

Time and Space in the Incantations

Abstracts: The aim of the paper is to deconstruct and compare time and space in the incantations on the bases of Estonian and Bulgarian traditions. The incantations are related with different time anchors, and with physical and mental time: they are related to the cyclic holidays and linear progression of the ritual year, or to the day of the week, phase of the moon, a certain time of the day, sunrise and sunset, etc. Time scale in incantation texts ranges from mythical past to potential future, while the ritual side represents the present real time. The segmentation of time, the chronological order and duration of charming and charms, the compression and dilation of time with the help of ritual are all part of the time characteristics. Charming was also related with real living spaces. Usually incantations are performed at home, indoors, or in the closer outdoor sphere, but sometimes in the peripheral and liminal locations of the farmstead. In the texts we can find different types of mythical space.

Keyword: incantation, mental time, physical time, ritual space

With incantations we are dealing with a tradition that has been active for thousands of years and that has kept changing in the course of time. More than other traditional folklore genres, incantations are bound to fixed sets of rules, prohibitions and rules. They were performed, passed on and recorded heeding various strategies. Since their heyday in the middle ages and early modern times, incantations yielded to other healing methods and (magical) means of asserting influence. In Estonia, the field of incantation use diminished greatly in the early 1920s with the spread of the medical network, instalment of hygiene requirements and other health-influencing habits. The decline

after the WW2 was especially sharp, incantations remaining only in use for healing ailments that medicine was powerless to cure (and still is, by the way), e.g. rose and other allergic dermatitis reactions. They were also practised in poorly accessible boggy and forested peripheral regions in cases requiring urgent intervention, such as a viper bite or traumas (e.g. sprains), which were, however, considered not worth the time of making a trip to a doctor. In addition to their practical usefulness, another factor contributed to the survival of incantations to our times – incantations were written down and were passed on in writing so that we have written records.

I am going to examine at close time and space as they are represented in Estonian and Bulgarian incantations. My opinion is that the dominant confession in the region has a strong influence on incantations. Estonian beliefs, calendar customs as well incantations corpora display strong Lutheran influences. We can also see that the main actors in incantation texts vary in regions with different dominant confessions. The Orthodox Church spread in Estonia only in the 1840s and did not have time to influence a genre as conservative as incantations. The Orthodox Church found little support in the mainland of Estonia, spreading more in the peripheral regions bordering on Orthodox areas (southeast Setu region, a narrow slice of north-eastern Estonia, the coast of Lake Peipus and the western islands). South- and north-eastern Estonian areas had, in addition to Orthodox neighbours, also mixed populations of Estonians and Russians (who were predominantly Orthodox) – and from these regions we find records of incantations typical of Orthodox regions. Presumably, we should expect greater similarity between incantations from the Orthodox regions of Estonia and (mostly Orthodox) Bulgarian incantations. However, since those are incidentally also regions where little verbal magic has been recorded (perhaps because in the early 20th century it was a region of high illiteracy and archaic attitudes), my arguments are based on the general Estonian incantation corpus. From the whole of Estonia, approximately 35,000 incantation texts and samples with accompanying rites, etiquette, attitudes and experience stories have been written down or recorded. The Bulgarian comparison material comes from two books: Iveta Todorova-Pirgova's "Bajanija i magii" (Todorova-Pirgova 2003)

and Irina Amrojan's "Sbornik Bolgarskikh narodnykh zagovorov" (Amrojan 2005).

The Temporal Dimension of Incantations

Since charms and charming are associated with the stages of people's lifetime and supported their yearly economic endeavours, helped with sudden social or physical traumas, we inevitably face the problem of relations between cyclic and linear time. However, it is important to point out that the norms regarding incantation time markers derived from common practice and the demands of everyday life, and response depended on the specific situation. In the case of traumas or (human or animal) problems that required urgent intervention, no regard was given to beliefs or time requirements; help was provided as quickly as possible. Also, search for lost animals or objects begun immediately. For example, one small traditional rite demanded the devil to return the lost object (knife, scarf, etc). The devil was "bound up" or "his neck was wrung" (i.e. growing grass was twisted together and knotted, and a stone was placed upon the knot with the command: "Devil, return my lost xx!" or "Devil, do not sit upon what is mine!"); when the lost item was found, the knot had to be unbound, since otherwise an accident would befall its maker.

