

Female Spirits Among the South Slavs

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The South Slavs believe in a variety of female spirits. These beliefs are colorful and reflective of South Slavic, and perhaps all Slavic, mythology. This article will present a survey of South Slavic mythological beings, along with descriptions of their appearance and their activities. Where possible, links to beliefs in other Slavic areas will be made.(1)

Among most South Slavs (Slovenes, Croatians, Bosnians, Serbs, and Macedonians and Montenegrins) the *vila/vile* (nom. sg. and pl., respectively; Bulgarian *samodiva/i*, *samovila/i*) was thought to live in the forest, to dance the *kolo* in groups of three, or sometimes ten.(2) This spirit could change its shape at will: now into a butterfly, next into a bird, a flower, a cloud, a fog, an old woman, or even become invisible. In Russia *vily* (nom. pl.) were supplanted by water nymphs known as *rusalki*. This took place sometime in the early Middle Ages. South Slavic *vile* were most commonly reported by lonely shepherds tending their flocks at night. Their activities were both positive and negative: in epic songs and fairy tales they are often found helping the hero, but in local legends and *memorata* they are usually harmful. Possessing superhuman strength, the legendary *vile* are reputed to be able to bring on clouds of hail to destroy crops or, conversely, prevent hail from coming. *Vile* were known to play lesser tricks as well, e.g., braiding horses' manes so finely that no human hand could have done so.(3)

The place in the forest or meadow where the *vile* danced was known as a *vilensko igrišće*, or *plésališće*. It was thought that if a male touched that spot with his foot, he would be struck dumb. It was further believed that if a young man came upon the clearing when the *vile* were dancing, he might either be turned into a stone or tree, or be taken prisoner to their mountain lair and be tickled to death. (Russian *rusalki* were also prone to tickling their male victims, often to death, but not consistently.) The young man might be released, but in that case he would return to his village mute. Babies found abandoned in the forest or a field, and even now and then on the doorstep of a house at the edge of the village, were said to have resulted from the consorting of a *vila* with a young lad.

Whereas for most South Slavs *vile* are now only magic helpers found in epic songs and magic tales, belief in their existence survived in the Janj region of south-central Bosnia at least through the 1960s and 1970s.(4) There the *vile* are considered non-human, but resemble tall, thin and very beautiful girls who wear their long, black hair *unbraided*.(5) They were thought to live in caves in the forest and to dance in a meadow called *vilino kólo*. As with traditional *vile*, their favorite occupations are knotting horses' manes and tails (which it is thought unwise or impossible to untie) and riding horses wildly through pastures. In

the Janj region the *vile* most often appeared at night to shepherds and goatherders, and several have been reported to defend a lone shepherd from roaming gangs. They are also reputed to help orphans and other unfortunates. Curiously, at least from our viewpoint, it is believed that if a man is milked by a *vila* (for they like to suck men's nipples, or is given of her milk to drink), he will gain superhuman strength.(6)

The three *sudēnice*, or fates (Russian *tri dévy sud'by* (like those of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Germanic tribes and others) are female spirits whose reputation also persisted throughout the ancient Slavic world until recently. They were thought to appear at midnight when a child was born. Dressed in white, they would enter the cottage through a chimney, a keyhole, or a door which had been carelessly left open. They were normally invisible, but their presence could be noted by such unusual phenomena as the fire in the hearth suddenly going out and then starting up again, a dog howling piteously outside, or a sudden strong wind blowing around the house. Their activity was to stand near the hearth, the traditional dwelling place of the house ancestor spirit, or near the threshold (likewise believed to be a traditional place where the family's ancestor spirit rested) and discuss the fate of the newborn child, how long he/she would live, what would happen in its life, etc. All three fates were said to speak at the same time so that it was difficult for the mother giving birth to understand what was being foretold. Only in case of a disagreement about the child's fate would they speak individually, and then it was believed that all three predictions would come to pass.

Belief in the three fates was current in parts of Northeastern Serbia until recently. There they are pictured as beautiful young women dressed in white (or in local costume) and crowned with a head of *unbraided hair*. The long, loose and untethered hair is a trait that the *sudēnice* share with *vile* and *rusalki*. It is considered an irresistible temptation for any males they encountered. Generally, the Fates appeared during the first three nights after childbirth.

