

The Slavic Magical Community and Natural Liminality (Prolegomena)*

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Ethnophilosophical research is an important line of inquiry in the attempt to construct a synthesis of Slavic folkloristics. (1) This is because the search for logical laws of association, and thus for the principles of encoding the meanings embedded in various forms of human psychosocial expression, both verbal and non-verbal, reveals the most general mechanisms of thinking. Such work makes it possible to perceive unity in diversity: the affinity among Slavic world views. Although Slavic religious faiths are different and some are oriented toward Rome and Catholicism while others are in line with Orthodoxy and Byzantium, they are best described by the model of "a single trunk," albeit with ethnic branches. This model is based on the assumption that the human cognitive universe is heterogeneous, qualitatively diverse, while adhering to a fundamental law of analogy and participation. (Levy-Bruhl, 128ff) In the case of the material analyzed here, we have an ongoing reactualisation of constant chronoacts, traditional patterns of behavior that are associated with significant periods of time. (2)

The theory of the *temps de passage* (3) supplies the main instruments for decoding these patterns. The theory is based on the law of periodicity that governs the Cosmos, but which is also echoed in human life as a series of stages with similar beginnings and endings. These stages always lead to the same goal: an apologia for life on which all human behavior is based – a universal model of culture. The coexistence and mutual translatability of the social and cosmic codes on the level of folklore texts – the verbal components of chronoacts – and the mechanism of internal textual coding of the markers of temporality constitute a problem that cries out for systematic solutions.

The liminal phase of every *temps de passage* is both culturally important and functionally and semantically complex. Here, just the invariant features of that phase will be used to identify symbolic meanings. The material on which our study of meanings will be based will consist of Polish and East Slavic bedtime prayers with the initial thematic formula "I'm going to sleep" (*idę spać / lozhus' spat*). In the Polish tradition, these were added onto daily prayers as a form of individual domestic ritual. (4) Daily prayers are part of the minor solar cycle and they were accompanied by a change in the ontological status of the individual: the transition from the phase of life (day) to the phase of symbolic death (night), with the projection of new life (day). This transition, both on the social plane – the individual rebirth of life – and on the cosmic plane – the rebirth of light – was isomorphic with the major solar cycle (the year). What these prayers had in common in Polish and East Slavic tradition was their non-canonical and magical character, as can

be seen from attempts made to classify them by the bearers of folklore or its collectors. Polish sources call them personal or private prayers, (Kotula,107) while East Slavic sources call them Russian [or East Slavic, Rusian] prayers (as opposed to Slavonic or Orthodox prayers).(Klimchuk, 185-187) In Russian, the words charm prayers (Kharitoniva, *Prakticheskaja magija*, 9) or simply textual bedtime amulets (*oberegi*, 'protective charms')(Adonieva and Ovchinnikova, 22-24) are also used. This universally felt distinctiveness from canonical, be it Catholic or Orthodox, prayers implied that the texts under investigation drew from power, not from religion, but from another source: a magical, mental method of transforming the properties of objects.(5) This method guaranteed a ritual effect, even when using Christian universals. The preference for closely defined, homogeneous forms (the evocation of the same range of motifs, images and phraseological units that are found in church and cosmic decorum) and their simultaneous presence in strictly magical acts (charms and spells) would seem to place all these texts on the same level. This level is that of the magic of the life cycle (the wheel of life) in critical and borderline situations, in which future positive changes are anticipated.

It is precisely liminality, as an interstructural phase, that accompanied all changes linked to the cosmic and biological rhythms of the transition between states. (Turner, "Betwixt and Between...", 93) Defined by Victor Turner as the periodic reclassification of reality and of man's relations to other elements of society, nature and culture,(6) liminality required ritualized behavior on every occasion. The transformative character and vehicular function of this behavior made it possible to achieve the projected desired state (the positive aspect of liminality). The projections of a new reality, which is replicable and culturally recognized, should thus include ritual texts whose very nature contains the basic parameters of liminality. These can be defined through a series of opposing processes and concepts such as: open/closed, visible/invisible, alive/dead (and also not-alive/not-dead), purity/impurity, ownership/"holy poverty" (nakedness), and solitude/community. The ambiguity ascribed to liminality, because of the possible coexistence of attributes of the past and present state, posed a danger for the liminal subject. Feeling thus threaten, the liminal subject would allow his imagination to give rise to demons in accordance with the law of dissociation. (James, 506) Thus the need to construct a magical defense became another component of the liminal code. The magic defense guaranteed that change would indeed take place, that there would be progress to the completion of the liminal phase. This defense existed alongside the aforementioned projection of the future (the time of beginning in the social and cosmic plane). Examining the basic symbolic phraseology of the liminal state, the clearly complementary mental sequences created by it, and their paradigmatic order enables us to reveal the essence of liminality: the magic invocation of life.