Part of incantations is related to specific calendar holidays:

- 1) Rituals fostering household chores and work: bringing Christmas (or the New Year) indoors, cajoling winds at the end of the year, shaking apple trees for a good harvest during the same period, repelling hunger, etc. took place.
- 2) Preventive rituals: grinding flies on St. Matthew's Day (Estonian islands, West Estonia, narrow area in South Estonia; known also among Latvians (Straubergs 1939: 249) and the Finnish (SKVR). On St. George's Day or on Good Friday, the wolf's muzzle was bound, so that it would not harm the herd in the summer. According to Mirjam Mencej (Mencej 2001), this rite was widely performed by the eastern and western Slavonians, and also Finland and South Estonia (Kõiva 1983), Latvia (Šmits 1941: 2047).

Rites and incantations which are related to specific holidays of the ritual year have a starting time and ending time. Their period of effect begins with rites in winter or spring. Often they also have one certain time of ending, a certain holiday finishing the season in the second half of the year. For example, the mentioned binding of the wolves' muzzles, coming to effect on St. George's Day (April 23 or the day before cattle was sent to pastures), and the untying of muzzles taking place on St. Michael's Day (September 23, when the cattle was settled into the barn). The untying abolished the magical bond that was made on St. George's day, and from that time onwards wolves were free and could quarry any animal in their way. It brings the relationship with the forest to an end. The majority of symbolic rituals and incantations are part of the annual ritual cycle and they are repeated again at the same time next year. This forms a cycle that is maintained with repetition.

Another important time anchor is the day of the week. Although the general belief held that healing is to be performed on even days of the week (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday), Thursday was clearly the preferred one. If there was time to delay with the healing ritual – e.g. to heal congenial developmental problems, joint problems and rheumatism as well as other chronic diseases – a Thursday of a suitable phase of the Moon was chosen. Estonian records of wrist joint and congenial problems claim approximately 80% of cases when the curing was performed on a Thursday (or rather on three consequent Thursdays). Thursday as a beneficial time for curing is also known in Bulgaria (Amrojan 2005: 122, epilepsy is cured three times, beginning and ending on a Thursday; the same in several texts of Todorova-Pirgova). The suitability of Thursday for performing magical rites and healing was supported by the 19th century beliefs and general customs – on Thursdays, people finished working earlier and young people used to gather for evening entertainment, the girls busy with handicraft and the young men spinning tales. From spring to autumn, and in larger farms also in the wintertime, this was followed by dancing. This “celebration of” and lesser workload on Thursdays has been considered a leftover from the worship of Thor (Est. Taara).

The phase of the moon is another very common time anchor in incantations. Generally, charming was forbidden in Estonia

moon was addressed. In the early 20th century it was still common practice to “send away” small tumors during the full or old moon period, when they were offered to the moon with the words “Look what I have and you don’t – take it!”, or a symbolic throwing gesture was made towards the moon with similar accompanying words. There are still people making use of the short charm and custom in Estonia today.

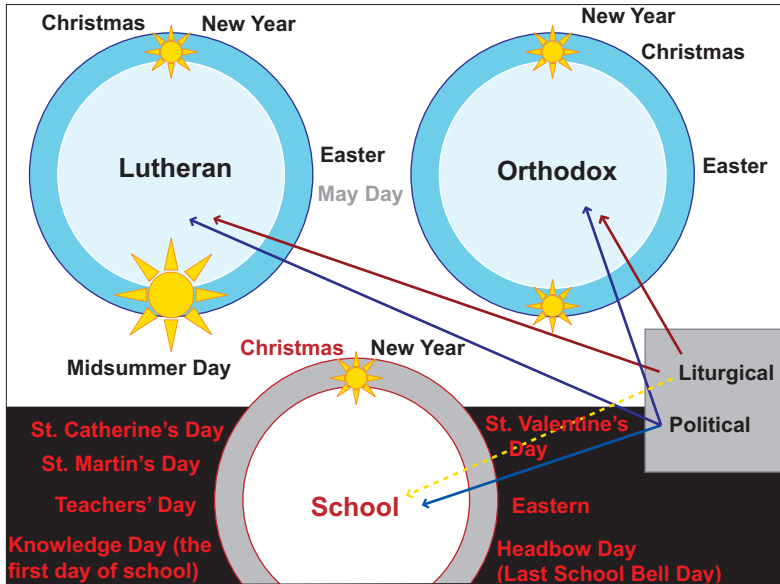
Moonlight as treatment was also important. Chicken-pox was cured using whisking in moonlight – the patient was in the moonlight, the charmer in the shadows, shaded from moonlight, and performing the whisking with a specially made whisk. Sprains and warts were also treated by folk doctors by symbolically palming moonlight and “washing” the affected area with circular motions. Sometimes the patient was told to wash hands with moonlight and imitate hand washing.

