

**A MAGICAL TREATING RITUAL –  
CASTING A SPELL AGAINST MISFORTUNE  
(BEWITCHING) IN THE VILLAGE OF  
OBIDIM, BANSKO MUNICIPALITY**  
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Source: ART AND CULTURE WITH NO LIMITS, pages 75-81

<http://www.satrae.swu.bg>

Neofit Rilski University Press, 2004



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**T**errain ethnographic researches, done to gather texts and rituals of spell casts, were performed in May 2004 under the project “Art and Culture Without Borders”. The magical treating practices were recorded in villages Kremen, Obidim and Gostun, Bansko Municipality. In the village of Obidim people told stories about treating rituals against bewitching, childishness and fright. These rituals are being practiced even now, but not that often, as it used to be 40-50 years ago. These people believed in the treating effect of casting spells and they told many stories when those spells were effective.

The bewitching in the village of Obidim is treated by putting-out embers, the fright is treated with pouring a bullet, and the childishness is treated by passing under a thread or the child passing over a fire in a strange land.

This research will deal with the ritual of bewitching.

The treating of bewitching by putting-out embers was practiced often throughout the whole territory of the country. There is a great variety of spell texts with minimum differences among the rituals. The difference in rituals was mainly in the usage of various objects. At some spells besides the so-called “live” embers, burned embers are also used. It is obligatory to have a green plate as well, but often there is an interesting element, if a green plate is missing, or the plate is just a clay one, a green leaf is put in the water, no matter what plant the leaf is taken from. This means that the green colour is important in the magical treating against bewitching. The water, used in

this ritual, is known to be called silent water (malchana voda), and it is brought from the spring as the person who brings it speaks to no one he/she meets; quick water – if the person who brings the water is running; unused water (nenachnata voda) – this water is just for the ritual and is used by nobody. Another significant moment is the place, where the ritual is performed – round a fire.

Next but not least of importance is that it is obligatory to use both a treating ritual and a conjuring text.

Such is the situation in the village of Obidim. People there use the following text:

An old man starts a journey under the road, above the road,

To cut stakes crooked,  
To build a curved shed,  
To gather snakes and lizards,  
To milk red milk,  
To turn it into cheese,  
Then he went to the market,  
Ljulum, ljulum, red cheese!  
Who took a bite – died,  
Who had a look – crashed.  
To disperse all misfortune,  
To clear all up -  
As pure silver  
As light feather.  
To drift away as fog over mountain,  
To move in the sea,  
Away from mountain!  
Wind will move it away!

The ritual is performed round the fire. The embers are taken from the fire with tongs or scissors. Before putting them in the water, the text for the spell must be prepared. The way

in which embers dispose in the plate is important. If the embers fall on the bottom, it means that the child is bewitched; if the embers flow on the surface, this means – no bewitching. The interpretations are individual for different women, who cast spells. At the end of the ritual, the women wash the child, after the child drinks from this water and the rest water is thrown away.

By the middle of the twentieth century the spells were a general way of treatment, and women, who cast spells, were highly respected, even more than the priest and the teacher. Though the Church anathematized magics and magical treating, spells have been preserved and used since ancient times to nowadays. As a whole the interest towards the magical medicine has always been intense. Historical sources and many recorded by the ethnographers conjuring texts and rituals witness this interest.

Ethnography studies the casts of spells from a different angle: 1. as psychotherapy to activate the resisting powers of the organism; 2. as a magical irrational treatment – the “bearers” of this type of treatment were studied; 3. as the repertoire and the vision of the old women, who had proved themselves as healers, and the ways, in which they received their gift; etc.

Besides the researches of spells as a part of the traditional folk medicine, there were many attempts to define even more ancient levels in them 4. This is thoroughly possible, as the magical rituals are very conservative – the text and the ritual are transmitted from generation to generation without changes and they are zealously kept. That is why probably some very ancient understanding about sickness and treatment of the body and the soul as a whole has been preserved.

To be able to define the pagan heritage in the spells against bewitching it is necessary to interpret the symbols in

the text as well as the symbols in the ritual, because during the treatment both the text and the ritual are closely related.

The ritual of putting-out embers in the village of Obidim includes sacred objects with a clearly depicted protective function. These are the scissors, the fire and the live embers. Together with this a green clay plate and water, which purifies, are used. The laying of several objects within the ritual, according to the traditional ideas, aims at the quick and effective oust of the sickness from the organism. The sacred objects in the rituals can be interpreted also from another point of view – the one of the ancient healer, as there is enough information gathered about the ancient understanding of the world.

