

CHARMERS AND CHARMING IN GERVĖČIAI LITHUANIAN COMMUNITY IN BELARUS

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The article focuses on the social functioning of verbal charms within a community. The subject of analysis is a small Lithuanian-speaking community living in the vicinity of Gervėčiai, Belarus, near the Lithuanian border. The survey covers synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The diachronic analysis is based on materials from fieldwork carried out in the vicinity of Gervėčiai in 1970, and stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives. Between 2010 and 2012 the author conducted fieldwork within Gervėčiai community.

The article analyses the number and density of charmers within the area, and the social and demographic peculiarities of charming. Special attention is paid to circumstances of charm transmission and family connections that can often be observed between the charmer and his/her successor. In addition, the sacral aspects of charming are considered in the article: charming is viewed by charmers as a peculiar religious practice that has not been authorised by the church.

Key words: healing charms, Lithuanian charms, transmission of charms, charmer, community, religion

Lithuanian healing charms have been investigated for more than a hundred years now, however, usually focusing on the texts of verbal charms, their structure, motives, distribution and the comparative context. Therefore the circumstances of charming and transmission of charms have been neglected. This article is intended to unveil the social context of Lithuanian charming practice. A small Lithuanian community residing in the vicinity of Gervėčiai, Astravyets district, Belarus has been selected for investigation. This is the Lithuanian enclave in Belarus located about 20 km off the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and about 60 km from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania (Figure 1).

The research covers synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Field research in Gervėčiai was pursued between 2010 and 2012¹. In the course of the fieldwork, I communicated with charmers who are still practising today as well as with their relatives and acquaintances. I also tried to collect as much information as possible about former charmers and the circumstances of charm learning, and I asked the charmers to whom and why they would like to pass on their knowledge. With a view to establishing whether the family status of the recipi-



Figure 1 (left). Gervėčiai area, located about 20 km from the Lithuanian-Belarusian border.



Figure 2 (below). Lithuanian villages in Gervėčiai parish.

ent is of importance in charm transmission, inquiries into family genealogical lines were made. Tombstone inscriptions in local graveyards were analysed in order to supplement meagre biographical and genealogical knowledge on deceased charmers. The diachronic research was greatly aided by materials from fieldwork carried out in the vicinity of Gervėčiai in 1970 that are stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives².

The research covers a defined geographical area, consisting of 13 villages (Figure 2), the population of which are mostly ethnic Lithuanians. Based on data collected in 1970 and between 2010 and 2012, in total 127 individuals practising charmers have been identified. Table 1 features illnesses, listed according to the frequency of charmers' healing (see number of charmers specialised in particular illnesses in column 3, number of practising charmers during the 2010 to 2012 period in column 4).

In general, illnesses healed by charming in Gervėčiai coincide with charming trends prevalent in the territory of Lithuania as 13 of the illnesses most frequently treated by charming are found in the Lithuanian top 15 (Vaitkevičienė 2008: 23–24, 76). However, Gervėčiai is distinguished by high numbers of charmers treating fright (62), sprain (30), and hernia (17). Moreover, a disorder called *padvėjas* (evil spirit, cf. Belarusian *надзеў*), which is understood as penetration of a demonic spiritual creature into a human body, is an exception as no charms against it have been recorded in Lithuania.

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PECULIARITIES

In the course of the research attempts were made to establish the distribution of charmers in the area under investigation and identify what part of the community they made up. The administrative and religious centre of the area is Gervėčiai village, where the institutions of administration, trade and services (local administration, bank, post office, library, school, etc.) are concentrated. In addition to these, the Roman Catholic parish church, where Mass is celebrated on Sundays and major feasts, is located in Gervėčiai. Therefore, roads from all the neighbouring villages lead to Gervėčiai. A smaller administrative centre is Rimdžiūnai, which is the second largest settlement in the region after Gervėčiai, with a school and kolkhoz administrative centre. Only half of its inhabitants are locals (mostly centred in the old part of the village); others came there to work in the kolkhoz or were relocated from the zone of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant after the 1986 catastrophe.

Administrative and religious centres have little influence on the tradition of charming, however, they reinforce social connections between people from dif-

No.	Illness	Total number	2010–2012
1.	fright	62	12
2.	evil eye	49	11
3.	erysipelas	46	7
4.	sprain	30	9
5.	snake bite	20	2
6.	evil wind	19	4
7.	hernia	18	–
8.	boils	11	1
9.	bleeding	7	1
10.	evil spirit (<i>padvėjas</i>)	4	–
11.	toothache	5	–
12.	witchcraft	3	–
13.	inflammation of carpal joint (<i>grižius</i>)	2	1
14.	sty	2	2
15.	rabies	2	–
16.	insanity	1	–
17.	epilepsy	1	–
18.	rheumatism	1	–
19.	night-blindness	1	–
20.	deafness and dumbness	1	–
21.	stomach ache	1	–
22.	warts	1	–
23.	swine illnesses	1	–
24.	any illness	4	1

Table 1. Illnesses treated by charming in Gervėčiai community.

ferent villages who come to common church services or meet at administrative institutions. If the need arises, people first of all tend to address the charmer living in the same village or in a neighbouring village within the parish. In addition, people who work or have worked together develop close relationships, for example, women who worked together in a kolkhoz and strained hands doing hard work would heal one another by means of charming – they would charm a thread with knots called *saitai* and tie it onto the sore hand. If in the circle of close acquaintances there is no charmer capable of healing a particular ailment, charmers are sought in other villages or sometimes other areas

and districts. The number of charmers in administrative centres has not been observed to be greater. The area is not in any way centred from the charming point of view; the patient himself/herself becomes the centre when starting to look for a charmer in the local area. The research conducted also does not indicate that the church would in any way restrict the practice of charmers, for example charmer Genia Petrovskaya (Gervėčiai village, 1927–2007) was the wife of the sacristan and would help her husband take care of the church. She lived in a house next to the church and patients who came to church services would later go to see the charmer. A highly pious charmer Marija Gražulienė (Gervėčiai village, 1908–1970) lived a few houses away from the parish church. The two charmers were more widely known due to the fact that they lived close to the church and it was convenient to drop by on the way to the church or when making other arrangements in the village.

