

Ethnomedical Ritual in the Context of Rites of Passage. Belarusian Tradition

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Abstract: The paper explores folk medical rituals in Belarusian villages and reveals the main conceptual schemes of magic healing. Van Gennep's concept of the rite of passage ("*le rite de passage*") is a starting point for the research. A diseased person is represented as a liminal being in traditional ritual healing; their biological status does not correspond to their social status. A ritual (which is a variant of a rite of passage) is used to correct this condition and replenish or receive new physiological potencies. This ritual is aimed at restoring the social status of the sufferer. At a deep semantic level, Belarusian ethnomedical rituals restore the lost integrity and micro-structural equilibrium of the human body, and symbolically recreate the harmony between the human and the Cosmos, neutralise the danger associated with the disruption of their relationship structure, and reestablish the proper status and place of the individual. The paper is based on the data from the late 19th to early 21st centuries. A considerable number of sources come from the author's fieldwork, conducted over the past 20 years as part of an on-going research programme¹.

Keywords: Belarus, folk medicine, folklore texts, rites of passage, liminality, spells, magic practices

Ritualism is such a typical feature of folk medicine that it is impossible to find a folk medical system that lacks it. The phenomenon of ritual healing demonstrates the effect of symbolic activities that are not objectively connected to the etiology of the illness where the connection only exists in the individual's mind. Nevertheless, ritual healing, despite being a purely semiotic phenomenon, may lead to subjective, and sometimes even objective improvement in a diseased individual's condition (Tkhostov 2002: 110). Academic medicine has sought to identify the natural and material bases of the rituals, assuming that the curing effect results from specific activities (for example, phytotherapy, physical methods) accompanying the ritual rather than from the ritual itself. But the effectiveness of 'natural' healing methods often significantly decreases in the absence of a ritual, while the ritual activity alone still has an effect. As Lévi-Strauss (1963: 191) argued, "in all these cases, the therapeutic method (which as we know is often effective) is difficult to interpret. When it deals directly with the unhealthy organ, it is too grossly concrete (generally, pure deceit) to be granted intrinsic value. And when it consists in the repetition of often highly abstract ritual, it is difficult for us to understand its direct bearing on the illness".

It is only possible to understand ritual healing if one accepts the idea that an illness is not just the disability of a certain body part, it is first and foremost a reflection in the individual's mind, a mental image that reflects the state of the person's body and ailment. The essence of any explanation of the origin of an illness boils down to a disruption of natural balance and the intervention of the forces of chaos upon the individual's world. Any treatment, then, is a ritual aimed at restoring the familiar and natural order of things. "All etiological constructions (i.e., explanatory mythologies) can be

regarded as a modelling system, because they programme specific types of practice, namely, healing rituals that are in turn practical representations of these myths” (Arnautova 2004: 36).

Explanations for the causes of illnesses fit into the concept of causality typical for a given culture, which is a pivotal element of its worldview and results from its dominant mindset. The mythological consciousness replaces causal relationships with precedents, blends the origin of an object or phenomenon with its essence, and relies on immediate, pre-reflective knowledge. Academic medicine has largely lost track of the strong emotional connection between sufferer and illness. Physicians tend to regard an illness merely as a pathology, even when it has a more profound meaning and implications in the individual’s mind. It is precisely this affective aspect of the mythological consciousness that produces symbolic representations, such as those discussed in this article. The author uses the fieldwork materials, which are deposited in the Archive of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore (AIAHEF) at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. All recordings were made by the author unless specified otherwise.

Ethnomedical practices as rites of passage

Despite differing folk interpretations of their meaning, the semantics of many rituals derive from ancient mythological ideas about the possibility of travelling from one world to another and returning in a new capacity. This common model fits well into Arnold van Gennep’s concept of the rite of passage, which was later developed in Victor Turner’s work on liminality. In a traditional society, all the spheres of life are regulated, and any changes are accompanied by a ritual aimed at marking the transition and avoiding problems or losses. In such a context, human life is marked by consecutive transitions from one social status to another, from one group to

another with the individual passing through various stages (birth, physical and social puberty, marriage, parenting, status elevation, ageing, death). Each of these stages is accompanied by activities, all of which have the same goal: to ensure the passage of the individual from one definite status to another equally definite status. These rhythms of passage can also be observed in nature, thus Arnold van Gennep compares rites of passage to the rituals that mark celestial changes (van Gennep 1960: 3–4). Van Gennep's ideas were then developed by field researchers. Among them was the English scholar Victor Turner who, while working among the African Ndembu people, compared the initiation rites of the tribal leader to the rituals surrounding a barren woman and discovered that they were based on a common original archetype: the idea of second birth. “What is being washed off in these life-crisis rites is the state of ritual death, the liminal condition between two periods of active social life,” wrote Turner (1967: 77). Thus a refinement of research methodology helped to ground Arnold van Gennep's theoretical ideas.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the theory of rites of passage is not a law guiding every ritual but rather an analytical scheme and a research tool. Rites of passage, along with a common goal, share the same three-part structure: “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)” (van Gennep 1960: 11). Yet van Gennep himself notes that “in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated” (*ibid.*). Despite this the theory still provides a helpful framework to explain various folk medicine rituals.

Although researchers have drawn attention to Arnold van Gennep's theory in describing individual aspects of folk medicine (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019, Dutta and Biswas 2019, Fusu 2020, etc.), a comprehensive picture of the healing ritual according to the Rites-de-Passage scheme has not been presented.

The liminal features of a sufferer. At certain moments in his or her life the individual faces crisis situations when a discrepancy occurs between their biological status and their social status. In traditional societies ritual serves as a primary means of eliminating this discrepancy. For example, when a child is born the main purpose of ensuing ritual practices is to strip them of their 'natural' qualities and endow them with 'cultural' features and attributes. In other words, in order for a newborn to become a human being, it is necessary to make them into one with the help of a ritual (Bayburin 1993: 57).

With diseased individuals the discrepancy lies between their physiologically unhealthy state and their social status as a normal, living human being. An illness is an occurrence that disrupts one's daily routine and renders one unable to go about one's usual activities, such as working or carrying out various biological and social functions, i.e. fulfilling their social role in its entirety. As a consequence, the sufferer could drop out of the group, which in traditional societies could make their existence challenging. "An illness is both a biological and a social category, as it is related to a person's need to combine the obligatory, the desirable, and the possible" (Arnautova 2004: 164).

A diseased individual's status is ambiguous and unclear: physically they belong to the human world but symbolically they bear the mark of death and decay, which gives them a transitional, liminal status. When someone was cursed in Belarus, they were called "neither alive nor dead" (Wereńko 1896: 213), cf. Russian *zhit' mertvym* (literally "to live as a dead person") meaning "to be ill, injured" (Ivashko 2003: 416). Recovery is reflected in idioms such as, "as if [he/she] was born for the second time"; "as if [he/she] returned from the next world". The well of life force that allowed the sufferer to resist both external and internal adversities has diminished or run out, necessitating replenishment and the acquisition of new physiological potentialities, as well as a status

adjustment. And in this case, similarly to life cycle rituals, “one way of resolving the tensions that have emerged is used consistently: the natural is transformed into the cultural, the artificial with the help and over the course of a ritual” (Bayburin 1993: 121).