One of the fixed formulae using moonlight to cure was “Go like the old moon from the sky!” that was repeated three or nine times. The same incantation formula was often used as the final phrase of a longer curing formula. The phase of the moon was also important in Bulgarian incantations, the same principles applied (Amrojan 2005: 7).

Bulgarian records highlight sunset and sunrise as both suitable times to perform curing rituals as well as a good time to draw water for treatment from a well or spring. Similarly, in the Estonian tradition these times were considered good for reciting formulae that regulated social relations, healed tumours and wards, warded against pests, and performing rituals that required “no stranger to see it” or “not talking to anybody”. However, usually incantations were performed during the daytime.

Incantations and their accompanying rituals is also subject of Svetlana M. Tolstaya’s proposed rules for the compression and dilation (elongation) of time. Identical phenomena are well known in the psychological and philosophical discourse, where they are used in a somewhat different sense.

Cyclicity and dilation of time are found in many incantations. Curing incantations are commonly performed three or nine times in a row. The curing ritual could be held on one but also on three consecutive Thursdays (or over an even longer time interval, as in the case of Bulgarian method for curing epilepsy: the procedure was repeated twice every twenty days) – the heal-



Drawing 3. Interaction of calendar cycles in today's Estonia.

ing cycle is of considerable length. Often also objects used in the ritual or performance location are changed during the ritual. For example, the patient's back is cured on the threshold of the bedroom, kitchen and house door, but children's diseases are treated in the sauna using various objects.

On the one hand, the times incantations is repeated is determined (three or nine times in a row on a certain day) and points to the chronology of the ritual (the incantation is performed in a certain position and in fixed order), but on the other hand the frequency depends on the choices and decisions of the charmer. If the patient is cured, there is no need for repetition any more.

Besides chronological order and frequency, the third time parameter is duration. Incantations are short texts and their performance takes a lot less time than performing the accompanying curing ritual. Shorter incantations take, for example, 0.20 min, longer ones 1.2–3 minutes. The ritual accompanying the incantation takes 10–20 minutes, less often up to 60 minutes or longer. Not only is the duration of the incantation so

much shorter than the accompanying ritual, it can be performed either at the beginning, middle or end of the ritual. In dialogue incantations, the short dialogue may take up to half of the duration of the treatment session, and in the case of traumas the incantation may take about as long as the accompanying acts. However, patients do not perceive the powerful text as briefly as it actually lasts when recited, but the psychological tension, trust in the charmer, the disease and novel situation, chronology of the ritual, make it seem much longer, as my experiments have pointed out.

Sample text:

Curing snakebite. The healer inspected the patient, took a cord of willow bark and tied above the bite site so the swelling would not go further. Then took a stone from the ground and started rubbing it around the bite mark.

While rubbing, the healer was reciting:

“Evil girls, evil boys,

They poked my boy (daughter, in the case of a woman).

Be you motley or black or grey

Or coloured erase your mistake.”

After reciting the words the healer spat on the ground.

After spitting, made like a cross on the bite site, saying

“Christ Jesus!” All the time while reciting, the stone was

moved around the affected spot (ERA II 234, 283 (5)

< Røuge parish (1932).