However, sometimes an undistinguished remote village can become the centre of attraction due to a renowned charmer, for example in the 1910s–1930s Peliagrinda village was famous for being home to charmer Šimas Augulis (1883–1934), and in the second half of the 20th century Girios village was famous for charmer Agota Jakavickienė (1909–late 20th century). Patients came to these charmers not only from the neighbouring villages but also from cities and even foreign countries (Astravyets, Vilnius, Minsk, Maladzyechna; Agota Jakavickienė would heal patients coming from as far away as Moscow). Legends about the powers of these charmers spread wide and were long-lived; between 2010 and 2012 quite a few folk narratives about charmer Šimas Augulis from Peliagrinda were recorded in villages around Gervėčiai, although the charmer had died in 1934. Šimas Augulis is depicted in the narratives as a powerful magician capable of curing all diseases (including deafness, muteness and insanity). In the stories about healing told by his former patients or their relatives, special emphasis is placed on Šimas Augulis' unique capacity not only to establish the cause of illness, but also to read the thoughts of the people addressing him and to describe their past and future. Meanwhile this magician is somewhat demonised in folk-belief legends: he is said to have possessed the *Black Book* and performed various magic tricks in order to play jokes or to teach somebody a lesson (for example immobilising the wedding party's carriage, or making the girls' skirts fall down during dances when they were playing the fiddle, etc.). However, neither stories by Šimas Augulis' acquaintances nor the folk legends present any evidence of this charmer having caused any irreparable damage, let alone harm somebody's health.

Stories of a different kind are told about another famous person from these parts, namely Agota Jakavickienė, a charmer of Ukrainian origin. She settled in Gervėčiai parish after marrying a man from Girios village who did military

service in Ukraine. People were especially perplexed by the way this charmer diagnosed illnesses: the patient was required to bring a raw egg, which charmer then would beat into a glass of water and according to the way the egg looked determine the causes and nature of the person's ailment. People still remember various treatments prescribed by this charmer, for example, Janina Trepšienė (born 1931) from Rimdžiūnai village told me about Jakavickienė charming her four-year-old son who was suffering from fright to the point that he could not even walk. Having uttered the required formula, the charmer instructed Trepšienė to go to the cemetery, cut out a strip from the bark of the aspen tree growing there, measure the boy with this strip (its length should have been similar to the child's height) and then bury the strip in the corner of the cemetery. After Trepšienė followed these instructions, her son was cured (LTRF cd 769). Bronia Kuckienė, Jakavickienė's neighbour and friend, remembered the way this charmer used to heal skin complaints by applying wet linen and burning flax above it. Jakavickienė could charm numerous ailments, including epilepsy and bewitchment; the patients whom she cured of serious illnesses would describe their experiences as miraculous healings (LTRF cd 749).

In the last decades the number of charmers has plummeted. In the 2010–2012 period only 21 practicing charmers lived in the Gervėčiai area, almost half of whom practiced only a single verbal charm. Analysis of the situation in 1970 (on the basis of data collected in the fieldwork sessions of that year and memories of respondents interviewed between 2010 and 2012) allowed identification of as many as 68 charmers practicing at that time. Hence, in four decades the number of charmers in the Gervėčiai area decreased to less than a third.

Nonetheless, changes in the demographic situation should also be taken into consideration – the total population of the village decreased thus, alongside the decline of the tradition, resulting in a decrease in the number of charmers. Taking into account the said circumstances, it would be more precise to speak about the relative rather than absolute number of charmers per capita. Based on the data of the population census of 1970, 2521 individuals lived in the 13 villages in the research area, whereas data from the population census of 2004 suggest that the population decreased to 1601 (*Памяць* 2004: 535–623). Hence, in 1970 there was one charmer per 37 community members, whereas in 2010 one charmer per 76 community members. These figures clearly indicate that in four decades the proportion of charmers to the total number of inhabitants halved. Though this figure makes the decline in absolute numbers of charmers mentioned above less dramatic, it still indicates an obvious decline in tradition.

These statistics allow the assessment of the scope of charming in traditional communities. Even with the decline of the tradition, the number of charmers remains significant. This becomes obvious when the number of charmers and

doctors is compared (calculating the number of charmers and doctors per 1000 people). Table 2 offers World Health Organization statistical data which indicate number of doctors per 1000 people in Belarus, Lithuania and the United Kingdom³; this data is then collated to the statistics of charmers in the Lithuanian villages of Gervėčiai area in 2010:

Number of doctors (per 1000 people) in Belarus in 2010	Number of doctors (per 1000 people) in Lithuania in 2010	Number of doctors (per 1000 people) in the United Kingdom in 2010	Number of charmers in Gervėčiai community in 2010
5	3.6	2.7	13

Table 2. Comparison of numbers of charmers and doctors per 1000 people

Despite the rapid decline in the charming tradition, the number of charmers still exceeds that of doctors. This points to the vitality of the charming tradition and shows that in people's minds healing by means of charming and charmers themselves are appreciated and cherished by community members.

TRANSMISSION OF CHARMS

One of the key aspects in the investigation of charming is the pattern of transmission of verbal charms within the community. As often as not transmission is shrouded in mystery and tied by rules to which it is necessary to adhere in order to ensure that the transmitted charm does not lose its power, while the disciple becomes a socially acknowledged charmer.