During rituals the negative characteristics of a sufferer as a liminal being, which manifest themselves in both physical and social deficiencies, are transformed into positive ones, leading to the leveling of the individual’s status. This means that a diseased individual is not unlike other liminal beings, for example a woman in labour, a newborn, newlyweds, or a deceased person. A sufferer is perceived not only as subject to decay, but also as an impure and dangerous being who is controlled by otherworldly powers. This very status pushes the diseased person to the margins (including temporal and spacial), where appropriate rituals must be conducted. Existing on the margins (which corresponds to van Gennep’s separation phase) is a period dominated by chaos and death, a phase of disorganisation when the individual lacks a stable definition, and the universe itself becomes ambiguous. But the healing process is predicated on a symbolic connection to an otherworld from which the life force needed for healing is drawn. The very situation necessitates an acceptance of chaos, as the revival can only start here. “Since every discontinuity in social time is the end of one period and the beginning of another, and since birth/death is a self-evident ‘natural’ representation of beginning/end, death and rebirth symbolism is appropriate to all rites of transition and is palpably manifest in a wide variety of cases” (Leach 1976: 78–79).

Ritual death as a precondition for the recovery/‘rebirth’ of the sufferer. Ritual magical healing is similar to other “medial” rites of passage, which combine “the two aspects of a ritual (destroying the old and creating the new) and, consequently, both components of the key dichotomy ‘death – birth/revival’” (Bayburin 1993: 171). The inclusion of the concept of death in the semantic field of

disease appears logical even from the perspective of modern common sense, but it should be remembered that in the deeper logic of mythology, death is a necessary prerequisite to revival and new life, i.e. recovery is impossible without it.

The first stage of a rite of passage involves the subject's gradually shedding the qualities that are indicative of their previous status. During this stage, the limits on social interaction and on the capabilities of the sufferer that result from their illness are supplemented by purely ritual requirements of either full or partial isolation. Like a dead body, an ailing individual is often placed on the ground or on an object that has otherworldly symbolic connotations. In Belarus, this object is usually a straw and fur coat (*kazhukh*), often a black one:

Бабкі лячылі тыя прыпадкі. Некалі бабка кажа, дык яна лажыла на кажух шэрсьцю ўверх, і тады выстрыгла і загаваравала, малітву казала, выскубала з гэтага кажуха, тады выкачавала па цельцы па рабёначку і кідала ў печ.

The village healers (*babki*, literally 'old women') would cure seizures. Once a healer said that she laid [an ill child] on a fur coat turned inside out and then cut [some fur] and said the spell, recited a prayer, pulled out [the fur] from the coat, then rolled it over the child's body and threw it into the stove.

AIAHEF, Smolnica village, Smalyavicki district, Minsk region – T. Valodzina, T. Kukharonak < V. M. Isaychuk, b. 1929 (2010).

Як спужаецца, на чорны кажух клалі, стрыгуць накрыж тры разы поўсці і кураць яго.

When they are frightened, they are laid on a black fur coat, the fur is cut criss-cross three times and smoke it².

AIAHEF, Shyлина village, Shumilinsky district, Vitebsk region < Anelya Volkava, b 1914 (1993),

In the case of epilepsy:

трэба на лицо голою задницею систы и сказаты: «Яка гость, така и чэсть». И хутчий кожуха чорного, шоб хто накрыв.

It is necessary to sit on [the sufferer's] face with a bare ass and say: 'The honor befits the guest' (literally 'such a guest, such an honor'). And someone should quickly cover them with a black fur coat (Agapkina 2003: 266).

Straw and fur coats are symbolic as they belong to both the 'cultural' and 'natural' spheres. According to Zbigniew Libera, putting a sufferer on a bed, on the ground, burying them in the ground, or putting them into water, i.e. limiting their mobility, is an act of likening them to a dead body in order to give them the possibility to recover and come back from death and illness to life and health (Libera 1995: 65).

The following ritual may be interpreted as a total desemiotisation (up to depriving a person of his or her name) and return to the 'clean slate' condition associated with birth:

Кончаецца дiтына, не могла снуты, плачэ як глуха нiч». Знахар пашаптаў i даў парадy: «Не старайцеся паказываць яго, по менью не звiтэ i чэрным глаза накрывайтэ». Калi за 9 дзён паправiцца, добра, будзе жыць, а не – памрэ.

'The child is ailing, he cannot sleep, he is crying in the dead of night'. The healer said the spell and gave some advice: 'Try not to point [at him], don't call him by his name, and cover his eyes with black'. If he recovers during the next nine

days, that is a good sign, he will live; and if he does not, he will die (Strakhov 2005: 175).

Social seclusion is further reinforced by various requirements and taboos concerning food, clothing, and mobility to which the sufferer must adhere. From a traditional point of view, “the initiate is at this stage ‘contaminated with holiness’: being in a sacred state, he (she) is also dangerous and therefore ‘dirty’. Consistent with this ideology, the rituals which bring the initiate back into normal life again nearly always involve such procedures as ritual washing, designed to remove the contamination” (Leach 1976: 78). At this liminal stage, ritual washing and bathing is aimed at separating the person from their previous status and at helping them acquire new qualities. In contrast to the ritual washing of a deceased person or a newborn, which constitutes only part of a rite, water manipulations in ritual healing may have an independent and self-sufficient meaning. Moreover, the initial qualities of such water were imbued with significance, and after the ritual the water that was used in any of the rites of passage was removed from the domestic space and placed into locations with mediative semantics. It should be noted that medical rituals also involved drinking such water, although some of it had to be disposed of anyway. The attributes of the sphere of death are especially evident in the preparatory manipulations. Firstly, water has dominant connotation of wilderness and chaos, which belong to the next world. Water with such qualities was deemed to take away what belonged outside of this world.

One may speculate that washing the sufferer’s body in today’s medical procedures harks back life cycle rituals where washing was “connected with the logic of the ritual, according to which the protagonist (a bride, a deceased person) must be transferred to the ‘primal’ (natural) status and only then their passage to the new quality is made possible. Washing and the lack of clothing

that accompanies it, the absence of any signs that link the subject to the sphere of 'culture' was likely to symbolise their 'natural', 'primal' status" (Bayburin 1993: 43). Additionally, "both on the cosmological and anthropological planes immersion in the waters is equivalent not to a final extinction but to a temporary reincorporation into the indistinct, followed by a new creation, a new life, or a 'new man,' according to whether the moment involved is cosmic, biological, or soteriological" (Eliade 1987: 130–131).