There are rituals connected with the presumed appearance of the *sudēnice*: the mother and child must sleep on the floor, and the room must be lighted each night; three special honeycakes, three glasses of wine and three of water, three cubes of sugar, and one gift of gold, such as a ring or necklace, are set out. In this region it is thought that the *sudēnice* enter the hut through the chimney at midnight, and that they will become angry if no meal has been left on the table: in that case their determination of the child's fate will not be a good one. Once a child's fate has been determined and set by the *sudēnice*, the food is eaten, by three men if the baby is male, or three women if it is female. The gold gift is then presented to the baby and it is his/her possession for life. On the third evening, a piece of basil (long considered a protective herb and a staple item in the ritual performance of magic charms) and a bit of cake are placed under the baby's head, and the icon lamp is set next to him.

These spirits have their own ritual: on the first evening the youngest says *Sutra čemo* (Croatian: "Tomorrow we'll do it"), the second says *Prekosutra* "the day after tomorrow," and the oldest says they should make the prediction on the third night. At that time she foresees a bad end; the second tries to mitigate that prediction; and the third finds the right measure. Thus is the child's fate sealed. Note: The birthing mother must remain awake all the while in order to hear what they say. If she should fall asleep, she must then remember her dream, for it is thought to contain the secret of the child's future. Belief in the *sudēnice* was common in all of former Yugoslavia, but now seems to have died out except in some remote parts of Serbia. In Macedonia they are called *naréčnici* or *orisnici* (cf. Greek *oristis* "one who determines"). They, too, are thought to be dressed in white when they arrive at midnight to determine the child's fate. Having been incorporated into the religious belief system of the people, they are considered to be close to God and to do His bidding. A number of proverbial expressions in Macedonian testify to their importance for setting the course of the child's life: *Tako mu bilo pisano i naréčeno od narečnicite* ("Thus it was written for him and determined by the *naréčnici*"); *Kako što mu e réčeno na čoeaka, od toa si úmira*, "As it is said for a man, from that shall he die"; and *Što mu e pisano na trékata večer na gláata na čoeaka, seto ke mu vrvi preku gláa* ("What is written on a man's head the third evening, so shall it come to pass").

If belief in the *sudēnice* and *narečnici* has receded into the near past for most South Slavs, there are other female spirits which are still thought to appear just after the birth of a child and to threaten the health of both the baby and its mother. Reported in Serbia as recently as the 1960s they are sometimes known as *bábice* or *nóčnice*, but since these names are taboo, they are more often referred to as *óne* "they," *kúme* "godmothers, or female relatives," or simply *májke* "mothers." Said to have developed from the souls of female children who died unchristened, they are thought to be long-haired women, dressed in black, who are dangerous to mother and child for up to forty days after birth or at least until the child's christening. They may appear at any time of the year, but are especially active during the *nekřšteni dani*. They come after dark, and they run loose all night, but since they fear light, they disappear after the first cock crows.

Defenses against these spirits include calling on the healing power of *řiva vátra*, or the sacred "living fire" which is kept burning all day and night in the family hearth. Other defenses call for using consecrated water to bathe mother and child, and placing iron objects in the bed, especially nails or axes which have been forged in the hearth, the home of the ancestor-protector spirit. Also used against such malevolent spirits are a red thread sewn into the baby's clothing, cloves of garlic placed in his diaper, and ritual *kádenje*, or censuring, of the room by burning something which has a sharp smell, e.g., an old shoe.

Another female spirit is the *móra* (cf. the related English words having to do with life and death: mortal, immortal, mortician, and even the Black Mariah {"paddy wagon"}, etc.), English nightmare (which, despite appearances has nothing to do with female horses, as is the same for the German term), French *cauchemár*, whence Russian *koshmár*, and German *Náchtmahr*). The *mora* specializes in frightening children and tormenting adults in their sleep. (This spirit is also common Slavic and was represented in Russia by the *kikimora* or *šišimora*, whose activity was the same; the root word is also found in a secondary term for witch in Russian, *mára*.) The *mora* causes bad dreams in which terrifying creatures chase the dreamer, suck blood from his nipples, and attempt to strangle him so that he has sensations of suffocating during sleep. Like the *sudenice*, *mora* are thought to enter the house through a crack in the door, a keyhole, or the chimney.

In Croatian/Kajkavian Bilo-gora, some 70 kms. east of Zagreb, standard precautions against them include the drawing of a pentagram or hexagram in red on the door, or sticking two forks together and hanging them on the handle. The addition of *Nema nikoga doma!* ("Nobody home!") is considered a good secondary action to take. Once inside, the *mora* will immediately begin strangling her victim. When others notice, they may help by thrashing (!) the baby with hazelwood branches. If it is a child being tormented, garlic may be rubbed on his chest and a few garlic cloves inserted into his diapers for added protection. If this measure proves ineffective, the baby can be rubbed with axle grease; soon the *mora's* lips will turn dark, and once her identity is known, she can be switched with the hazelwood branches to prevent her from continuing to torment the innocent victim. A testimonial recorded in 1969 says that if an adult male notices that he is possessed by a *mora* he can put a harness next to him in bed. As soon as he feels the *mora* tormenting him he can take the harness and put it over her head. Since the *mora* is female, she will turn into a mare at once.