Unlike charm texts,⁴ transmission rules are not particularly strictly delimited by language and folkloric or religious tradition, displaying considerable similarities in rather distant European regions. According to recent publications discussing the rules of charm transmission in various countries in Europe (England, Wales, France, Greece, Estonia, Russia and others), and also among the English and Irish emigrants in Canada, the following general tendencies may be discerned:

1. Charms are passed on to just one disciple and only immediately before the charmer's passing away (or when the charmer is no longer capable of practicing; Passalis 2011: 9, Davies 1998: 42, Kõiva 1996: 16; Vaitkevičienė 2008: 46, 91);
2. Charms are as a rule passed on down the family line (Passalis 2011: 10; Davies

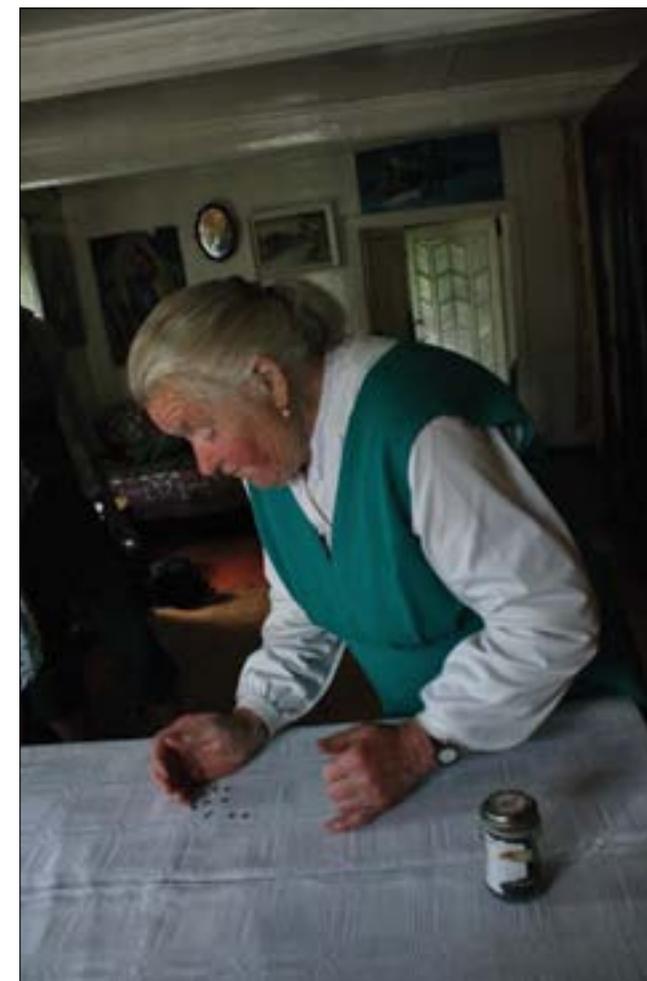


Figure 3. Leonarda Augulienė from Rimdžiūnai charms while counting out the *Datura stramonium* seeds in order to treat fright. Photo by Daiva Vaitkevičienė 2011.

1998: 42; Lovelace 2011: 42; Mansikka 1929: 21, 25; Vaitkevičienė 2008: 48, 92; Толстая 1999: 239; Барташэвіч 2005: 547), although passing on to friends, neighbours or even strangers is also possible (Davies 1998: 42, Passalis 2011: 10, Kõiva 1996: 10). The importance of the family line is illustrated by a peculiarity noted in France, where the charmer is socially acknowledged only when the charm has already been passed on along three family generations ("the healing gift had to be known to have been passed down through three generations at least to be recognized by the community", Davies 2004: 94);

3. Charms can only be passed on to certain special members of the family. In Western Europe and among British emigrants, passing on to the seventh son, who is allegedly endowed with special powers, is emphasised (Davies 1998: 43; Lovelace 2011: 40, cf. Vaz de Silva 2003). Among Lithuanians and Belorussians, there is a deeply entrenched tradition of passing charms on to the firstborn or lastborn child in the family (Mansikka 1929: 23; Vaitkevičienė 2008: 49, 92; Būgienė 2010: 76; Баргашэвіч 2005: 547); passing on to the firstborn is also known in Bulgaria (Толстая 1999: 239);
4. “Contrasexual transmission”, when woman passes on charms to a man and vice versa (Davies 1998: 43; Roper 2005: 80; Lovelace 2011: 42; Passalis 2011: 10; Vaitkevičienė 2008: 49, 92);
5. Charms are passed on to a person of a certain age (e.g. the charmer’s junior, Roper 2005: 81, Vaitkevičienė 2008: 47, 91; Баргашэвіч 2005: 547; Толстая 1999: 239), a married person (Dobrovolskaya 2011: 87), or conversely, to young girls (Толстая 1999: 239);
6. The charmer must possess inherent powers, for example “strong blood” (Davies 2004: 93; Būgienė 2010: 75); or this power may be handed down by the ancestors (for example Owen Davies describes cases of inheriting healing power from ancestors who would eat eagle’s meat, the power would then last through nine generations (Davies 1998: 48).

When conducting research in Gervėčiai, I attempted to establish patterns of transmission typical to this community. The first three rules were undoubtedly confirmed, forming a common normative complex: charms are passed on to a sole person only, who is a member of the family and either firstborn or lastborn (this complex will be further discussed in detail below). The passing on of the charms to the charmers’ juniors is regarded as a matter of course which is not even consciously reflected on (this happens naturally, since charms are passed on from one generation to another). The inherent peculiarities of the charmers are not emphasised in Gervėčiai, although they tend to become evident when charmers are compared with one another or with their patients. Thus, the charmer is commonly thought to have “strong blood” (stronger than the patients’), and a charmer of stronger blood is considered to be more powerful. Yet contrasexual transmission seems to be completely missing in Gervėčiai. Admittedly, this mode of transmission is generally scarcely known across Lithuania: only three such cases have been recorded (Vaitkevičienė 2008: 48, 92), possibly being borrowings from other traditions (this question could be elucidated by studies of the transmission patterns among neighbouring peoples – Poles, Belorussians and Latvians).