Application of Gerald Gennette’s model for chronological representation of events (outlined in “Narrative Discourse”, 1983) reveals that performing an incantation is generally depicted as a scene – a one-on-one correspondence between the act and the discourse, and less often as a summary (events presented in abbreviation), or rarely as a pseudo-recording of the dialogue between the characters (the latter primarily in the case of dialogue incantations).

Recital of incantations follows the general rules for ritual performance, namely it observes chronological order and time anchors, prescribed duration and performance frequency. There is also a typical pattern of pauses during which no observable treatment or charming takes place. Holding pauses is characteristic of traditional folk healing as a whole and its role is as

important as the ritual crying, laughing or swearing performed as part of traditional customs.

Despite the fact that each new performance of a ritual contains opportunities for inserting variation and personal choices, regular repetition has forced the memories and folk beliefs to fixed ruts that new performances deter rather than encourage innovation in performance and discourage variation. Cognitivists believe that the stability of religious rituals is increased by their (to an extent) public nature – the rituals require collective and simultaneous co-ordinated action. Since the success of religious rituals depends on the co-operation of numerous participants, this severely limits freedom in performance.

Secondly, all such rituals are related to a special cultural mode of performance that does not tolerate variation but reduces the variation of rituals (McCauley, Lawson 2002: 50). In the above we considered the time of performing an incantation and the requirements of the related communicative strategy. However, in addition to the process of performing the incantation, a separate time category is constructed by the incantation text, which is a linguistic and folkloric product with its own time categories and time terms.

Time as it is presented in incantation texts is often synchronous with the accompanying performing situation or ritual and representative of the present real time – it is also delivered as first person appeals to either the disease, people, beings, or higher powers.

Examples:

Court words. When you go to the court hall and see the judge, you whisper quietly:

*“Me lamb, you wolf,
But I will eat you up!”*

or

Harm caused by the evil eye.

“Hendrik, Hendrik,

Do not come to my house!

I have two dogs,

Three black cats.

They will eat and rend you

And beat you with briar branches” (RKM II 213, 24 (4)

< Røuge parish).

Written records describe the ritual aspect of performing incantations often with construction of “if-then” or as a potential future while the text represents the present. In written memories of healing rituals, the charming and healing ritual is described as a past event that is often also dated. “When my aunt’s daughter, now 47, was doctored at three years of age” – the record from 1974 allows us to date the event to about 1930–1933. In one account the schoolteacher Juhan Saar of Kihnu Island dated the charming of his wife’s shoulder to when his new house was finished, adding with the precision of year and month when that took place – January, 1931 (he wrote to the folklore archive a few months after the event, using the help of his diary). Several of such reminiscences describe the experience of not the immediately involved, but the experience of someone who observed the event, the reflections and attitude of that observer, mediated emotions and knowledge. Incantation texts very rarely allow us to date them. Even general time references, such as mentioning the waning moon, do not allow us to conclude the treatment was performed necessarily in a moonlit period as the reference is a cliché, a metaphor.

However, many curing incantation texts do describe a mythical or very ancient time when Jesus, the apostles or saints were alive and roved the land, Moses saved his people from slavery, Jonah was swallowed by the whale – the time of the events described in the Bible. Another time anchor in the legendary healing words is the epic past or the time of the other side (other world). This is a time where absolute silence reigns, trees are growing backwards, a man in black clothes steps from the sea to the shore (in Estonian incantations), or the time of the so-called left-handed world (in Bulgarian incantations). Incantations also used schemes built on impossibility: a disease can not spread before a stone has developed roots and a tree grows without roots, a bird flies without wings.

The Spatial Dimension of Incantations

Next we are going to consider the dimension of space in incantations. Up till now, space has been described primarily from the point of view of mythical landscapes (Ilomäki 1989; Krohn 1924).

Lived space with its socio-cultural relations and the terms of opened and closed, private and public space were brought to the spotlight in folkloristic only recently in connection with studies of oral literature and its narrating. These categories of space are interesting also in the case of magic texts.

Although intuitively we would presume that in the case of incantations and their performing relations to performance location would be very important, in actual fact the place and performing location are both less often and more ambiguously mentioned than time in written records, the place is only broadly outlined. Additional requirements are made, if at all, about the quarters and centrality-periphery of the location, especially in the case of buildings located in public space.