An imitation of a diseased person's death constitutes a separate group of medical rituals. It is usually interpreted as a ritual deception of the illness. "The ultimate means to cure a child's seizure is as follows. When the seizure starts, all the people in the house become solemnly quiet, everyone remains still in the place where they were caught by the command uttered by the diseased child's mother, who immediately covers the child with a white blanket, holds a Candlemass candle³ over it and burns incense. To put it shortly, if anyone were to enter the house [at that moment], they would think that someone had died. The Death that was sent for the child would think the same way and would not touch the child" (Nikiforovskiy 1897: 43). Such an interpretation may be valid in this case; however, it is important to stress that folk medical ritual is aimed at the sufferer's revival, which always implies death.

With severe diseases in particular, for example epilepsy, a ritual was practiced that involved pulling the child through a hole dug in the boundary between two fields or plots of land. In the ritual, the child would be put in the ground and then retrieved later. While the semantics of revival is evident in this ritual, equally important is the symbolic burial of the sufferer, which is also reflected in their external attributes. Most notably, this involved undressing the child, thus 'naturalising' it, i.e. returning it to a natural, primal status:

Па восені выкапалі мяжу, раздзець рабёнка і праз тую мяжу працягнуць тры разы, а яго рубашачку разарваць і там закапаць.

In the autumn holes are dug on the boundaries, [one must] undress the child and pull it through the holes three times, then tear off its shirt and bury [the shirt] there,

AIAHEF, Vaslavova village, Ushacky district, Vitebsk region < V. I. Bumaga, b. 1933 (1997)

Як дзецкая балезь бывае. Насілі тожа на растанькі, выкапывалі ямку і прасаджавалі яго тры разы. Выкапалі пад мурам, штоб прасадзіць. Яна там возьме і перадаць мне, і так тры разы. Каб каляная зямля, каб не абсыпалася. І валасы стрыгуць, прасьвердзя ў дзераве і тья валосікі, і кіпцікі забівалі. І памагала.

At times, a child would get sick. We would take [the child] to the crossroads, dig a hole and pull it [through the hole] three times. We dug the hole under the masonry to pull [the child] under it. She [the other participant in the ritual] would take the child and hand it over to me [under the ground], and we would repeat it three times. The soil should be hard enough so as not to collapse. And we would cut the [child's] hair, and make a hole in a tree and put the hair and fingernails inside. And it helped,

AIAHEF, Vishchyn village, Ragachouski district, Gomel region – T. Valodzina, T. Kukharonak < N. A. Kuzhava, b. 1928 (2009).

There are certain parallels between the covering of a liminal being (the veil covering a disease sufferer or a bride has meaning of hiding them, making them invisible, and also of ‘undomesticated’,

shapeless cloths, cf. shroud) and a sick child who was covered by an Easter tablecloth:

Капают на границе яму, щоб пралесть, бярут скатёрку пасвяцёную, у хаті раздзенься і голая ўранцы бяжы туды, і там эту скатёрку с себя скідай, тры разы пралезь, скатёрку кідай і бежы дамой гола і надзенься. Мінаеця.

They would dig a hole on the boundary in order to pass through it, take a blessed tablecloth, undress at home and run there naked in the morning, take this tablecloth off there, pass [through the hole] three times, leave the tablecloth and run home naked, then dress up. The disease is healed.

Polesie Archives of the Institute of Slavonic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (PA), Prisna village, Vetka district, Gomel region – M. Borovskaya.

Using a wedding gown both at a funeral and during a medical procedure is also emblematic: a child suffering from epilepsy was often covered with its mother's wedding gown (Belarusian Folklore-Ethnolinguistic Atlas (BFEA): Parakhonsk village, Pinsk district, Brest region recorded – T. Gerasimovich). These rituals also included burying a child's shirt on a border, i.e. the symbolic burial of a child's sick double. Thus, similar features and practices are evident in a disease sufferer and a deceased body. They are immobile, they are washed, their 'living' clothing is substituted with a cover, their hands and legs are tied. Similarly, tying a string around a body was a method used in both funeral and healing rites, with the latter including those that did not necessitate 'deadening' (killing) pain, such as panic attacks or the evil eye. Epilepsy, for example, was cured using a string that had been used to tie a dead person's legs. The string was used to measure the sufferer's

height and an odd number of knots were tied in it, after which the string would be carried around the person's neck. An ailing person was also placed in a marginal part of the house, i.e. they were endowed with the qualities of a deceased body.

The sphere of death in medical rituals is also constructed with the help of such categories as West, North, the Moon, bottom, left, dark, etc. These categories are relatively well-developed and are represented by numerous variants and configurations. The world of illness, as well as the world of death, is a world turned upside down, a mirror reflection of the world of normal, healthy, living people. The silence that is normative in folk medical procedures is also essential as it indicates the patient's proximity to the next world.

A number of folk medical rituals are based on an awareness of the necessity of taking the sufferer through death and the need for their future 'resurrection'. Alternatively, they are taken not just through death, but also through a symbolic burial. Among such rituals is washing a sufferer's body with sand from a grave, followed by the return of the sand to the grave (Tolstoy 1983: 259), and the burial of an ailing person's symbolic double (represented for example by a shirt) with a deceased body.

Каўтун -- валасы зліпаюцца ў кучу комам, звіваюцца, што і не рашчэшаш. Вродзе атразаць нільзя. Ён должен атыйці. А то казалі – узяць шарсцяную нітку і змераць свой рост, а затым эту нітку складаваць ды тых пор, пакуль не палучыцца клубочак. Палажыць гэты клубок у гроб пакойніку.

A Polish plait is a lump of hair that is interwoven together so tightly that it is impossible to comb it. Apparently, you cannot cut it. It must go away. It was told that [one should] take a woolen thread and measure one's own height and then

wind this thread until it forms a ball, then put this ball into a dead person's coffin.

AIAHEF, Ramashkava village, Tolochik district, Vitebsk region < Zhana Vaskrasenskaya, b. 1938 (2007).

In this context, it is notable that the sufferer is ritually sent to the cemetery. If a fever attack starts during the night, the sufferer mounts a fire iron and heads for the cemetery where they squeeze themselves between two recent graves (Nikiforovskiy 1897: 276);

Хинта. Советали – найти башмак на улице и той башмак надо текти на могилке (абуць і ісці). Чи штоп сонца не фсходило, чи штоб зашло. Зашло сонце и тегни, фстретила кого – не говори ничего.

Fever. [They] advised to find a shoe in the street and to put it on and walk in it shoe to the graveyard. Either before the sunrise, or after the sunset. After the sun sets, if you meet somebody – don't say anything.

РА, Zaspa village, Rechytsa district, Gomel region – N. Sveshnikava < T. A. Stryzhak, b. 1913 (1982).