Figure 4. Zofija Kuloic from Gėliūnai shows the way to charm water in order to heal sprain. Photo by Evelina Simanavičiūtė 2011.

Transmission on to a single person

When attempting to record charms, researchers constantly face the fact that a charm must be passed on to a single person and cannot be disclosed to others, since it will then no longer be suitable for healing. For instance, during the fieldwork session in Gervėčiai area in 1970 the Lithuanian folklorist Bronislava Kerbelytė wished to record charms from the charmer Paulina Mockienė (Galčiūnai village, 1896–1980), but she could not disclose them. The reason for the refusal was the fact that she may still need the charms herself as people come from afar to ask her for help, and disclosure of charms would strip them of their healing power (LTR 4160/110). However, not all charmers hold such strict attitudes; although everyone is aware of the rule, at times it is disregarded or regarded only partly, thinking that the power of a charm may weaken, yet not vanish completely. Mania Laurinavičienė (Gėliūnai village, b. 1922) has passed

her charms to several members of her family. In 2010 she disclosed her charms to a folklore collector. In our conversation in 2012 Mania complained that after she had disclosed the charms to an “unknown man”, fewer patients would come to her for help. In Laurinavičienė’s words, that man took her patients away as she believes that once the man learned her charms, he started charming himself, having absorbed part of the power and lured the patients away.

Some charmers disagree with the opinion that when disclosed to another person, the charm loses part of its healing power. Anelia Buckienė (Gudininkai village, 1912–apx. 1980) taught her cousin Janina Karmazienė (Girios village, b. 1934) to heal evil wind by means of charming, and the charm was later successfully used by both women (LTRF cd 740/36). Marija Magadzia (Gruodžiai village, b. 1931) learned to charm erysipelas and the evil eye from her friend Julia Kaltan, who lives in the same locality (Gruodžiai village, b. 1931). The charmers claim that if one of them died, the other would uphold the charms. Today, both friends are charmers and both are equally powerful. Sometimes when the patient is seriously ill the charmers charm him/her one by one. According to Marija Magadzia, a charm is not a secret and she has taught quite a few people to heal by charming. In addition, she shared the charms with folklore collectors adding that from then on they could also take up healing (LTRF cd 743/21). However, such cases of charms being easily shared with other people are extremely rare. Usually one person is taught to heal by charming and this person as a rule is a family member.

Family members vs. strangers

The tradition of transmitting charms from one generation to another in the same family is strongly sustained in Gervėčiai Lithuanian enclave. Usually charms are inherited by children and other family members, as people avoid passing them to strangers. Marytė Juškienė (Mockos village, 1931–2013) maintains that “everyone teaches their children [that you have to] give what you have” (LTRF cd 538/7). Janina Karmazienė from Peliagrinda village (niece of charmer Paulina Mockienė) said that by no means could charms be passed on to strangers (LTRF cd 739/58). Marytė Juškienė related that charming was learnt by one generation from the previous, charms were passed on shortly before death and strictly to family members. She asked her mother’s cousin to teach her charming but was refused (LTRF cd 537/10). Marytė Juškienė learnt only one charm from her relatives: her father’s spinster aunt Anelia Kiškelytė (Mockos village, late 19th century–1960), who shared their house, taught her to heal fright.

However, there had been cases when charms were passed on to strangers. Janina Karmazienė (Girios village, b. 1934) learnt to charm erysipelas from her neighbour Bronia Urbonavičienė (Girios village, 1907–1999), with whom they were friends and whom she attended to in her later years. Charmer Anelia Buckienė (Gudininkai village) wished to pass on the charms to her neighbour Leonarda Mažeikienė, however, the latter refused because her husband objected. In almost all cases charms are transmitted to strangers when there are no possibilities to pass them on to family members or relatives.

In the course of the research, data was obtained on 25 cases of charm transmission between relatives; these data are summarised in the Table 3:

Family connections (blood relatives)	Number
mother – daughter	13
grandmother – granddaughter	3
mother – son	2
father – daughter	2
female cousin – female cousin	2
aunt – niece	1
aunt – nephew	1
grandfather’s sister – brother’s granddaughter	1
Total:	25

Table 3. Transmission of charms to blood relatives

The transmission of charms to blood relatives is overwhelmingly in the mother-daughter direct line (13 cases). There are cases when the direct line skips a generation: grandmother passes her knowledge on to her granddaughter (3 cases) or grandfather’s sister teaches her brother’s granddaughter (1 case). Criss-cross transmission (involving a change of sex) was recorded of two types: mother to son (2 cases), father to daughter (2 cases). There are occurrences of more remote transmissions which are outside the direct family line, but they are rather rare: female cousin to female cousin (2 cases), aunt to niece (1 case), and aunt to nephew (1 case).

These data suggest that the female line prevails in charm transmission over the male line (not a single case of father to son transmission has been recorded), however, this might be attributed to the fact that in general, female charmers outnumber male charmers. Not a single respondent referred to gender as an important factor, yet it was mentioned that women were more eager to learn verbal charms.

Charms may be transmitted not only to blood relatives but also to people related by marriage (Table 4):

Relation by marriage	Number
mother-in-law – daughter-in-law	3
father-in-law – daughter-in-law	1
husband – wife	1
mother's stepmother – stepdaughter's daughter	1
mother-in-law – mother-in-law	1
Total:	7

Table 4. Transmission of charms to relatives by marriage

Although charms are much less frequently transmitted to relatives by marriage, the tendency to pass them on *via* the mother-in-law – daughter-in-law line is the most obvious (3 cases). In all the cases the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law were linked by their place of residence (they either lived in the same house or close to each other in the same village).

