THE WITCHCRAFT MEDICINE – TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL COORDINATES[1]

Abstract*: The witchcraft is seen as a complex spectacle of words, gestures, mimics, actions and objects which is performed, like any other ritual, in a sacred place, isolated from the profane environment. To choose such a place requires time and care, not to enter a forbidden space that could contaminate the therapeutical act in a negative way.*

Keywords*: the witchcraft, sacred time, profane time.*

To follow temporal and spatial coordinates was an important element in popular tradition, and not to follow them was simply passing into the abnormal.

In relation to the notion of folkloric time, Nicoleta Coatu (1998) speaks about the existence of the ambivalence of profane time and qualitative time, the first being a concrete, physical one, the latter belonging to a "hierophanic" coordinate in order to reflect the impact of man and evil force.

According to popular beliefs, when “the skies open” on New Year, Baptism, Easter, Sânziene, Saint Andrew, Christmas, there is a breaking off between the profane time and the magical religious one and this is considered the only fortunate moment when people could understand animal language, treasures came to light and characters could be recognized.

Witchcraft requires a special temporal coordination and if it does not find a clear placement on this coordinate, it needs at least an approximate one because the space it covers from one time into the ‘other is almost imperceptible. This sends us to a careful following of certain rules: "Any witchcraft/spell cannot be performed at any time" (Gorovei, 1985:80).

For example, it is said it is not good to use witchcraft when there is new moon, while scald head, impedigo - "bubele dulci" are not exorcised when the moon grows lest we should get the reverse effect, some witchcrafts are performed on lent days, at the end of the month, some are done only on lent days (Monday, Wednesday, Friday), for pimple, pustule - "de bubă" the witchcraft is done in the morning of Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, for epilepsy – "răul copiilor", for leucoma, cataract – "albeață" the witchcraft is done before the sunrise, for scab – "râie" the spell is done on Tuesday to Wednesday or on Thursday to Friday, the witchcrafts in mud are done on Saturday at sunset. But as a rule, these are not performed on Sundays "probably because the witchcraft is of the witch-doctor and the cure is of God, of Virgin Mary and other saints and because Sunday is a day of rest, it is not allowed to use them in such a day" (*ibidem*), only the witchcraft for the evil eye - "deochi" can be performed in any day at any time.

It can be noticed that a general rule cannot be established for the days in which every witchcraft is performed, because the rules change depending on the place and the witch-doctor. Some witchcrafts are performed only on Mondays, while in certain places people strongly believe in witchcrafts performed on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and those spells cast on Sundays and Mondays have no cure.

It is considered a great sin to perform a witchcraft on holy days and on the week before Easter. Generally, for cures, the witchcraft was performed on lent days

[1] Maria Pescaru, University of Piteşti, mariapescaru@yahoo.com, Carmen Banța, University of Craiova, carmenbanta74@ yahoo.com.

BDD-A5931 © 2011 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:57:54 UTC)

(Monday, Wednesday, Friday), to drain - "a seca" the sickness but witchcraft can be performed in the other days of the week, if needed.

For example, Macedonians believed that the person, who got sick on a Tuesday, has no cure. Romanians talked about the 3 bad hours of Tuesday somewhere between the three singings of the cocks; Bulgarians believed in the evil hour which belonged to Tuesdays; Serbians and Macedonians said it was bad that somebody should die on Tuesday, because there was the risk of this happening all over again the next week. This type of witchcraft is supposed to remove the patient from the chronological time in which he assumingly does not live anymore, and to place him in another time. In fact, the witchcraft itself reenacts the primal events, considered significant and the one for whom the spell is performed and the performer relieve an original reality. 'If the moment of getting sick is evoked as if you recognize at least half of its origin this can mean that you received a magical power that helps you fight the sickness.

The sacred intensity of the temporary moment is also known by the witches who chose especially the days avoided by the witch – doctors, in order to succeed. After the sunset, at midnight, until the cocks sang for the third time, a forbidden period began "when all the activities of the humane obey the taboo, non-humane acts" (Olteanu, 1997: 163).