According to the understandings of the ancient man sickness is caused by evil powers or by taboo breaking. The reasons for the sickness in the traditional folk culture are the same. The evil powers are in the image of wood nymphs, mermaids, dragons, etc. When getting sick these evil powers cause a bad condition of the organism, which can be defined as a chaos. Sickness is an expression of the chaos, while health is an expression of cosmos in the opposition Chaos – Cosmos. According to Mircha Iliadae: “Life cannot be corrected, it can only be created again by a symbolic repetition of the cosmogony, because it is a sample for each creation.” The idea of cosmogony can be observed also in the spells in the village of Obidim. The ritual gathers in one the three main elements – water, live embers and the obligatory green colour /as a colour of the plate or as the green leaf/. Most probably the leaf is from an older period of the ritual. It symbolizes the tree of Life. Another possible interpretation is that the green colour, as well as the leaf and the bough, which is widely used in the ancient art, is an equivalent to the tree of Life. The live ember is a part of the fire, which itself is one of the symbols of

the Sun. Water has a chthonic origin. The gathering of the three elements represents the vertical structure of the Universe. The ritual treatment against bewitching by putting-out embers is performed nearby the fire. The fire plays a very important role in the traditional folk culture. Dimitar Marinov writes: "According to people's beliefs, the fire is something sacred and no evil breaths, no curses can function near the fire; all evil powers are crushed near the fire."<sup>5</sup> According to the ancient understanding of the world, the fire is one of the centres of the occult space; it symbolizes the super own. If it is necessary to make a symbolic reincarnation of the man and to pursue the sickness via cosmogony, the fire is the most suitable place. Because the cosmogony is performed within the centre of the world, and the fire as a centre of the family or the super own territory, is the place, where the transmission from Chaos to Cosmos, and from sickness to health, can be done.

Another moment, interesting for this research, is the green plate. In this case, the place is a vessel of the treating elements and it can be related most probably to the Great Goddess. The dialogue of Plato "Harmid"<sup>6</sup> presents the Thracian conception of treatment. According to the Thracians within the process of treatment, you treat the body and the soul simultaneously, as the soul is treated with spells. Most probably this is the connection between text and ritual in casting spells against bewitching and in spells in general.

There are many researches on conjuring texts of spells. According to Angel Goev, the text of spells shows the effect of healing. "It depicts the picture of the sickness, the way, in which the sickness will be taken out of the body, the place it will be sent to, etc."<sup>7</sup> According to this type of analysis, the spells in the village of Obidim show the picture of the sickness at the very beginning of the text.

An old man starts a journey under the road, above the road,

To cut stakes crooked,  
To build a curved shed!

The oppositions chaos – cosmos and straight – crooked are very clear here, as they imply one and the same idea. The chaos is visible in the way the old man moves. He is not walking along a path, but “under the road, above the road”. The harmony in the human body is upset by the sickness, which is a symbol of the chaos. The chaos supposes that there is no order and that’s why the movement is in turmoil. In this turmoil and wild space the old man cuts crooked stakes and builds a curved shed. The crooked/curved symbolizes chaos. The fact that a shed is being built in this chaotic turmoil space marks the beginning of the transmission from chaos to cosmos and puts the start of the new birth.

The second part of the text shows the way, through which a treatment will be reached.

To gather snakes and lizards,  
To milk red milk,  
To turn it into cheese,  
Then he went to the market,  
Ljulum, ljulum, red cheese!  
Who took a bite – died,  
Who had a look – crashed!

The key to healing is the snakes and the lizards gathered. Snakes and lizards have a chthonic meaning. They appear only in the warm months of the year, and in the cold months they disappear. Along the valley of the river Mesta, snakes are respected as a master, a keeper of fertility, health and luck of the house. Besides, snakes are used for treating several diseases, and parts of it are carried as amulets. 8 In ancient times snakes were an attribute to the gods of health. It

can be seen in scenes with Acclepius. 9 The Snake symbolizes also the new birth as it appears with the revival of Nature. As a healing animal the milk taken from it and the cheese made are also treating. The milk itself has a reviving function. 10

The last part of the text closes the cycle as finally the organism is cleared from sickness. It is sent far away – in the sea, in the mountain. And the soul clears as pure silver. There is a new birth and this is stressed with the comparison “pure silver”.

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