In total, 32 cases of charm transmission to relatives (both blood relatives and in-laws) have been recorded. Only 7 cases are known of charms being passed on to people other than relatives. Most often in such cases the recipients are neighbours or friends (Table 5):

Communal relation	Number
female neighbour – female neighbour	3
female friend – female friend	3
Strangers	1
Total:	7

Table 5. Transmission of charms to community members (non-relatives)

It should be noted that in 6 cases out of 7 the charmer and her apprentice were related by close friendship or by living in the same neighbourhood. For example, Bronia Urbonavičienė (Girios village) passed a charm on to Janina Karmazienė (Girios village) as they were very close and Urbonavičienė's children had abandoned her in her later years. According to J. Karmazienė, B. Urbonavičienė and herself were even closer than relatives (LTRF cd 740/29).

Cases of strangers being taught to heal by charming are extremely rare. In the course of the research a single such case was detected: Marija Magadzja from Gruodžiai teaches anyone who would like to heal by means of charming

(including strangers; she claims to have taught quite a few people when she was in hospital in Astravyets).

Alongside the models of charm transmission to family and community members, there are some data regarding an extraordinary way of transmission in which a person is taught to charm in a dream. Charmer Mania Laurinavičienė, whose father Osip Sinkevicz (Puhavitchy village, 1876–1935) was taught to practice charming in a dream, relates the story. At that time a man was sick in a village and Mania's father dreamt of a late neighbour who said, "I will teach you to charm and you go and charm that man and give him charmed water to drink". Mania's father charmed the water, the patient drank it and was himself again. Since then Osip Sinkevicz started healing by charming (LTRF cd 762). This was the only story related to the teaching of charming in a dream recorded in Gervėčiai, however, there are other similar cases known both in Belarus (Лобач, Філіпенка 2006: 55, 208) and in Lithuania. For example, in Kalviai village (Dieveniškės parish, east Lithuania) Jozefa Jančis (1915–1998) saw her late neighbour Marilia Kapusta in a dream in which Marilia passed her charms on to Jozefa. Before her death Marilia Kapusta had promised to transmit her charms to Jozefa Jančis but failed and thus came in a dream to do so⁵. Extraordinary transmission of charms in a dream is known among Estonians (Kõiva 1996: 13, 16) and among southern Slavic people (Толстая 1999: 239).

The first and last child in the family

It is universally known that charms in Lithuania are passed on not to a random member of the family, but exclusively to the first- or last-born child (Vaitkevičienė 2008: 91). This general rule holds true in Gervėčiai as well and is proven by respondents' replies to the question of who is entitled to become a charmer. During my fieldwork I strived to verify the general rule of transmission by finding out the factual situation. Observation and survey results confirmed the regular rule, although it also revealed possible exceptions: out of 17 cases in which data on the charmer's position in the family is available, 14 were eldest or youngest children in their families, however, 3 were middle children, see Table 6:

First-born	Last-born	Only child	Middle child
4	7	3	3

Table 6. Charmers' position in the family from the point of view of primogeniture

Statistically the group of youngest children predominates. Although the general rule does not differentiate between the first- and last-born child, charms are usually inherited by the youngest (this is possibly due to a bigger age difference or certain social or emotional bonds between the parent and the last-born child). Three charmers were the only children in their families and also considered suitable to inherit charming.

Let us more closely consider the exceptions when charmers are neither the first nor the last children in their families and examine their qualification (if this in any way differs from that of other charmers). The charming power of these people differs greatly. Marija Gražulienė, who was the middle child in her family, was a renowned charmer able to heal many illnesses and frequently visited by patients. Zofija Kuloic (Gėliūnai village, 1929–2011) was not widely known and the surveyed members of the community could tell little about her healing. The charmer herself claimed that she had few patients and rather seldom, although some of them would come from remote localities. The third case of the charmer being the middle child in the family rather supports the rule of the first or last child than its exception: Marija Aleksienė (Peliagrinda village, 1920–2000) used charms to heal erysipelas, however, being neither the first nor the last child in the family could not be exactly sure whether her charming was of any help. Aldona Petrikienė (Peliagrinda village, b. 1928) who was treated from erysipelas by Aleksienė said that the charmer warned her that she was neither the first nor the last child in the family and thus the charm might be void. Aldona Petrikienė claims that the charm was to a certain extent helpful, yet failed to fully heal erysipelas and thus she had to turn to another charmer for help (LTRF cd 739/11).

The rule of charm transmission to the first or the last child is related to the concept of healing power. According to the general attitude, the middle child cannot heal people by charming because his/her charms do not work, as only the first- or last-born child has sufficient power to heal. For example, Janina Šaškevič, daughter of Veronika Ulvin (1906–1979) from Gaigaliai, wanted to learn charms, however, the mother refused to teach her as she was of the opinion that her daughter, being the middle child, would not have the necessary power and would be unable to help anyone.

It should be noted that only those who were born first and last can charm and not the eldest and youngest of the surviving children. If the first- or last-born children are dead, none of the surviving members of the family can charm. For example, Veronika Ulvin had 8 children, the eldest son Mečislovas refused to learn to charm considering it a frivolous and unmanly business, and her youngest daughter was dead. Therefore, Veronika Ulvin had no one to pass her charms to. This and other similar examples suggest that the power of charm-



Figure 5. Valerija Bublevič from Mockos demonstrates way of treating the evil eye: she pours water 9 times on the knives in the corner of the table. Photo by Daiva Vaitkevičienė 2011.

ing is understood as inheritance which can be passed on exceptionally to the first- or last-born children as they are the only children who inherit the power of healing. This reveals uneven distribution of power within the family and the singularity of the first- and last-born children. This concept, giving prominence to the beginning and end of the sequence of offspring, reflects the differentiation of family members in terms of power.