The inversion, the otherness of behaviour, is obvious in this case. The person heads for the cemetery at a time that is inappropriate for living beings. The way they move is also highly symbolic: riding a fire iron or walking in just one shoe is a means to transcend the border between the two worlds; the use of a found shoe emphasises its otherworldness. The ritual takes the form of an inverted burial that is conditioned by the inversion of the protagonist themselves: they are a diseased (i.e. bearing a death mark) but still living person. Moreover, a deceased body travels in one direction only (at least as far as the living can tell), whereas an ailing person's route is radically different, implying a later return.

Thus, the preliminal stage, which starts with the stripping of the sufferer of their old status and depriving them of social and cultural marks, reaches its apogee in the imitation of death and burial. “The interaction between the ‘lower’ chaos and the ‘upper’ cosmos in the process of creation leads to a situation whereby a person must sometimes descend into the hell of chaos and turn into the amorphous, the destructive, the inorganic, the intuitive” (Yevzlin 1993: 15).

The liminal stage proper involves a transition in a space that is extremely dense with symbols of death and otherworldliness and leads to the turning point of the situation. At this moment “a sharp diversion in the course of a ritual takes place and, consequently, the protagonists of the ritual start viewing the event from a different angle” (Bayburin 1993: 178).

First and foremost, the rite of passage revolves around the sufferer themselves, although in most cases, especially those involving serious illnesses and/or children, the sufferer is marked by their passiveness, and all the words and actions are transferred to another person who carries out the transition, leading the diseased person between worlds and statuses. Attention is focused on the healer. According Valentina Kharitonova (1999: 305), a healer who casts spells as part of their job must transition into an altered state of consciousness and perform the necessary magical work while in this state, and then return to the normal state. The casting of spells consists of three main stages. In the first stage, the percipient is led to grasp the unusual nature of the event. This includes various preparatory activities, turning to higher powers for permission, etc. The second stage involves the magical manipulations per se. The third stage encompasses the final activities, e.g. thanking the higher powers, “relaxation for those who had a contact with the next world”, which involves considerable neuropsychic and psychoenergetic tension (Kharitonova 1999: 309–310). In this respect

charm- and spell-casting are rites of passage that involve the natural process of getting deeper into the psychic sphere.

The 'new birth' motif

The postliminal stage always implies that the patient will be endowed with new qualities. This stage can be regarded as a symbolic resurrection, it evokes second birth and thus is described in almost physiological terms and categories. In this context, the other world where the ritual death takes place is symbolically compared to the womb, and the process of healing is described using the terms of a birth ritual. The rebirth symbolism is especially evident in cases where children are involved, as they have not yet severed all the ties with the other world and with their mother.

Instances of symbolism revolving around female bottoms and genitals clearly demonstrate how such contradictory ideas as birth and death can be integrated within a single symbol. The perception of the abdomen (especially the womb) as representing the bottom, depth, underground speaks to the universal symbolic link between the earth and the woman. Closeness, narrowness, and darkness are attributes associated both with the other world and the womb. The ancient mythologem of the earth being the mother's womb is manifested both on the level of folk ritual and on the linguistic level, for example, the phrase *v zhivote byt'* (literally 'to be inside the belly') means 'to be dead' (Podyukov 1990: 62). In ancient cultures, female organs are associated with a cave, and the cave itself is perceived as being in close connection with the mother's womb. "The mythologem of coming into the cave denotes either penetration into the womb of Mother Earth or a return to the mother's womb, back to one's prenatal, 'pre-existing' status. The ideas of birth and death reveal a certain 'symmetry' in this context: the birth may be interpreted as coming out of a locked,

internal, ‘cave-like’ space of the womb into the endless universe, and the death and subsequent burial may be regarded as an attempt to renew the opposite situation, as a renewal of the initial status that takes one back to a space that is similar to the womb” (Toporov 1997: 475–477).

It is emblematic that there are parallels between these ideas and recent scientific findings relating to perinatal memory. According to Erich Fromm, in cases of extreme pathology a strong willingness to return to the mother’s womb can be observed, and the sufferer tends to feel and act like a foetus. “In the behavior of such a person, we find a fear of life, and a deep fascination for death (death, in phantasy, being the return to the womb, to mother earth)” (Fromm 2008: 38). The analysis of internal and external symbolism typical of rites of passage demonstrates that their essential components are similar to this phenomenon, combining the ideas of conception, death and birth. In some cultures a single word can simultaneously mean pregnancy, burial, and consecration. Burials in the foetal position are also widely documented. Thus, from a mythological point of view, the female womb is described as a semantic equivalent to the earth and underground, while also being interpreted as a mysterious and dark origin rife with danger and even capable of causing death. In many contexts, the female bottom is interpreted as an entrance to the other world, or even the other world itself reduced to the size of a human body.

Verbal formulas in medical magic explicitly point to the female bottom as a tool of healing and rebirth: “What she used to give birth, that she’ll use to cure”. It is essential that the healing ritual should be performed by the mother, which the formulas reflect:

А маці клала на зямлю, пераступала тры разы: Якая маці
радзіла, каб тая і адхадзіла.

The mother put [the ailing child] on the ground, stepped over it three times saying the mother who gave birth, must cure,

АІАНЕФ, Myslbazh village, Lyakhavichy district, Brest region < A. K. Rakhmanets, b. 1930 (2005);

Ваўхвілі дзяцей этых. Я з воч, як дзяцёнак маленькі і сурочыўся і начніцы, сама перва, як мяне наўчыла бабка, ложыш падушку, на эту падушку ложыш дзіцёначка, і яго нічога ніякага во так во перахажавалі. “Хто цябе радзіў, тэй цябе атхадзіў”, тры разы. Но толька ты сама не падымаеш, а падняць должен другі, мужык, ці сьвякруха ці хто.

The children were cured thus. If a small child was suffering from the evil eye or from notsnitsas⁴, first, as my grandmother taught me, [I would] take a pillow, put the child on this pillow, and step over it [saying]: ‘Who gave birth to you, will cure you’ three times. But you don’t then lift [the child] yourself, someone else must lift it, the husband, the mother-in-law or someone else,

АІАНЕФ, Grudzinauka village, Bykhauski district, Mogilev region – Т. Valodzina, Т. Kukharonak < Т. А. Perminava, b. 1953 (2012).

A number of folk healing methods involve the sick child’s tactile contact with their mother’s genitals, by rubbing the child against what is euphemistically referred to as the woman’s ‘lower hem’ (АІАНЕФ, Valyntsy village, Verkhnedvinsky district, Vitebsk region < М. М. Semezh, b. 1920 (2005); Выціраюцца за полом і кажуць: “Чым маты пародыла, тым і очышчае” (“[They] rub [the child] with the hem and say: ‘What the mother give birth

with, she uses to cleanse” (AIAHEF, Padlesse village, Zhabinka district, Brest region < G. I. Yermak, b. 1922 [(2000)], or the woman’s underpants (AIAHEF, Martsinava village, Verkhnedvinsky district, Vitebsk region < N. M. Lamiskaya, b. 1931 (2005), or her own hand:

Патрэць рукой па сваей намітусь, а тады па ліцу рабёнку: Чым радзіла, тым і лячыць буду.