The Moon is a stimulating element, of the manifestation on the evil nature "the archaic – mythical symbol of the night star is involved also in syntheses which reflect the relation moon – water – vegetation".

Romanian folklore says the herbs used in medicine are found protected by the Moon, while Mircea Eliade states that in Sweden, China, Polynesia and Melanesia "the herbs grow on the Moon" (Coatu, *op. cit*: 11).

Many cultures believe that, in the full moon nights, you can see the spirits of water, of forests and of air which gather at the witches' Sabbath when the warewolves and the ghosts come to life. But according to Janus' symbolism the moon is both gate to heaven and gate to hell, having an evil influence on people, too. In China it is said that a pregnant woman exposed to the moon's rays will give birth to a hare lip "buză de iepure" child, and in Romania, especially in Bucovina, the pregnant woman who drank from the water in which the Moon mirrored itself, will give birth to a mad child. In the same time, in other cultural areas, the Moon is more like a goddess to whom people could pray, asking for health. In our folklore the sun is seen as God's eye of the day, and the Moon as God's eye of the night. In many cultures the Moon is seen as part of the other world, from here originating the idea that the dead people's souls lived on the Moon (Greeks and Romans) or that the dead went to the Moon to change their appearance (Iranians, Polynesians) or that the dead's souls rest on the Moon waiting for reincarnation (Indians). Birth, wedding and death are marked by rituals of innitiation, of integration in the community, all being part of a succession of life moments qualitatively marked. Crossing the temporal border means passing from one world to the other, the sacred time becomes profane; the body and soul harmony starts decreasing and all these can be avoided only by following the time limits.

The witch – doctor, by hundreds of years' practice, learned to respect the favourable temporal coordinates and believed in the magic calendar which sets the favourable and unfavourable moments. "Time has sacred and profane accents, being made of discontinuous segments, each with different causal significances" (Rautu, 1998: XI). When talking about spatial coordinates, life goes on in a determined place "described in the system of semiotic binary oppositions – left/right, up/down, sky/earth,

BDD-A5931 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:57:54 UTC)

earth/underground, north/south, east/west, sea/land, human/non-human, house/forest etc." (Olteanu, *op.cit.*: 168).

Many beliefs talk about the existence of a parallel universe which can be easily entered at temporal break – offs. Passing from one time to the other means also passing from one space to the other. Passing from our world to the other one can be accomplished using unusual practices: in the Inuit tradition the dead person was taken out of the house not through the door, but through the window, while in the Romanian tradition the deceased is taken to the grave with his feet ahead. A conscious passing from one world to the other exists only if it is performed by a witch that follows a strict virtual. She has two passings: one, while she is alive, as a witch who acts against humane, and the other after her death, when she returns as a "ghost" in the human world in order to continue her evil deeds. Supernatural beings pass into the human world by changing their appearance, this is a feature of all evil characters and it is completed by the partial loss of power, of supernatural signs.

As long as life goes on in a certain time and space, it will be composed of a succession of access gates, with a dual nature but which cannot be used consciously by many people to achieve their goals. The doorstep (good and evil) is considered a bridge between the two worlds and the snake of the house which is said to live under it, as the guardian spirit of the family.

Romanians wanted to emphasize this relation even more that is why they carved their gates' pillars, they painted their clay bowls with the sign of this "guardian spirit"– the snake of the house. A Romanian belief says that the dead person sees and knows everything that happens inside his home up to the moment the priest crosses the doorstep and when the bells toll for him that person loses his hearing. This means for the community that the dead person naturally integrates in the world he/she will have to live in. Another Romanian custom is to put holy salt on the doorstep to chase "the devil" away or to put coals – "tăciuni" under the doorstep and after it is crossed, no spell will touch the person who starts a journey. It is also said that it is not advisable to sleep at night resting your head on the doorstep – the boundary between the two worlds, because there is a high chance of becoming disabled, also it is not good to trade on the gate step or sit on it, because the devil may hide there. The window, another sacred space, is an unnatural entrance to the house, a sort of space, of world. The Serbians considered that a pregnant woman should not look out of the window; Romanians believed that looking in of the window from the outside may cause eye sickness. The ones who drank water given out of the window could get an evil disease which can harm even animals, and if somebody threw water out of the window, that could be considered a profanity of this sacred space. Plague and cholera knocked at the window to let people know they were coming, the messengers of death (sparrows) came by the window, the coffin was taken out of the house using the window and not the door, people put water and a towel on the window sill for the deceased's soul who came to wash itself, the window was used to take out very sick children as a simulation of death.