Transmission of charms as continuation of tradition

As already mentioned, charms are perceived as an inheritance: charms used by parents and grandparents are inherited by their children and grandchildren or other relatives (and only when children “are not entitled to” or “refuse the inheritance” are charms inherited by strangers). However, the transmission of charms is important not only to the recipients, but also to the transferors who are concerned with the transmission of their charms to other people before they die. It is believed that a charmer who fails to pass his/her charms on to someone faces a long agony before death. Anelė Buckienė from Gudininkai had no one to pass her charms to before death and was in agony for a long time before dying; her neighbour Leonarda Mažeikienė, who was sitting at the bedside of the dying charmer, relates that Anelė could not leave this world for three days – at times it seemed that she was about to die and then would come to life again (LTRF cd 756). Charmer Genia Pūkštienė (Rimdžiūnai village, early–late 20th century) had promised to pass her charms on to her daughter Leonarda Trepšienė, but her brother failed to call for Leonarda in time to see her dying mother. The daughter believes that as her mother “took the secret to the grave”, she had no peace and had been coming to her dreams for a year (LTRF cd 613/23).

Dead charmers take care of their charms after death as well. After her mother’s death, Mania Laurinavičienė had doubts about continuing to heal by charming. Then her mother, charmer Anelia Sinkevicz (Ponys village, late 19th century–1970s) came to her in a dream and ordered her to continue charming (LTRF cd 779/5).

Last but not least, the inheritance of charms and continuation of charmer’s activities is also related to paying homage to the deceased charmer and his/her memory. Bronia Urbonavičienė, who had passed her charms to Janina Karmazienė, said that after her death at least her charms would be cited and she will be remembered as the one who taught them (LTRF cd 740/29).

CHARMING AS RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Traditional charmers in rural localities are characterised by the fact that they perceive healing as a sacral activity and do not request remuneration for their services; such a perception of healing is characteristic of the entire tradition of Lithuanian charming (Vaitkevičienė 2008, 50–52). According to the Lithuanian folklorist Lina Būgienė, the concept of faith keeps repeatedly popping up in interviews with charmers, and is endowed with particular importance and meaning in their narratives and stories about themselves and their power (Būgienė 2010: 79). Charming as a powerful gift from God was acknowledged in Belarussian communities as well (Лобач, Філіпенка 2006: 10). The tendency to relate charming and religion is evident throughout Europe. However, charmers acting as healers are regarded as quite distinct from cunning folk practicing magic; such a strict differentiation is attested in England and Wales (Davies 1998: 41). However, in some regions these categories are not definite: according to Joseph Conrad (1987: 549) “while many South Slavic villages have two conjurers, one for healing charms and one for black magic, it is sometimes the case that one practises the other’s art”.

Research in Gervėčiai supports the fact that charmers view their work as a religious activity. Let us discuss a few typical instances of religiousness and unrequited activity.

One of the most renowned charmers of the Gervėčiai area, Mania Laurinavičienė, is very pious; she perceives charming as a religious practice and views the utterance of charms as a prayer to God. In her opinion, the power of healing comes from God and she is a mere mediator, because it is God who heals (LTRF cd 779/17). She believes that God is more powerful than man and can heal sicknesses that doctors fail to heal (LTRF cd 779/9).

Some charmers hold the opinion that charms help only in cases when the person believes in God (LTRF cd 635/345). Charmers often refer to charms as “sacred words”, “sacred utterances” or “sacred prayers”, as the charms themselves or prayers attached to them often mention Jesus Christ, St. Mary and Saints. This is the folk perception of Christianity which contradicts the official position of the church, disclaiming religious actions and texts that have not been approved by the church. Charmers and the community have a different perception of the situation – they understand charming as a sacral action, even though charmers have not been commissioned by the church to act as mediators between humans and the deity. Charmers, however, do not believe they need such authorisation and perceive healing by means of charming as a religious practice⁶. According to Lina Būgienė (Būgienė 2010: 75–76), who investigated charming in eastern Lithuania, charmers believe that their ability to help people comes from God and they take responsibility to act in the name of God.

Some charmers are really pious, actively participate in religious activities and interact with priests. Genoefa Petrovskaya, whose husband served as the sacristan of Gervėčiai church, would clean and keep the local church in order. Marija Gražulienė would strictly observe fasting. She took care of her relatives' religious lives, for example she arranged the Catholic christening of her hitherto unbaptised nieces. Leonarda Augulienė (Rimdžiūnai village, 1927–2014) sang in church and decorated the cross in Rimdžiūnai village. Marija Magadzia socialises with the priest, who comes to visit her. Charmers and members of the community, in contrast to the official position of the church, do not believe that charming contradicts Catholicism in any way. Conflict between healing by charming and the church is mainly generated by the unfavourable attitude of some priests in this matter. According to the charmers, even priests believe in the sacredness of charms, for example, the story has it that a parish priest whose legs were paralysed as the result of a car accident was healed by charming. The cause of the paralysis, as charmer Marija Magadzia puts it, was fright; the priest was healed by Astravyets charmers who treated him for fright. The charmer notes that the priest was at first reluctant to be treated by means of charming but that when he heard the text of the charm and was ascertained that “everything is clear”, gave his consent to being charmed and was healed (LTRFcd743/29). In Gervėčiai area and in the whole of Lithuania there is a popular story about a priest who scorned charming and would reprove women involved in charming from the church pulpit. However, when a snake bit his cow the priest gave credence to charming (LTRF cd 537; cf. LTR 4155/293, LTR 4232/552–553).

The sacredness of charming is also evident in refusing to take remuneration for the treatment. Charming is perceived as a gift of God that should be shared. Teresa Berniukevič (Mikhailishki village) when refusing to take payment for an act of charming says that “God gave me this gift and I don't need anything”. According to Janina Šaškevič, daughter of charmer Veronika Ulvin, when a patient asks you should not refuse to treat him/her by charming and “then God will send a blessing on you and God will help you” (LTRF cd 752/8). The attitude of the community towards a charmer who refuses to charm when asked is highly negative.