She rubs the back of her hand against her genitals, and then [rubs] the child’s face [with her hand]. What [I] used to give birth, I will use to cure.

AIAHEF, Padymkhi village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region < V. C. Karaban, b. 1932 (2002);

<А што за малочай?> – Эта первы раз як увідзіш рябёнка, возьмеш, на пол паложаш, і во так чэрыз яго тры раза: “Чэм нарадзіла, тым і ўзьлячыла” і абратна назад пярэйдзеш, і так тры раза. Толькі як первы раз. І тада так дзелаеш.

<And what [did you use to cure] seizures in children?>

When you see the child [having a seizure] for the first time, take it, put it on the floor, and [step] three times over it like this: ‘What I used to give birth, that I will use to cure’ and go back again, and three times like this. But only when it’s the first time. And then you do it.

AIAHEF, Garadok, Vitebsk region – T. Valodzina, U. Lobach < Y. F. Dzem’yanenka, b. 1946 (2011).

For a seizure, one of the most popular healing methods is to cover the sufferer’s face with a naked female bottom. The fact that the ritual should be performed by the mother points to associations

with second birth: «Если падушча бросіт, сядаты тым мэстом і до губ ему дотыкаюцца. Только маці. Як поросёнка так, то до свінні “If one suffers from epilepsy, sit [on them] with that body part and touch their lips. Only the mother [can do it]; If it’s a piglet, then it must be a pig” (AIAHEF, Dzyamenichy village, Zhabinka district, Brest region < Y. N. Germanovich, b. 1934 (2000)). The female bottom is viewed as a disease transmitter that works both ways: “Ад чаго стала, каб ад таго перестала” – “What caused it, should stop it” (AIAHEF, Galavenchycy village, Chavusy district, Mogilev region < M. S. Kahanouskaya, b. 1926 (2006)). In an everyday context, however, such contact between a child and body parts with an otherworldly association was forbidden and was seen as a potential cause of illness. It was believed that if a women showed her uncovered genitals when passing over a child, the child would stop growing (Romanov 1912: 305).

The symbolism of the second birth is closely connected to attributes associated with female genitals. These are symbolically represented by a skirt, a barrel, a horse harness, or a clamp, which cursed or frightened children would be pulled through. Tatsiana Shchepanskaya coined the term “pull-through symbolism” to denote acts of pulling a person through tunnel-like openings and the attributes associated with these acts. Such activities are interpreted as symbolic of resuming childbirth (Shchepanskaya 1999: 20). This is further reinforced by using the same shirt that the woman was wearing at childbirth: “У каторай рубашке ребёнка ражаішь, ту рубашку хаваюць і, як ребёнку што зделаіца, дитя занедуже, дак тады праймаюць дитя тры раза» – “The shirt that you were wearing when you were giving birth is then hidden, and if something goes happens to the child, if it falls ill then [it is necessary] to pull it through the shirt three times” (РА, Zalatukha village, Kalinkavichy district, Gomel region – A. Talstikhina). Alternatively, wedding clothes could be used for the same purpose, evoking the deep semantic link between the wedding and death.

A cursed, for example, child would be pulled three times through the wedding dress (Barszczewski 1990: 35). The symbolic appeal to the wedding inevitably evokes death: “Кажуць, як балезнь чалавека дужа часта кідаіць, вянчальную адзежыну на яго і ён тады быстра памрэць” – “[People] say that if a person is often sick, they are covered with a wedding gown, and then they will die soon” (AIAHEF, Gubina village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region < L. L. Baratsevich, b. 1912 (2006)), compare this with the requirement to sing a wedding song while helping with an epileptic seizure:

Нада вясельную песню пець і жопай сесь на ліцо.
<А якую вясельную песню?> Любую, хто якую.

You should sing a wedding song and sit with your arse on their face.

<And what kind of wedding song?>

Any kind, anyone can sing whatever they want.

AIAHEF, Byvalki village, Loyew district, Gomel region < T. A. Fedarenka, b. 1932 (2009).

Birth symbolism is especially clearly reflected in the method that involves washing an epileptic child with the broken waters of a woman who is giving birth:

Як перша дзіця хто ўродзіць, дак пайдзі вазьмі роду, гэтаго. І змый гэтым родам. Ды вылі на крыжавыя дарогі. <Кроў гэту?> Ну гэто, як родзіць дзіця.

When someone gives birth to her first child, go and collect the birth fluid. And wash [the ailing child] with it. Then pour it on the crossroads.

<The blood?>

Well, the thing, when she is giving birth to a child.

AIAHEF, Malyja Chuchavichy village, Luninets district,
Brest region < A. M. Gargun, b. 1924 (2007)

Water can also have similar healing qualities if it is prepared in the following way: “На парозі нада стаць і тры разы кружку з вадой прадзіваць паміж ног. Прадзівайш і кажаш: Адкуль радзіўся, тым і палечся” – “Stand on the threshold and pass a cup with water between your legs three times. Pass it and say: ‘Where you were born, that will be your cure’” (AIAHEF, Prudok village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region – T. Valodzina, T. Pshonka < S. V. Zhar-nasek, b. 1924 (2001)). A symbolic correction of ‘incorrect’ child-birth that resulted in the birth of a sick child was also performed by ‘repeating’ the childbirth, but upside-down: a mother would undress, leaving only her shirt on, and pull her child three times between her body and her shirt, putting it under the lower hem and pulling it out through the collar (Nikiforovskiy 1897: 35).

The idea of leading a sufferer through a symbolic death and resurrection is reflected in rituals that involve putting the child under a trough, the symbolism of which is traditionally connected with that of the coffin:

Накрывалі ад падучай начоўкамі, а тады нада каб первянец ішоў праз дзверы і кінуў збан, харашо, каб той збан разбіўся.

[To cure] epilepsy, we covered [a child] with wooden troughs, and then a firstling should pass through the door and throw a jug, it’s good if this jug breaks.

AIAHEF, Parechcha village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region < K. K. Nyadbalskaya, b. 1924 (1994).

U nas, kali ŭ dziciaci Valiantova chvaroba, to paložać jaho pad paroham, nakryjuć načoŭkami i razabjuć z kołki harščkoŭ (novych) ab načoŭki, to pad čas miniecca,

Here, when a child has St. Valentine's illness⁵, we put it next to the threshold, cover it with wooden troughs, and break a couple of new jugs against the troughs, then [the disease] will pass in some time (Federowski 1897: 395).

This is a semantically multifaceted act: it indicates the new birth of the sufferer, symbolically resonates with the motif of 'breaking' the illness, and involves a set of activities that are performed to frighten a demon. Another symbolic representation of a coffin is a box where an ailing child was put for a short period:

Эта крыксы называецца. Бабы выгаварывалі. Насілі, у кухар паложуць і закрывуць, там паляжыць. А як бывае, што так крычыць, як сьвіньня верашчыць, тады насілі ў сьвінны хлeў.