Of course, to an extent it is the essential feature of language – there is no need to define spatial relations in detail. Language is by its nature selective and codes only some features. Linguistic mechanisms central to recreating space are selection and enrichment. Spatial and visual details are outlined only in general, causing a need for information enrichment.

The space that the ritual was performed in was the landscape of a specific town or village. In many cases we can see (or read between the lines) that the written record gives us or outsiders only the general direction to understanding the spatial relations, while the same scant spatial description is sufficient to orient the performer and patient, and from their point of view there is no need for additional details. A similar scarcity of spatial pointers is characteristic of other folklore genres as well. The next sample is a case where the location for performing the ritual can be derived from the context:

When a dog puppy was brought home, it was put in the kettle and a little fire was made underneath it. Then one went and shouted three times in through the smoke-hole:

“What are you boiling there?”

And the other replied from indoors:

“I am boiling a portion for the wolf.”

Then the puppy was let out of the kettle and the wolf shouldn't attack it (H II 13, 165 (7) < Koeru parish).

What we can conclude from this sample text is that the ritual was not performed in the main living house but either in a

summer kitchen, sauna or grain-trashing room. People orient themselves in space with the help of mental maps, but these maps are created, in addition to personal room experience, also from texts they read. American narrative researcher David Herman (2002) observes that cognitive mental maps help us to model spatial relations between people – in the above sample, the deictics “one” and “the other” define the farmstead household members.

Rules regulating the incantation performance reveal that in some cases the healing rituals were performed in inaccessible locations. This does not mean far-away wilderness, but once again the home and nearby locations that were transformed inaccessible by the way of a ritual performed by certain people at a certain time. One of the conditions of uniqueness of rituals is, according to religion researcher J. Tambiah, the relation to special places and special time, as well as the fact that rituals are never merely copies of prior or future performances (Tambiah 1979: 115).

Some diseases required the patient to visit the charmer. They were asked to wait either outside or in a certain room. Records about wonder healers of the 19th and 20th century indicate that sometimes they had so many patients that they needed to wait several days for their turn. In that case, the village people helped in providing them accommodation (and in some cases this became an additional source of income for the villagers, for example healer Jaesche). In most cases, however, the healer was called to the patient’s home so that the charming took place in the home sphere, indoors (in the sauna, near the heating stove, in the living space, in the stables) or at liminal borders (the front door’s threshold, thresholds between rooms, the sauna threshold, next to the window). Suitable outside locations included fence-posts, the gate, the closest crossroad, a field or forest edge near the household, a specific land spot the disease was believed to have been gotten from. The rocks, stones, trees and bushes that the disease was transferred to as well as the healing water spring were usually in the shared public village space, or sometimes in the village periphery.

Let us have a look at the typical spaces of incantation texts. In incantation texts we see side by side mythic, foreign and

far-away landscapes (sea, bog, morass, forest), as well as man-made space (manor, village, household or farmstead). Man-made spaces are seldom specified – the disease was sent to another village, the wolf to the manor’s herd, the disease to a stone and tree-stump – obviously there was no need to enrich the spatial location with detailed specifications. Bulgarian incantations name existing high mountains (Stara planina, Pirin), locations such as Samokov, Sofia, the Black Sea, the Danube River, as well as mythical places. The Danube is called a bottomless river of blood; the Pirin Mountain is an empty place where nothing happens. Such locations situated on the borderline of real and unreal are side by side with Tilimis-mountains, or bare and empty mountains, Tilimis-town, situated behind nine seas, the weird so-called “left world” where everything is different, as well as Biblical landscapes. Mythical landscape objects in Estonian incantations include the Black Sea – a strange water body that black men come out of, and a mythical house where Mary or the saints are boiling woollen thread (the thread of life). Biblical landscapes ranging from an unspecified desert where Jesus travelled on a donkey to specific locations related to the life of Jesus and the apostles (e.g., the Jordan River, Gethsemane Garden, Zion Mountain, Jerusalem, Nazareth, and the Red sea) as well as landscape objects mentioned in the Apocrypha are usually found in healing words with legend motifs.