Charmers perceive their practice as sacred work. Charmer Marija Magadzia says that all people who heal by means of verbal charms do so “with God” (LTRF cd 743/30). According to Janina Šaškevič, the one who charms, helps people, therefore following the rite of charming, the charmer feels good and light at heart (LTRF cd 752/8). Marija Magadzia claims that even though the process of charming may be really hard (for example, if a person is harmed by evil eyes, the act of charming may be so difficult that the charmer feels pressure in the

ears, is tormented by yawning and streaming eyes), once the act is completed the symptoms disappear (LTRF cd 743/32). Mania Laurinavičienė claims that even in her declining years she finds it “easy to pray to God” (although relatives and neighbours disagree) and after the act of charming she feels good and light (LTRF cd 762).

The relationships between the charmer and his/her patient (or the patient's relatives who have turned to the charmer for help) fall in line with a certain traditional code of ethics. The charmer does not request remuneration for healing and even rejects the possibility of such remuneration. Janina Karmazienė tells her patients that they are not allowed pay her and those who try will be refused treatment the next time (LTRF cd 740/27). Antanina Augulienė (Rimdžiūnai village, 1880s–1940) spoke to her patients in a similar manner (LTRF cd 769). The code of charmers' ethics provides against the utilisation of power for sordid motives, which is sometimes expressed through a prohibition on thanking – charmer Janina Karmazienė believes that the patient cannot say thank you because if he/she says so, the charm will be void (LTRF cd 740/27). If the patient thanks the charmer, the latter responds with the formula “Do not thank, let it help!” (LTRF cd 749). It is a usual practice in Belarus and Lithuania that charmers heal without compensation; many examples can be given (Vaitkevičienė 2008: 52, 93; Būgienė 2010: 73; Лобач, Філіпенка 2006: 88, 90). The same attitude towards payments is well known among charmers throughout Europe. According to Owen Davies, in France the gift of charming was not commercial and no formal payments were made – the client must not, above all, say thank you, because that would risk breaking the charm (Davies 2004: 93). In England the patients should never say thank you or give any direct cash payment for their treatment; it was a “law” of traditional charming which distinguished charmers from cunning folk (Davies 1998: 44).

It should be noted that although charmers refuse remuneration for their healing, the patient's code of ethics, which exists alongside that of the charmer, binds the patient to express gratitude in a certain way. As in the case with the charmer, this obligation is associated with power – it is believed that if you fail to remunerate the charm, it will not be helpful. The conflict in the charmer's and patient's attitudes is regulated by means of the introduction of gifts: gifts refer to a kind of payment which the charmer receives without requesting or even when objecting. It is an archaic pattern of social communication: to interchange gifts and services instead of direct payment (Mauss 1996). This pattern mainly works in rural communities where charmers and their patients are related by a network of gifts and services. An example can be given from Newfoundland, Canada, where descendants of emigrants from Britain and Ireland continue to practice charming to the present day. According to Martin Lovelace, “rural

society in Newfoundland remains a finely calibrated system of favours given and repaid. ... Some way of giving compensation for charming would easily disappear within the myriad acts of assistance, like help with getting firewood, car repairs, or sharing meat from a hunting trip, which continue in Newfoundland life to the present” (Lovelace 2011: 39–40).

Most often patients in Gervėčiai would try to remunerate the charmer by giving food – a piece of ham, bacon or eggs. Jania Kuckienė (Girios village, b. 1934), whose mother and mother-in-law were renowned charmers, related how people would bring presents to them, such as sweets, a kerchief or even a penny or two. However, they were not very eager to take these presents and would say that they were healing on God’s account and not for payment⁷. People who wanted to repay the charmer sought to leave presents unnoticed, would put them on the table and leave (LTRF cd 753-03).

Not only food but also textiles were given as presents. The renowned charmer Paulina Mockienė from Galčiūnai village would receive towels or a piece of cloth for her treatment (LTRF cd 747). People would bring sweets, cookies or material to make clothes to Anelė Buckienė from Gudininkai (LTRF cd 756).

Money is also mentioned as possible means of payment, however, in the cases of monetary remuneration the attitude was that on no condition could a price be set or pre-negotiated and the patient pays as much as he/she can and wishes to. Charmers from Gudininkai Elena Barauskienė (1899–1987) and her daughter-in-law Leonarda Barauskienė (1925–2005) would never request remuneration but sometimes would “receive a rouble or two” (LTRF cd 761). Šimas Augulis from Peliagrinda would take as much as the patient can pay and if he/she is unable to pay, then he would take nothing (LTRF cd 537/6). Similarly Agota Jakavickienė would not request remuneration but people strived to leave money (LTRF cd 559/4–5).

Gifts and money (and especially money) cannot become the source of income allowing the charmer to live comfortably. Charmer Mania Laurinavičienė told Ona Reketienė (Rimdžiūnai village, b. 1936), who came to her for help, that she could not take money as in a dream she saw her late mother and she told her not to take money for charming because the charm may be ineffective. And if she did not take money, she would make good for both – the patient and the charmer. M. Laurinavičienė claims that people sometimes slander charmers, believing that monetary reward is taken for healing but this is not true as the charmer is rewarded by God rather than by people (LTRF cd 748/35).

CONCLUSIONS

The research in the community of Gervėčiai revealed that to date the practice of charming remains part of social reality significant in people’s lives not only in terms of healthcare but also in terms of the social and religious life. Charmers are individuals who gain respect and reputation within the community for their actual help in the treatment of stubborn illnesses. In line with the charmer’s ethical code, they never refuse to heal and do so without remuneration, thus being viewed by patients and their relatives as highly principled people. In addition, charmers emerge as individuals who represent religion, although the church has not authorised them to take the responsibility. People who do not know charmers and have never turned to them for help are often suspicious and distrustful of them as they have no personal experience (often their opinion is influenced by the media, which tends to paint charmers in a bad light).