It [the disease] is called kryksy⁶. Women would use charms [to cure it]. [A child] was carried and put into a chest and shut it there, and it would stay there [for a while]. Sometimes it would scream in a way that resembles a pig squealing, then it was carried into a pigsty.

АІАНЕФ, Prusy village, Staryya Darohi district, Minsk region < V. M. Sheshka, b. 1934 (2010).

Эта крыклівіца, тады ўжо адчынілі скрыню да палажылі ў скрыню да зачынілі. І пакінула крыклівіца.

It is [called] kryklivica⁷, [we] would open the box and put [a child] into the box and shut it. And kryklivica would go away.

AIAHEF, Semezhava village, Kapyl district, Minsk region < N.M. Urbanovich, b. 1928 (2009).

To reinforce its symbolic connection with rebirth, the healing ritual was often supplemented with activities associated with a particular context of birth. It was seen as essential that the ritual be related to the specific place where a woman was giving birth. On the one hand, the 'birth place' possesses all the features of a marginal place; on the other hand, it is a particularly sacred centre, a starting point where a person was born and thus a microcosm was created. The well-documented tradition of guiding a woman in labour around a table might be related to this idea. The place of childbirth keeps its generative semantics and healing power for a long time after childbirth. The temporal dimension is added to the spatial one: "Only the midwife can prevent mesyachyna⁸; if she hasn't done it during the baby's first bath, she does it in a week, but it should be on the day and the hour of the baby's birth" (Nikiforovskiy 1897: 37). In cases of testicle inflammation in a newborn, the mother was advised at dawn to put the child either on the ground near the threshold, or, preferably, on the very spot where it was born (Federowski 1897: 403).

The idea of revival and rebirth is also linked to technological and mechanical processes that symbolically duplicate and enact the very concept of creation of the new. The culinary code is one of the most potent examples of this. Firstly, 'bread' is a common linguistic and cultural metaphor for human origin and existence, for example *z adnaho ciesta zlieplienyja* (literally 'moulded from the same dough', i.e. birds of a feather); *rasci jak na drazhdzhach* (literally 'grow as if on yeast', meaning grow in leaps and bounds); *niedapiechany* ('underbaked', or 'half-baked'); *paskrobak* (literally 'made from scratch', which can refer either to bread that was made from the last remaining flour, or the last/late child), etc. In folk medical practice the symbolic comparison between a child and

bread is especially vivid: “When they knead dough, they put the child (aged 1 month to 1 year) into the dough bowl and cover it with a lid, and keep it there for around half an hour (Shein 1902: 78)” – “Як родзіцца нежывое дзіця, так дзежку бяры адкрывай — і ў дзежку яго. Яно тога духа хопе і атойдзе” – “If a child is stillborn, open the dough bowl and put it inside. It will then take on some of the [bread] spirit and recover” (Lyada village, Vetka district, Gomel region – G. Lapatsin < E. P. Chvarkova, b. 1916).

The most vivid and widespread variant of the rebirth motif is ‘rebaking’ a sick child in an oven. This is based on the idea of a similarity between an oven and the mother’s womb; thus, putting a child into an oven symbolised not only eliminating the illness by means of baking, but also the child’s temporal relocation into the other world, where it acquires the necessary attributes of health (‘is baked properly’) and is then reborn. Interestingly, in some parts of Russia all newborns were ‘baked’ in a similar fashion. There was a belief that every child is born ‘raw’ and the first task for the family is to finish shaping its physical appearance (Bayburin 1993: 54); compare this with how “a raw child” in one of Russia’s dialects means “a baby that was born weak” (Baranov 2001: 21). The culinary code and in particular the opposition between ‘raw’ and ‘cooked’ acquire a special meaning within the framework of medical practice. Claude Lévi-Strauss noted the opposition between raw and cooked, boiled, dried, or fried in his research. According to his studies, this opposition in various cultures often overlaps with other binary oppositions, such as alive vs. dead, self vs. other (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 334–342). The notion of ‘raw’ is evoked during the first stage of a rite of passage (for example a woman who has just given birth is called raw). Linguistic phenomena also reflect this pattern: ‘raw’ can refer to an illness (‘*syra*’ (Belarusian for ‘raw’) means ‘cold’ in Drybin district). A spell by Vetka reads: “Take the sleeplessness, *syrovets*⁹, pain out of the slave of God...”, etc.

The use of ‘raw’ or ‘cooked’ (boiled) water is also regulated. Spells were applied exclusively to raw water; a spell or a prayer was sufficient to render the water sacred. The status of raw water as an intact, natural, primal substance corresponded to the status of the newborn. Thus, “як первы раз купаіш, нада ваду браць цёпленькую, тока не кіпячоную. Нельзя. Вот кажуць: у вары купаны – эта пра злога чалавека” – “for the first bath it is necessary to take warm water, but not boiled, which is prohibited. The saying ‘bathed in boiled water’ means a wicked person” (AIAHEF, Vula urban settlement, Beshankovichy district, Vitebsk region < N. A. Bondarava, b. 1930 (2002)). But for further healing water had to be domesticated: “One should bring water in a new pot from such a place that no one has used for the past three years, boil it, put a knife, a needle and a spindle into the pot, cover it with a wooden bowl, put the pot under the cradle and gently turn it upside down” (Nikiforovskiy 1897: 38). To comfort a child during a panic attack one was only allowed to use cooked water, as water’s otherworldly ‘raw’ qualities were neutralised by this domestication through boiling: “To heal the distress one should boil the water and carry it around the [child’s] head three times” (AIAHEF, Yushki village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region < S. M. Shamshur, b. 1944 (1994)). The process of boiling is strongly associated with creation in medical rituals; such imagery is vividly reflected in folk tale motifs that derive from the relevant rites of passage (for example Baba Yaga the witch boils and bakes the hero; the hero dives into boiling milk, etc.).

The seme ‘raw’ is also evident in the term *suravaya nitka*, which means a coarse linen thread used in healing rituals. The thread embodies the dichotomy between culture and nature in a ritual setting. The preference for a coarse thread in folk healing is also related to its ‘incompleteness’, its roughness as opposed to the finished article (Strakhov 2005: 187). A coarse thread was used to measure the sufferer, then, if there was a dislocation or sprain

it was tied around the arm or leg, or it was used to cure warts, etc. However, the symbolism is particularly evident in the association between a coarse thread and a pregnant woman who is herself (alongside the baby in her womb) ‘raw’ and not ready for birth yet.