We can presume that far-off landscapes, the authority of the Bible and the mythical “other world” played a significant role in the sacralization of time and space. Associations with sacred people and landscape, with model events that have to help a contemporary healing ritual and bring a successful recuperation, or bring order to economic or social space, are of primary importance. At the same time, it is not really important whether the incantation reciter knows where the river of Jordan geographically runs and how it is related to the most sacred events and canonical texts, or believes naively that the river is perhaps in the neighbouring district. Likewise is it probably immaterial whether the charmer and the patient, being participants in the ritual, place the mythical word together with its landscape objects onto their mental map, or they perceive it as a reality that needs no further specification.

Conclusion

The time characteristics of charming are more strictly regulated than its spatial aspects. Narratives do not give precise spatial details, and neither do descriptions of charming events. However, the description does refer in general to the movements and spatial relations of the participants. Spatial deictics work as strategic hints, calling on the reader or listener to imagine the action site creatively, adapting the position of a hypothetical observer. We can conclude from written records that charming was usually performed at home, indoors, or in the closer outdoor sphere: they did not go far to perform the incantations, usually it was done on the territory of the farmstead and its economically active area, less often at some point within the home village. Besides living and working structures, charming locations could be peripheral or liminal locations of the farmstead: the location suitable for disease transfer could be on the border of the village, intersection of fields, etc. Connection to a potential point of contagion was created by means of an object, earth or water brought from there or by the incantation text. Incantation texts send harmful animals and people, expansive evil and disease to unspecified wild places or remote real places.

Like incantation performance includes the living space and the mythical space (acting as the sacraliser, transformer and focaliser of actions of space), both actual and imagined world acting as a complicated orchestration of near and far-off room, the dimension of time is just as multifaceted. In addition to incantations related to the cyclic holidays and linear progression of the ritual year, there are a number of charms that are related to the day of the week, phase of the moon, a certain time of the day, darkness and light, sunrise and sunset. The segmentation of time, the chronological order and duration of charming and charms, the compression and dilation of time with the help of ritual are all part of the time characteristics, some of which are always taken into account and some of which are used depending on the situation and (disease) etiology. Time scale in incantation texts ranges from mythical past to potential future, while the incantation text itself usually represents the present real time. Thus, actions and actors of

the mythical past are transported to the present; the incantation models are re-established and activated by empathy and associations.

There are a lot of similarities in stereotypes and in choice of time and space of incantation performance in Estonia and Bulgaria. Place names and biblical locations are also very similar in the texts. However, there is a marked difference in relation to actual and mythical locations. Estonians are less likely to use location indicators: the disease and the evil are sent to the neighbour or the landlord (human-created locations), or to unspecified forest, bog, tree or stone (non-cultured landscape elements). In Bulgaria, these locations are much more often specified and related to actual surrounding landscapes – specific mountains, rivers and places. Those locations can be attributed mythical qualities and there is an advanced system of named mythical cities and other localities.

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ERA: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivi rahvaluulekogu (1927–1944) [Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944)]

H: Jakob Hurda rahvaluulekogu (1860–1906) [Folklore collection of Jakob Hurt (1860–1906)]

RKM: Fr. R. Kreutzwaldi nimelise Kirjandusmuuseumi rahvaluulekogu (1945–1995) [Folklore collection of the Literary Museum of Fr. R. Kreutzwald (1945–1995)]

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Through the Ages II. Time, Space, and Eternity

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<http://www.folklore.ee/ri/pubte/ee/sator/sator13/>

ISSN 1406-2011 (print)

ISSN 1736-0323 (web)

ISBN 978-9949-490-98-1 (print)

ISBN 978-9949-490-99-8 (web)

Tartu 2015

Printed version: Mare Kõiva. **Through the Ages II.
Time, Space, and Eternity.** SATOR 13. Tartu 2014

Author: Mare Kõiva

Series editor: Mare Kõiva

Editor: Liisa Vesik

Translators: Liisa Vesik, Mall Leman, Lii Liin,
Tiina Mällo

Cover design: Lembit Karu

Designed by NGO Estonia Folklore Institute

HTML: Diana Kahre

Electronic version editing is supported by EKKM14-344
Expansion of the sphere of use and introduction of the
Estonian language, culture and folklore in electronic
information carriers.

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