonal healing must also follow their rhythm. The sun was usually mentioned in the folklore collections as a healing, benignant factor (*áldott napp* - 'blessed sun'²⁷). The period of 'evil' causing disease, lasts from after sunset until dawn. At the same time - again on the basis of the principle of resemblance - the efficacy of a remedy or a cure was linked with the changes of the moon. In the early 1700s, Anna Zay wrote the following advice in her book of remedies:

Ha Iffiu az Aszszony Embor újságon élyen az orvossággal, ha hamrintz Esztendón már fejül vágjon hold töltén, ha 40 Esztendő tájban Hold fogjtán keil élni az orvosságokat, mert ha erre nem vigyászs ezzel való élés nem használ...

(‘If the man or woman is young, they should take the medicine at new moon; if they are over thirty, they should take it at full moon; if they are around forty, physics should be applied when the moon is on the wane; for if you fail to observe this, the treatment will be of no avail ...’)²⁸

We should, in this place, mention the symbolic usage of magic numbers in healing, which strengthens the curative effect. In every culture there are so called sacred numbers (e.g. 3, 4, 7, 9). In Hungarian ethnomedicine the number 3 figures most frequently. Normally, the same treatment must be repeated three times: in the morning, at midday, and in the evening (or those are the times at which a medicine must be taken); or at sunset, at midnight and early at dawn;

or perhaps at the same hour on three consecutive days. The number 9 figures as a multiple of 3 (they uttered the incantation nine times to cure sty, they made nine circles round the boil, they prepared nine dolls). In this healing process, number 9 often stands for various objects or qualities (nine kinds of grass, earth from nine graves, flour from nine houses). The repetition ensured by the sacred numbers enhanced the psychological effect of the treatment, as it was in a accord with the expectations of the traditional belief system; at the same time, in the case of medicinal herbs and drugs this is only natural - after all, that is the kind of rhythm we follow in taking our modern medicines today as well.

The scene of the treatment was also significant in the system of folk tradition. Of the parts of the house, the fireplace and the threshold figured as the scene of healing actions. Both, by virtue of their direct contact with the outside world, form a transition between the external and the internal worlds, for which reason they were deemed especially suitable as locales for magic acts. Also belonging in the same category were the cross-roads and the cemetery; it was in these transitional areas that one could get rid of maladies, transfer them to other people, or bewitch others (by pouring out or by dolls cast away).

The places of pilgrimages were the important scenes of healing; in the traditional village lifestyle, they played an important role not only as occasions of spiritual communication, but also as opportunities of widening social contacts. In addition, most places of pilgrimage had near them some 'sacred well' (Csatka, Vasvár) or medicinal spring on whose basin they washed the sore parts of their body; the water of the well at Bucsuszentlászló is used as an eye lotion.²⁹ Even in our days, people with a pain in their legs often resort to those places of pilgrimage having medicinal springs (Szentkút, Heves County). In Andocs, the bark of the willows standing in the Franciscans' garden is held to possess curative power.³⁰ It was a characteristic custom associated with the pilgrimages that some personal object or a small piece of the clothes worn on the body had to be left at that well.³¹

It was in the places of pilgrimage that people acquired the objects to which they subsequently attributed symbolic curative power: primarily the holy water (at the pilgrimage of Gylmesközéplak, in 1968, I myself photographed the healing by holy water), which they took home along with other sacraments,³² and particularly the offerings cast from wax.³³ In the places of pilgrimage of Transdanubia, even as late as the 40's, 'votive objects' made of wax were being sold in large quantities. If somebody had a pain in his leg, hand, eyes or ears, they bought wax figures of the appropriate shape; if they had stomach trouble, they bought a wax figure having the shape of a frog;³⁴ if they had heart trouble, they bought an offering portraying a heart. They left the wax figures at the altar of the church of the place of pilgrimage, offering it up, as it were, for recovery,

sacrificing the wax object symbolising the sick part of the body.

These examples also testify to the plurality of symbolic healing methods used formerly in Hungarian ethnomedicine.

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³⁴Vajkai, A. *Népi orvoslás a dunántúli búcsújáráshelyeken*. In: *Magyarságtudomány*. 1942, No. I, p. 135.

TRADITIONAL KOMI CONCEPTS ABOUT DISEASE AETIOLOGY

Irina Ilyina. Syktyvkar, Komi

Traditional medical culture has a difficult character, because the accumulation of rational knowledge and experiences progressed simultaneously with the evolution of spiritual ideas, the main part of which was formed by the concepts about supernatural world. And in the traditional Komi medicine positive experience and peculiar achievements in a man's knowledge are indissolubly combined with irrational notions, religious and magical actions and rites. This syncretism clearly shows itself in folk concepts about the course of disease.

In this report the author tries to bring together facts that are able to reveal traditional Komi concepts about disease aetiology. This task is complicated by the process of their rapid disappearance. Even in the 2nd half of the 19th century scholars had noted that population of the Ust-Sysolsk area 'had some knowl-