Polish researcher Katarzyna Łeńska-Bąk has noted the special role that salt plays in rites of passage; it is the first agent of change and a perfect way to transform the natural into the cultural. Not only does it signal passage between the sacred and the profane, but also conserves and stabilises a certain order of things, blocking further transformation (Łeńska-Bąk 2002: 86). This might lie behind the ritual of carrying salt around a cursed or distressed person, the ritual thus affirming their wholesomeness as a human being not subject to dangerous external forces.

Прымаўку быстрой усяго соллю выганяюць. Гаворыш:
“Соль-саляніца, усяму свету памашніца, у моры пабывала, па свету пахаджала, усяму свету памагала. Памажы этаму там ці старому ці малому”. І тады абносяць і ў печ. Каб нідзе не валялася эта соль.

The fastest way to get rid of the evil eye is to use salt. One says: ‘Salt, oh my salt, you are helping the whole world, you have been in the sea, you have travelled the world, you have helped the whole world. Help this old one or young one.’ And then they carry it around and put it in the oven. This salt shouldn’t be lying around.

AIAHEF, Chyzhakha village, Berazino district, Minsk region <
G. I. Korsuk, b. 1929 (2010).

Salt is one of the primary means of healing a curse; sometimes the salt is said to be blessed. Salt (along with bread) is a widespread offering both for sacred guardian helpers and for the illness itself.

While many rituals with rebirth symbolism involved imitating death, another group substituted death with sleep. Sleep is by itself a temporary transition into another state, it opens up the borders between this and the other world. Many traditional lamentations call on the deceased person to wake up, i.e. come back to life. For this reason, a number of magical manipulations aimed at healing a sick child are performed while it is asleep, considered to be the optimal setup because the child is in the other world. So, for example, when a child was suffering from notsnitsa, specially prepared water was placed under its cradle, its shirt was hung outside, etc. Sleep is one of the preconditions for the successful healing of an abscess, whereby merely falling asleep is seen to go a long way towards feeling better. In her analysis of lullabies that contain references to a child's death, Lilia Khafizova interprets sleep as one of the most potent depictions of passage. "A child's awakening is equal to its growing up and acquiring the status of an adult. Children get this status through sleep, which is interpreted as a temporal death" (Khafizova 2000: 94).

But on this journey of sleep, the sufferer had to be provided with support from this world in order to be protected from being pulled into the other world. This explains the use of a number of wards and apotropaic symbols in all stages of magical healing. The setting of passage determines the openness to contact the other world and the fluidity of border, while the influence of the other world is constantly regulated.

The notion of way

In the semantics of rites of passage the idea of visiting other worlds and the very idea of passage can also be conveyed through the metaphor of the way, road, or journey. This was already pointed out by Arnold van Gennep, who noted that "passage from one social posi-

tion to another is identified with a *territorial passage*, such as the entrance into a village or a house, movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares” (van Gennep 1960: 192, original emphasis). The spacial aspect of a healing ritual always includes the notion of way and a relocation that is not conditioned by utilitarian demands. In a number of cases, the healing ritual itself was reduced to relocation; however, its distinct spatial configuration lent it additional significance. The locations that were chosen for the ritual had a marked boundary semantics. The ritual focused on transcending the boundary, the spatial movement across the border, i.e. passage in the broad meaning of the word. One such location can be a threshold:

Два пороги перайсьці, а на трэцьцім сказаць: “Добры вечар, я ўсьцікаюся, прасьці, я пакаюся”. Тры разы перайці і тры разы сказаць.

Cross two thresholds, say at the third threshold: ‘Good evening, I wet myself, forgive me, I will repent’. Cross oneself three times and say it three times.

AIAHEF, Zadvor’e village, Lyakhavichy district Brest region < M. M. Rakuts, b. 1936 (2005).

A bridge can be another such location:

Крыксы ў яго. Мальчык быў дужа крыклівы. А ў нас мост чэраз рэчку быў. Ночы не спалі, а бабушке пасаветавалі. Ідзі пад мост і рукой пастукай: “Як этыя балкі маўчаць, каб так і мой унук спаў”. І ўсё, як рукой зьняло.

He suffered from kryksy. The boy was very loud. And there was a bridge over the river. [They] couldn’t sleep at night, and someone gave advice to the grandmother. Go under the bridge and knock [on it] with your hand. ‘These beams are

silent, let my grandson sleep in the same way'. And that's it, he was cured.

AIAHEF, Khodasy village, Mstsislaw district, Mogilev region < V. V. Pimakhova, b. 1939, and M. S. Gromava, b. 1938 (2011).

Another location associated with boundaries was a crossroads:

Як крычалі малыя рабяты, іх тады вадзілі па крыжавых дарогах.

When young children kept screaming, they were taken along the crossroads.

AIAHEF, Turki village, Dokshytsy district, Vitebsk region < V. U. Mits'ko, b. 1926 (2005).

The material embodiment of the concept of 'way' is a road or a street, which often feature in folk magic: "When you utter the spell three times, you should carry the child across the street three times – there and back again" (AIAHEF, Usokha-Buda village, Dobrush district, Gomel region – H. A. Bartashevich, L. Barabanava < A. V. Yarmoshkina, b. 1913)). In another ritual, a sick child was to be carried in the hem of one's clothes twice a day, at dawn and at sunset, without looking back at the 'border', i.e. the rising or setting sun (Wereńko 1896: 207).

Relocation from one place to another in the course of ritual healing emphasises its original meaning in which the passage involves overcoming a certain obstacle and following rules (to be naked, to pass through holes, etc.) that highlight the link to archetypical symbols of passage and rebirth. "A healer called Mazenka took the sufferer to the barn, told him to undress and run to the neighbouring grove naked (and it was late autumn and frosty); he had to find two aspens growing from the same root and squeeze

between them. And old Mazenka was whispering something during the process” (Shlyubski 1927: 21–22).

“The way becomes the omni-way, it is the brightest and the most intense image of space that must be perceived as the omni-space, the universal space that combines both the sacred cosmogenic space of the Universe and the profane, modest, and cosily domestic everyday space” (Toporov 1993: 9). The role of the way in magical healing is especially prominent in the texts of spells and charms. In these texts, the way is the most direct and effective means of eliminating the original status and achieving a desirable outcome. Most eastern Slavic narrative spells revolve around a hero’s way. The notion of way reflects the aspiration to reach the location where the ritual is performed (on a metatextual level) and the idea of visiting the other world in order to overcome the crisis (on a semantic level). Moreover, according to Sergey Shindin, “the image of way in magical practice can foreground ideas about the close relations between the events in the macrocosm and the microcosm and about the possibility of influencing individual or social life directly through a connection to the cosmos, the absolute sum to which the way is an equivalent” (Shindin 1993: 111).