In northeastern Serbia there is a female counterpart to the male Croatian *ved* (who occupies the position of the *domovói* in Russia), the *šumska majka*, or "Forest Mother." She is thought of as a beautiful woman with unbraided black hair, well-developed, even huge breasts (which not only fulfills a masculine dream, but brings her closer to the Ur-Witch of South Slavica, Baba Roga), and very long fingernails. She is sometimes "seen" and has been reported as naked, but is usually described as dressed in black or white clothing. Like many other spirits, she can change her appearance into that of an animal. She has been perceived and reported as a dog, cow, horse or goat, but most often as a small haystack! She is said to appear only after midnight. As her name suggests, the *šumska majka* is not ordinarily a harmful spirit, although she has been blamed for baby's colic and crying fits. Fearing light and smoke, she does not enter the village.

Like the *vila*, the *šumska majka* stays in the forest, whence her beautiful singing can be heard. At times she also lusts after young men, and there have been many reports of encounters between her and a village lad. The *šumska majka* is considered a protector of pregnant women, and she is often called upon in charms to cure sick babies; the *bajalica* or conjurer, addresses her directly in the performance of her healing ritual.

Vjéštice (Cr; Serbian *véštice* witches, " whose name is derived from OCS *véděti* ("to know, have secret knowledge"); in Slovene and the Kajkavian dialect of Croatian: *coprnice* "charmers," from German *Zauber* "magic"), may appear to humans in the form of an unknown dog approaching without being called or a cat unfrightened by a stick or rock thrown at it. Though ordinarily invisible, they are thought to be able to cause the sound of horses' hooves stamping, or to make stoves produce excessive smoke, doors slam, or whirlwinds of dust appear at crossroads. Any of these phenomena may even today elicit the exclamation: *Éto vještica!* (Cr. "It's a witch!") For most South Slavs, such witches are found now usually in tales, but post- World War II field research in Croatia, in the Janj region of Bosnia, and in Serbia, has shown that belief in them may still be strong. Recognized by their manner of speaking, uncontrolled eye movements, or an ability to stare at the sun for long periods, they are primarily married women (or less commonly an unmarried girl) of one's own village. Often reported at crossroads, they are thought to gather on the eves of saints' days and especially before the beginning of Lent, when it is considered extremely dangerous for normal persons to leave the house. Like *vile* and *more*, they torment men by sucking blood, especially from their nipples. It is thought that if a man awakes to find he is being "milked," he must grab the witch by the hair and promise or threaten (!), to give her salt at dawn. She will not stop unless he does so. A preventative measure is to wipe one's body with garlic before retiring; this is an especially frequent precaution taken on the eve of Lent. These witches are said to grease their own bodies with a special salve made from hearth ashes, so that they may ride on spindles or brooms faster through the forest on the way to their meetings.

A female being who is both semi-mythological and yet a human who lives in the village, is the conjurer, the local medicine woman (rarely a man); she possesses secret charms and potions to help, hinder, or harm. The most common term for this person in Slovenia is *čarovnica*, in Croatia and Bosnia *vráčara*, in Serbia *bajalica*, and in Macedonia *basnárnica*, but in any of these regions she may simply be called *Bába Mára* "Old Woman Mara" (or whatever her name may be). When she is not practicing magic for hire, she is suspected of stealing milk from villagers' cows. By sprinkling salt on each side of the path which a given cow uses to return to its barn she reportedly can cause the animal to dry up in three days. Another magic trick involves tying a rope to the streetside doors of the barn, putting a pail under the rope,

and going through the motions of milking. This method was reported in 1948 in the Bilo-gora region by persons who swore that they saw fresh milk flowing from such a rope.

The identity of the village *vračara* is usually known, but if it is suspected that an unknown witch is practicing in the village, a common means of determining her identity calls for making a tripod stool on St. Barbara's Eve (December 4). When the churchbells announce the first mass of the Christmas season, a man must take the tripod to church and stand on it near the choir. The first woman who turns to look is considered a/the witch. This method was reported in Bilo-gora in 1948, but has been noted for other South Slavic areas (e.g., the Dalmatian islands) as well.