It is precisely the magical bases of the encoding of bedtime prayers, with their actional and substantial signs of transition, that were inherent in the verbal forms used to evoke powers. The rational or practical determinants chosen pointed toward mystical associations. Furthermore, there was a preference for the greatest degree of effectiveness and the evocation of the strongest powers at the highest levels of the Christian pantheon. This can be seen as one of the main mechanisms for multiplying prayer power. The imagery of magical covering and uncovering that is typical for West and East Slavic bedtime prayers was based on the isofunctionality of word and deed and on the structure of a text built according to the magical principle of condition > result: if A, then B, or A in order to B, i.e., the subject utters A in order to achieve B. (Cyvjan, 114-115)

The magical establishment of a border between this world and the other world, between the secure and the insecure was essential in the situation of liminality. It was achieved by the magical closing off of a liminal subject (the magic of Alcmene [Stomma, "Mit Alkmene (The Myth of Alcmene)", 99-110]) from all four directions. There are several variants to the formula in question and the magic works both on the existential plane ("God at the head, the Mother of God at the feet, and angels at the sides") and on the cosmic plane ("a cross from heaven to earth"). Also important is sealing off the liminal subject from the front and the rear, as well as guarding him against all liminal spaces: corners, windows, doors, the fireplace. The latter function is performed by entrusting the liminal spaces to the care of guardian angels. In its original form, i.e., the construction of the magic circle, the protection formula contained the image of the "iron fence" and this is quite typical of farming, pastoral and hunting incantations. Similar imagery, however, is also encountered in other protective and defensive incantations, such as those invoked "against an evil man," "on the way to court" or for weddings. (Petrov, 100-101) Bedtime prayers, as personal invocations in a natural liminal situation, have preserved this original protective intention and, in the Polish tradition, some of them have taken on the form of a prayer to St. Nicholas, the so-called *mikokajka*. The central motif of the St. Nicholas prayers is magical enclosure, a remnant from the time of pagan prayers directed to agricultural and domestic divinities. (Kotula, 208-209) The motif of the key, which, together with the image of the iron fence, completes the formula of surrounding with a fence in Slavic magic, exists also in Christianized versions. Here it takes on a canonical Catholic orientation and the keys that lock the fence (in the *mikokajka* - "the jaws of the wolf in the forest") are associated with the keys of St. Peter, (Petrov, 112) or of Peter and Paul, or of Nicholas. Interestingly, sometimes the saints Peter, Paul and Nicholas become the compound *Pietrzepawlemikokaju* (Peter-Paul-Nicholas) a phenomenon that reveals the magic principle of multiplying (here triplicating) power. This probably has a pragmatic and operational goal rather than attempt a religious valorization.

A similar mechanism for evoking power is also manifest in relation to other components of the Christian code that appear in the function of universal apotropaic elements, e.g., the motif of the cross,