The tendency to pass charms to direct progeny or close relatives suggests that charms are listed among family values. The fact that charms are transmitted not to a random offspring but rather to the first- or last-born child allows the assumption that family members are differentiated not only from the point of view of power, but also from the functional aspect, as the first- or last-born children are dedicated to healing and sacred activity. Bearing in mind the fact that in Lithuania the first-born or the last-born child inherited ownership of their parents’ land and house, a presumption can be made that traditionally families strove to retain charms in the same house, passing them on to family members who lived there.

A comparison of different periods revealed that the tradition of charming is in rapid decline. In Gervėčiai this decline is additionally accelerated by the fact that the average age of the representatives of the local community is rather high – the majority of Lithuanians residing there are around 70-80 years of age and most of their children have left and are no longer part of the local community. Therefore very few charmers have the possibility to pass their charms to their children and grandchildren because the attitude of the latter towards charming is totally different.

Despite the above-listed facts, charming in Gervėčiai is still being practiced. The statistical comparison of charmers and doctors, which revealed that the number of charmers per capita exceeds that of doctors, suggests that in the Gervėčiai area the tradition of charming sustains its status as an important social phenomenon.

NOTES

- ¹ Fieldwork was conducted as part of fieldwork sessions organised between 2010 and 2012 by Vilnius University and aimed at linguistic, historic, ethnographic, and folkloristic examination of the Lithuanian enclave (the organiser of the fieldwork sessions was Saulė Matulevičienė). The article is mainly based on the author's audio recordings stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives (LTRF cd 531–561, LTRF cd 738–778). In addition, materials collected by other participants in the fieldwork sessions have been analysed, mainly an interview with charmer Mania Laurinavičienė from Gėliūnai conducted by folklorist Saulė Matulevičienė (LTRF cd 779) and data collected by pharmacist Ugnė Gudelytė (LTRF cd 610–683), etc.
- ² Two fieldwork sessions were organised in Gervėčiai in 1970 by the Institute of the Lithuanian Language and Literature and the Lithuanian Society of Regional Studies (Lietuvos kraštotyros draugija). The collections of the fieldwork sessions are stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives; many of them are used in my research: LTR 4111, 4151, 4153, 4155, 4156, 4160, 4161, 4224, 4226, 4227, 4232.
- ³ The calculation covers general practitioners and medical specialists. The statistics quoted concerning doctors is based on World Health Organization data. See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS> [checked on 15/06/2013].
- ⁴ I do not mean migratory Christian charms here, which are widespread across Europe and beyond.
- ⁵ Told by Jozefa Jančis' daughter Jania Staniulienė, 71 years of age, residing in Padvariai village, Šalčininkai district. Recorded by Daiva Vaitkevičienė, Inga Butrimaitė, Asta Skujytė, Julija Ladygienė in 2013.
- ⁶ According to Lina Būgienė (2010: 75–76), who investigated charming in eastern Lithuania, charmers believe that their ability to help people comes from God and they take responsibility to act in the name of God. The concept of faith keeps repeatedly popping up in interviews with charmers, and is endowed with particular importance and meaning in their narratives and stories about themselves and their power (Būgienė 2010: 79).
- ⁷ Owen Davies gives a similar example from England: according to the charmer Luke Page, “you got to take no thanks, but thank the Almighty, and keep it to your-self”. According to Davies, “this rule presumably derived from the belief that these charms and the ability to charm were divine gifts, and as such should, in turn, be given freely to those who required it” (Davies 1998: 44).

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ARCHIVE SOURCES

LTR – Lithuanian Folklore Archives at Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, manuscripts

LTRF – Lithuanian Folklore Archives, sound recordings

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PLICA POLONICA IN BELARUSIAN BELIEFS AND INCANTATIONS

Tatsiana Valodzina

Apparently, there is no disease that attracts so much attention from researchers (both medical doctors and ethnographers) as *kautun* (*Plica Polonica*, the Polish plait). However, to this day there is no generally accepted solution regarding the etiology and history of the disease, which manifests itself in entangled hair and is accompanied by rheumatic pains, sores, rash, crooked nails, blurred vision, as well as attacks of nerves, spasms and increased heart rate. This article will feature Belarusian materials that represent the eastern extent of the area of beliefs related to *Plica Polonica*. The article is based on the folklore and ethnographic data collected by the author over the past 20 years, and aims to analyse the ontology of the disease named *kautun*, its involvement in human communication both with the body and with non-human beings. The article also provides comments on the historical evolution of beliefs and magical practices associated with the *Plica*.

Key words: Belarusian ethnomedicine, healing ritual, *kautun* (*Plica Polonica*), incantations, contemporary beliefs, ethnographic fieldwork.

CAUSES OF PLICA POLONICA IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Apparently, there is no disease that attracts so much attention from researchers (both medical doctors and ethnographers) as *kautun* (*Plica Polonica*, the Polish plait). By the mid-nineteenth century over 900 (!) research articles had been published and their number increased steadily. In 1843 Beschorner, director of the first asylum in Poland, published a large population-based study. However, to this day there is no generally accepted solution regarding the etiology and history of the disease, which manifests itself in entangled hair and is accompanied by rheumatic pains, sores, rash, crooked nails, blurred vision, as well as attacks of nerves, spasms and increased heart rate. One of the first researchers of the disease, Kajetan Kowakewski, wrote in 1839: “The plica is almost entirely confined to certain countries. It occurs in Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Hungary, Silesia, Transylvania, and Prussia. It is also occasionally met with in different parts of Germany; along the Rhine, Switzerland, in Holland and Paris” (Morewitz 2007). This article will feature Belarusian materials that represent the eastern extent of the area of beliefs related to *Plica Polonica*.