In accord with the Indo-European dichotomy system, most villages have two professional witches: one for healing, one for inflicting harm. Sometimes the distinction is noted by contrasting terms: the one for positive actions is termed *bajalica* actions, and the one for negative actions, *vračara*. They may be turned to in time of need, but they are never quite trusted, and children are always warned to avoid them. A common threat to make children behave is a Kajkavian-Croatian phrase such as *Ako ne budete dobri dat ću vas babi Mari!* ("If you aren't good, I'll give you to *baba Mara!*"). A similar warning involves the purely mythological witch *Baba Roga* (the South Slavic counterpart of Russian *Baba Yaga*): *Odnijet će vas baba Roga.* ("Baba Roga will take you away.") Belief in these powerful and practical, semi-mythological witches, the local conjurers and soothsayers, persists from Slovenia to Macedonia and Bulgaria in many villages of the Balkans.

In summary, the long South Slavic tradition of belief in female mythological beings continues, and the underlying dualistic perception of them is still strong, despite such problems as wars, invasions, and the like. The female water spirits are demons lurking below or in the forest to catch the unaware males, yet even they can be the source of power for certain villagers (ordinary women as well as female conjurers); one must always be careful in and near the water. Most female spirits have a more complicated relationship with human well-being than their male counterparts. Some, such as the *vile* and *šumske majke*, are visualized as enticing, beautiful young women with long, perpetually unbraided hair who are either naked or dressed in white or black shifts (both chthonic colors for the Slavs, among others), and who have a lustful appetite for young men and who are fond of dancing the *kolo* or riding horses wildly through the plains. These may at times be sources of aid to lonely shepherds or heroes in folk literature. But the majority of the female spirits are older, ranging in age from the youngest *sudenica* through the *more* and *babice* to the old crone, the *vještica* and *vračara*, and usually they bring trouble and grief. Certain details of appearance and activity may be shared among two or more of them, e.g., long, unbraided hair, choice of dress color, fondness for dancing. For believers, all these female spirits play a significant, and largely

negative role in a person's life from birth until death. To defend oneself against such spirits, traditional protective rituals must be performed. These are usually done with the aid of an intermediary such as the village conjurer, for she has secret potions, magic amulets and, most important, direct contact with the genius of the Underworld. Her rituals may not always be effective, for believers are convinced that evil is omnipresent and can only be appeased or induced to leave temporarily. Yet their performance is often enough to calm the fears of those afflicted by malevolent spirits still thought to influence the course of one's life.

Notes:

1. Research for this study was conducted at the Zagreb Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku (formerly Zavod za istraživanje folklor); consultations were also held with folklorists at the academies of sciences and arts and museums in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb. Research and funding for the final revisions were provided by University of Kansas grant no. 3320 from the Kansas General Research Fund, and from the senior Fulbright program of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars.

An early version was read in St. Louis at the session of SEEFA held in conjunction with AAASS convention in October, 1999.

2. For reasons of economy the generic term *vila/e* will be used here. In any case, the basic features are almost identical regardless of their geographic location in the Slavic Balkans. Curiously enough, this number (10) is not among the magic numbers for Slavs and Indo-Europeans in general.

3. For a general introduction to South Slavic folk belief, see E. Schneeweis, *Serbokroatische Volkskunde. Erster Teil: Der volkstümliche Glaube* (Second Edition, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1961), pp. 3-33. See also Christo Vakarelski, *Bulgarische Volkskunde. Zweiter Teil: Geistige Kultur* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1968), pp. 207-47.

Specialized information concerning almost all aspects of South Slavic mythology can be found in Veselin Čajkanović, *Mit i religija u Srba. Izabrane studije* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, kolo LXVI, knj. 443, 1973).

4. Survival of such beliefs may be disputed since the destructive forces of the wars and massacres of the 1990s, but I will assume that they have been retained, just as others have persisted throughout the centuries.

5. Long, unbraided hair has a special attraction for Slavic males; thought to be untamed, unruly, and loose, such women are considered "easy prey" for males; of course, the joke is on them.

6. Scholarly interest in the Balkans has always been strong. See especially: *Glasnik Zemaljskog*

Muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine (GZMBiH), Sarajevo; Zbornik za narodni život i običaje Južnih Slavena (JAZU), Zagreb; Glasnik Etnografskog Muzeja (GEM), Beograd. Other journals of many ethnographic and folklore institutions in former Yugoslavia are likewise lodestones of information; see: Traditiones, Ljubljana; Narodna umjetnost, Zagreb; Narodno stvaralaštvo-Folklor, Beograd; and Makedonski folklor, Skopje; and various publications of the Institut za folklor, Sofia, Bulgaria.