which is as primary and essential in bedtime prayers, as it is in charms and spells. On one of level, this complex, demonstrative symbol functions as a kind of insulation from evil forces, a barrier that can almost be tangibly perceived. This role of the cross has long been well-known in Polish tradition in the form of so-called “characters,” engraved magical talismans intended to provide protection against demons or plagues, which people carried with them, put under their pillows or nailed over the doors of their houses. The talismans had the form of the magic cross of Zacharias, or the medal of St. Benedict. Many were inscribed with Latin phrases that indicated against whom the talisman was supposed to function, namely the divine adversary (an element of Slavic cosmogenesis) or evil personified (in the Christian orientation). Typical engraved phrases include: *Vade retro satane!* (Get thee behind me, Satan!) or *Fugite partes adversae!* (Run away, enemies!). Many talismans also pointed to the divine source of their power with phrases such as: *Crux sacra sit mihi lux, non draco sit mihi dux* (May the sacred cross be my light, and not the dragon [Satan] my guide). (Seweryn, 162-163) Mystic participation thus came about through an image that served as a model. Under the law of participation it partook of the sacred nature of the object. (The same function can be applied to another bedtime prayer motif, the Gospel as a verbal icon of Christ, cf. Luke 24, 32, the dogma of Chalcedon.) Multiplication of the magical power of the sign of the cross is widespread, especially in East Slavic text-amulets. Multiplication can be achieved quite literally, by increasing the number of times a particular motif appears (e.g., through sevenfold repetition, or by carrying the cross for a distance of 77 versts). Such actions are another example of the “theological materialism” often recognized as a distinctive feature of Orthodox religious practice. This “materialism” makes it possible to feel the nearness, presence, invisibility, and the almost tangible nature of the cross as a symbol of protection and eternity. (Jevdokimov, 268) The strengthening of the word-image through the gestural code that is inscribed in the verbal structure also served to construct an invisible border that would be impervious to unclean forces. Thus, making the sign of the cross at the beginning and end of a bedtime prayer and crossing oneself in the course of saying it served both to activate the power of the cross through gesture and to multiply its efficacy.⁽⁷⁾ The liminal nature of the evening chronoact – the transition between life and symbolic death, and back to the phase of life – also determined the second level of encoding found in prayers. Thus we see references to a new creation inscribed in the texts and anticipation of signs of new life. Note especially the figures of Jesus, the Mother of God, and the saints, which belong to their permanent canon. They appear a dynamic aspect rather than a static one. They are frequently pictured as wandering, an image that is also characteristic of the texts of spells and charms. There, too, saints and other holy figures walk, rove, and wander. Several mythical concepts underlie their wanderings: the journey as a test; foreignness as a source of miraculousness (cf. the valorization of the stranger and his magical properties); and the unfathomable mystery of God – his unknowability – the journey being one of the hypostases of the “unknowable God” as far back as Indo-European mythology.

(Novikova, 297-298)

Calling up figures from the Christian pantheon is governed by the principle of the economy of thought, the mental shortcut, in which a name evokes mythic events. This arrangement produces a “sacred history” of sorts. As a result, a magical, physical metamorphosis – the rebirth of life – was also supposed to take place on the existential plane. This was guaranteed, on the basis of the laws of participation and identity, by the divine anastasis, the *mysterium crucis* as the threshold of a new life and the identification of the Cross with Christ. As Christ “conquered death as such, and not just the death of one man, Jesus of Nazareth” (Jevdokimov, 247-248) so the cross could come to the aid of the performer of an evening prayer. Thus this life-giving, invigorating Cross, located at the center of Christian theology, became mankind’s “most potent weapon” in the liminal situation, and, at the same time, serve as the symbol of liminality. (8) Thus the actualisation of the mythic history of Christ assumed the transfer of the original event from its initial time into the present – a shift from the darkness of Christ’s Passion to a new light.

The pattern of parallels between bedtime prayers and text-amulets and the isomorphs for the verbal code of natural liminality, by which the time of the beginning was inscribed into the time of the end and the continuum of time was guaranteed, articulated the semiotic character of the Cosmos and gave substance to the cosmic “transit.” As we may recall, the oldest iconic forms of the cross: the swastika (*crux grammata*) implied the idea of movement through the bending of a straight line or the curving to the right of each cross arm. It seems that the same motivation existed for the magical-religious behaviors that accompanied chronoacts of natural liminality. Under the influence of Christianity, it took on the form of an individualized defense against the divine antagonist. The original cosmic representation (heaven, earth, sun, stars, moon, etc.) of these chronoacts came to be dominated by the Christian canon as described above. The pragmatic realization of an individual transition – “I’m going to sleep” – was strengthened in East Slavic texts by the autoidentification of the liminal figure: the speaker was supposed to insert his or her own name (as per the instructions *imia rek* so often found in spells and charms). The phenomenon of so-called dual faith observable in various forms of Slavic folklore can be found here also. (9) The code of cosmic transition is embedded in the deep structure of the anthropological orientation, however, in the focus on the individual transition. This code is inscribed, for example, in the universal sign of the cross. The cross can symbolize the four regions of the earth either as a square or a quadrilateral. (Lévy-Bruhl, 262 and Lurker, 175) It can also serve as a vertical and horizontal representation of the world, like the image of the world tree (the axis of the world). Both the cross and the world tree are marked by identical symbols: wood, stone, gates, or by the four corners of the house mentioned earlier in connection with bedtime text-amulets. There are even lexical correlations between the structure of a house and the human body