The main motivation to embark on the way, for the subject of a spell or healing practice, is to meet representatives of the other world either on the way or at the end of the journey. Oppositions such as inside–outside, life–death, healthy–ill are resolved there, and the space of their journey represents the sufferer’s status as lacking stability and being open to various influences. Return from this space and from such a journey is symbolically understood as a new birth (Libera 1995: 186). While the other is transformed into the self, the vector of movement shifts from the periphery of domesticated space to its center (Bayburin 1993: 192). In the case of healing magic this involves the relocation of the sufferer and the healer from a space where the ritual is performed. This way

is relatively well-marked and full of restrictions and taboos, such as ‘one must not look back’, ‘one must not speak’, etc.

Similar to rituals dominated by symbolism of the way/journey are those involving stepping into borderline locations and leaving the disease there. Such rituals are predicated on the existence of two subjects. The first subject is the sufferer themselves, whose action of stepping over certain objects or places is imbued with the symbolic meaning of overcoming their sick and ‘borderline’ status. Objects that are stepped over are united by their belonging to the boundary and even the other world. Among such objects are the fur coat (*kazhukh*): «Як дитя було бальное, то праз кожуха вывернута, казалі, нада яму пераступіць» “When a child was sick, they said that it should step over a fur coat turned inside out” (BFEA, Veluta village (Luninets district Brest region – T. R. Fedukhovich); and a threshold and a well: “Кажуць, над калодзесям носяць. А зараз яшчэ цераз парог: Крыксы-плаксы, выходзьце вон” – “They say, [a child] is carried over a well. And now also over the threshold, saying ‘Kryksy-plaksy¹⁰, go away” (AIAHEF, Assyo village, Lepel district, Vitebsk region – H. A. Bartashevich < N. M. Sazon, aged 78). The second subject is the healer who steps over the sufferer. On one level, this implies that the ailing person is lowered, placing them in a location with an otherworldly association. On another level, there is a clear symbolic connection with the area between the legs as naturally connected with the idea of ‘death-birth’, since the dominant chthonic meaning of the legs is also connected to the reproductive function. The mediative aspect of the situation is reinforced by placing the sufferer in a border area, for example on a threshold, on the junction between floor boards, along a beam, with their head towards the oven:

Кали дитя плачэ, дак можэ яму уроки случылісь. Нада дитёнка палажыць спавітага чэрвоным паясом на масту

(на падлозе) удоль бруса (балька ў столі) галоўкай да печы. Мати пераступае яго правай нагой да прыгавора: Чым парадзіла, тым і атхадзіла. Тры разы так»

When a child is crying, it could be that someone cast an evil eye on it. You should put a red belt on the child, put the child on the floor along the ceiling beam, head towards the oven. The mother steps over it with her right leg and says: 'What I used to give birth, I'll use to cure'. And so it goes for three times.

РА, Grabauka village, Gomel district, Gomel region – Т. Shchepanskaya < V. P. Aploshkava, b. 1936 (1982).

Клалі на ганак і маці пераступала туды-сюды тры разы, і прыгаворвалі: Якая маці радзіла, такая і адхадзіла.

[We] put [the child] on the porch and the mother stepped over it back and forth three times and repeated: 'The mother that gave birth will be the the one who will cure' (Piatrouskaja 1998: 119).

Як крычыць (дзіця), то надо де мостицы (дошкі ў падлозе) сходяцца, кладёшь и три раза перэходишь, и кажэ: Чым мать родила, тым и отходила.

When the child is crying, one should put it on the junction between the floor boards and step over it three times, and say: 'What the mother used to give birth, she'll use to cure',

РА, Verkhniya Zhary village, Bragin district, Gomel region – V. I. Kharytonava.

On the one hand, stepping over a child symbolically correlates with giving birth and indicates that the illness is left in the out-

side space. On the other hand, it endows the sufferer with vitality through contact with the female sexual sphere. It is significant that stepping over a child was prohibited outside the ritual context (“you won’t grow”), and that if this was done by a demon, it foretold a misfortune: *jak čort pierastupiū* (literally ‘as if a devil stepped over (someone)’), meaning that someone’s life went awry (Vasyukovich 2000: 200).

Thus, the aim of a diseased person’s relocation across the border (especially if it is a child) is to go through the stages of their socialisation. “In healing spells the way may also epitomize the process of healing. It is a process that happens along the way and implies certain dynamics. A small-scale model of this way indicates the aspiration to achieve the same goal in real life. According to the laws of an archaic mindset, if we model a successful outcome on a small scale, we can successfully accomplish it in real life” (Zav’yalova 2006: 190). The transition between self and other, life and death not only neutralises these oppositions but also marks the fulfillment of an appropriate social status.

Therefore, a magical healing ritual results in the renewal of an ailing individual’s personal integrity, which consequently leads to the (re)establishment of social stability, while the individual overcomes the desemiotisation that was caused by their illness. Recovery is semiotically recognised as a return from the other world, inevitably leading to the “reestablishing of homogeneity in the living world” (Bayburin 1993: 116), which is a typical conclusion for all rites of passage. Consequently, it also leads to the restoration of the normal structure of the universe in general.

Conclusions

Within the framework of a rite of passage, a sufferer is represented as a liminal being whose biological status does not correspond

to their social status. However, equilibrium can be restored in the course of a ritual. The liminal stage of the ritual is expressed through a medical manipulation that should take place in a location that is rich in symbols of death and the other world. The main idea is to lead the sufferer through a symbolic death and resurrection. The postliminal stage, or, to be more exact, the symbolic resurrection, represents a second birth, and is thus described in near-physiological schemes and terms. This involves conceptualising the world where the symbolic death takes place as a womb, while the process of healing is represented as childbirth. The general concept of rituals involve the creation of a new person. Folk medical rituals specifically are regarded as the correction of a sufferer's physical state, which includes the separation and destruction of their (personified) illness and the strengthening or modification of their biological capacities and health.

The result of a medical ritual is that the sufferer acquires a clear and unambiguous definition, restoring both their personal order and social stability. The individual overcomes their desemiotisation, which was caused by the illness. If, however, the individual is captured by otherworldly forces and falls under the influence of death, they fall out the human semiotic sphere. Recovery can be symbolically represented as a return from the other world, the world of the dead, which inevitably contributes to the restoration of order in the world of the living and, consequently, the reestablishment of the normal structure of the universe in general.

Notes

¹ The fieldwork materials are deposited in the Archive of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore (AIAHEF) at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

² All further recordings were made by the author unless specified otherwise.

³ Candles blessed during the Candlemass celebrations were used in many Belarusian rituals, including a significant number of rites of passage (translator's note).

⁴ *Notsnitsa* is a female nightmare spirit and the personification of child disease in Slavic mythology (translator's note).

⁵ A vernacular term for epilepsy (translator's note).

⁶ Another name for *Notsnitsa*, see note 4 (translator's note).

⁷ Another name for the personification of children's disease (translator's note).

⁸ One of the names for infant illnesses that are associated with the age of one month (translator's note, see Valodzina 2009).

⁹ A term for malaise deriving from the word *syry*, which means 'raw' (translator's note).

¹⁰ *Plakac* derives from the word *plakac'*, to cry (translator's note).

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