The chimney is a sacred place used by spirits as a way to enter the house. Romanians, when lenting somebody milk, they had to circle the chimney pillar three times holding the milk pot and all these in order not to give their hand away. The same apotropaic role has the spindle which is hang with a garlic bulb on its top down the chimney pillar in order to protect the new – born from witches. There are some places with a special role, places where witchcrafts are performed, and they are known as: Forbidden places – where you are not allowed to put different objects; holy places, evil places: cemeteries, crossroads, abandoned houses, the place where the wool is melt, the

BDD-A5931 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:57:54 UTC)

places beyond the village border (Rautu, *op. cit.,* XII). All these areas are governed by mythological creatures: Muma Pădurii, fairies, magi – "solomonarii", warewolves – "pricolii", dragons – "zmeii".

In Greek mythology, Hecate is revered as “the crossroads goddess”, being an expert in the magical art of spells, mistress of the three worlds (sky, earth, hell), the creator of ghosts and hallucinations, both benefactor and frightening, but she is also the symbol of the crossroads that means the unknown.

The footprint is any sacred space that had contact with a sacred bearer, with a character that hold this force or with an object. The foot is known as a symbol of force, and keeps a great part of the sacred intensity of that person. The simple stepping on the ground is a symbol of taking possession of it, known in Romania as "descălecat".

Russians used "the ground under the right heel" in some rituals, the Serbians washed the children spilt by the evil eye with water from animal footprint and Romanian women from Bihaia made the cow have milk again (întorceau laptele) using its footprint, or in Romanian folklore, people avoided stepping into the water used to wash the deceased because the feet of the person touching it might go numb. If somebody suffered of cold feet or feet pain, witchcraft had to be done on him because he stepped "on an evil ground". The wise old men say that you should never step after an immoral woman because she troubles everything, brings poverty and burns the ground underneath her feet but it is advisable to step after a straight woman or girl. When you start a journey and somehow you do not manage to reach its end, you can be sure that an evil power stands in your way and does not allow you to cross its territory or, on the contrary, it can "help" you pass to another space with other rules. Ukrainians believe "the spirit of the forest" makes the ones that answer his call, get lost and this is easily done by weakening their watchfulness, altering their reason. Romanians say that to sacredly mark the place the fairies danced or the air spirits roamed, different objects are left or forgotten and these are used later in magic practices to make the spirits come back. Romanians use to cross themselves when they leave their house, in order to be protected from the evil they may encounter. "The house may represent symbolically an ambivalent center, profane when real-concrete activities take place and sacred, when metaphysical, spiritual actions occur" (Coatu, *op. cit.*: 161).

The witchcraft is seen as a complex spectacle of words, gestures, mimics, actions and objects which is performed, like any other ritual, in a sacred place, isolated from the profane environment. To choose such a place requires time and care, not to enter a forbidden space that could contaminate the therapeutical act in a negative way.
The interesting fact is that this place is chose somewhere at the border line between the two spaces (sacred - profane), for it "is marked with magical accents: each part resembles the whole, the place of an object takes part in the object’s existence; it is integrated in it" (Răutu, *op. cit.*: XII).

Bibliography

Nicoleta Coatu, *Structuri magice tradiționale*, București, Editura BIC ALL, 1998
Artur Gorovei, *Descântece românilor*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, vol. II, 1985
Antoneta Olteanu, *Ipostaze ale maleficului în medicina magică*, Bucureşti, Editura Paideia, 1997
Radu Răutu, *Antologia descântecelor populare româneşti,* Bucureşti, Editura Grai şi Suflet-Cultură Națională, 1998.

BDD-A5931 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:57:54 UTC)