on the one hand and the macrocosmos – the four directions – on the other.

The type of research procedure outlined here, which takes into consideration the information coding principles in a verbal text that is dependent on natural liminality (non-canonical prayers, text-amulets), makes it possible to generalize about mutual cultural links in the Slavic world. We can use parallels between techniques of thinking and behaviors in a situation of change, including those related to situational liminality such as charms and spells to perceive common ethnopsychological principles tradition.⁽¹⁰⁾ The types of kinship demonstrated here involve the essence of magico-religious. They reveal a faith in the modelling and preserving role of the word. They also involve the construction of a liminal code on the basis of sympathetic (homeopathic and contagious) magic. The Christian “accessories” in our folk texts perform an instrumental function, serving to strengthen the magic circle of life. They demonstrate that human beings, plunged into the movement of the circle, can unconsciously combine religious ritual with magic in order precisely to ensure the revolution of time and the constant renewal of being.

NOTES

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1. Cf. this type of research in A. Brzozowska-Krajka.

2. The concept of the chronoact (*vremiadeistvie*) is taken from the work of M. Bakhtin.

It emphasizes the dominant dimension of time in folk ontology, as well as the clichéd nature of the behavior determined by its diversified qualities. See also Gacak.

3. The three-phase theory of *rites de passage* is built on the metaphor of time. It accepts the model of times of transition, with the established area of sociocultural properties specific to individual phases. See van Gennep; Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage”, pp. 93-111; Turner, “Liminality and Communitas”, pp. 94-130; Leach, pp. 124-136; Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.* [The Anthropology of Nineteenth Century Polish Rural Culture] pp. 155, ff.; Wasilewski, pp. 259 ff.; and Brzozowska-Krajka.

4. See the following sources for texts: *Zbiór Wiadomości do Antropologii Krajowej* [Collected

Bulletins for Polish Anthropology], *Wiskz*, Kolberg, Kotula, *Ukraiins'ki zamovliannia*, Efimenko, Maikov, Vinogradov, Vetukhov, Romanov, Dobrovol'skii, and Kharitonova, *Prakticheskaiia magiia*.

5. For magic as a mental construct, See I. Todorova-Pirgova, pp. 134-140.
6. All the theoretical findings involving liminality are from the cited works by Turner.
7. This convention of performance has lasted until today among the Orthodox population of Western Polesie, see, e.g., the recordings of the Russian prayers made in the 70's and 80's by F.D. Klimchuk, pp. 186-187). See also the direct indication of the mythological foundations of faith in the efficacy of the magic circle built up with private prayer formulas and Christian signs, e.g., in East Slavic belief tales -Zinoviev, motifs B16 a - the devil is afraid of prayer (mentioning the name of God, or the cross) B 16 d - the devil is afraid of the magic circle; he cannot take a man who has drawn a circle around himself while praying.
8. For the link between the cross and the category of borders, see, e.g., Tolstoy, pp. 538-540.
9. Cf., e.g., characteristics of dual faith - S.S. Ozhegov, pp. 44-47.
10. I include the concept of situational liminality in the broadly understood theory of rites of passage, which includes not only critical points in human life, but also any transitions from one condition to another; for the performance of spells and charms as an ad hoc situation and its invariant features, see V.I. Kharitonova, "Zagovorno-zaklinatel'nyi v narodnoi kul'ture Vostochnykh Slavian [Spells and Charms in the Folk Culture of the East Slavs]."

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