

## GHOSTS AND WITCHES WILL NEVER DISAPPEAR FROM THIS WORLD

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**Abstract:** This text explores the enduring presence of ghosts and witches in human culture. The text delves into the complex belief systems surrounding spirits and witchcraft, emphasizing their deep roots in human history and their persistent influence across different societies. The belief in spirits and witches is unique to humans, stemming from our cultural evolution. This worldview divides existence into tangible and imagined realms, with spirits inhabiting the latter. Spirits represent the spiritual order and are inaccessible to human senses, becoming part of this realm through death. Witches and sorcerers, on the other hand, are seen as mediators who can influence the tangible world through their contact with the spirit realm. Different cultures have various ways of conceptualizing the world and the spiritual entities within it. Despite these variations, the basic structure of belief in spirits and witches remains consistent, rooted in the human need to influence reality. Magical practices are driven by human needs, whether for survival, fertility, wealth, or personal desires. These practices often involve rituals, props, and specific actions to connect with the spiritual realm. The text provides examples from different cultures, such as Macedonian village practices in the 1930s and modern Akan spirit shrines in New York, to illustrate the universal nature of magical practices and their connection to human needs. The continued presence of ghosts and witches in human culture underscores the enduring nature of these beliefs and their role in helping humans navigate the complexities of existence.

**Keywords:** spirits, ghosts, witches, magic, magical practices, humans, *homo sapiens*

Purgatory souls! / On any side of the world: / Or burns in tar, / Or freezes at the bottom of a river, / Or for more severe punishment, / Implanted in rough wood, / When the embers of the furnace bite it, / And it squeals and weeps tearfully; / Each one hastens to the cluster! / Let the crowd gather here! / Behold, we celebrate *Dziady*! / Come down to the holy tabernacle; / There are alms, there are prayers, / And food and drink (Mickiewicz, *Dziady* 2)<sup>1</sup>.

Witchcraft is the Achilles heel of every ethnographic description, every field study. It is that sphere of life of the local community which is difficult to reach for an observer, which usually shows itself only in secondary, external

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<sup>1</sup> Polish original: „Czyśćcowe duszeczki! / W jakiegokolwiek świata stronie: / Czyli która w smole płonie, / Czyli marznie na dnie rzeczki, / Czyli dla dotkliwszej kary / W surowym wszczepiona drewnie, / Gdy ją w piecu gryzą żary, / I piszczy, i płacze rzewnie; / Każda spieszcie do gromady! / Gromada niech się tu zbierze! / Oto obchodzimy Dziady! / Zstępujcie w święty przybytek; / Jest jałmużna, są pacierze, / I jedzenie, i napitek” (Mickiewicz, *Dziady* 2).

manifestations, leaving the fullness and depth of its phenomena in hiding, and in exploring which the researcher must necessarily support his own observation with exaggerated, distorted or intentionally fragmented local information

(Obrębski 2022: 59)<sup>2</sup>.

The title statement is a trap. It is set for a discourse oriented towards man, *homo sapiens*, his point of view, his experience of the world. It is also set by man, the same man who gets caught in it.

According to current scientific knowledge, created by humans and for humans, only our species, of all those inhabiting Earth, have developed belief systems in the course of cultural evolution, among which an important role is played by ancestral spirits and our attempts to influence reality through their mediation. In this way, the ‘world’ consists of at least two realms: 1. that which we tangibly experience on a daily basis and 2. that which we imagine as a space-time belonging to spiritual entities which – due to the limitations of our body and senses – we cannot observe, feel or hear. Of course, different belief systems and different religions divide the ‘world’ in different ways, i.e. horizontally, vertically, more or less multi-level, with and without the concept of returning under a different form of living matter, etc. But these are still variants of the same initial structure. The ‘world’ is thus ‘our world’, a ‘human world’, one in which we are the ones trying to dictate the terms to all others, thus including the planet we live on and the Universe we live in. Behind ‘our world’, there are ‘our spirits/spiritual beings’ and ‘our witches’ – in other words, we ourselves, in various forms, wanting to have a place in it, in ‘our world’, even after death, and to be able to influence it and have an impact on our descendants despite our absence in that realm.

Theoretically, ghosts and witches belong to two different orders. Spirits represent the spiritual order, inaccessible to human sight, of which man becomes a part through the death of his body. Witches and sorcerers, on the other hand, are people who ascribed the knowledge of influencing tangible reality through contact with the spirit world. Both are therefore connected by death: physical (transition to the spiritual state) and social (the specific social status of witches and sorcerers and their temporary contact

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<sup>2</sup> Polish original: „Czarownictwo jest piątą achillesową każdego opisu etnograficznego, każdego studium terenowego. Jest to ta dziedzina życia społeczności miejscowej, do której z trudem tylko może dotrzeć obserwator, która ukazuje mu się najczęściej tylko we wtórnych, zewnętrznych przejawach, pozostawiając pełnię i głębię jej zjawisk w ukryciu, i w poznawaniu której badający z konieczności wyręczać musi własną obserwacją przesadną, zniekształconą lub celowo ułamkową informacją miejscową” (Obrębski 2022: 59).

with the spiritual reality<sup>3</sup>). This is why they are often referred to as ‘mediums’ and situated on the border between the two worlds. However, they cannot achieve this kind of connection on their own – for this purpose they need certain props, elements of animate and inanimate nature, man-made objects, verbalised words, gestures, precisely defined time and space, etc., which, by means of an analogy of an action performed in relation to the expected one, will make it possible to open the window of the sacrum in the space-time continuum of the profane<sup>4</sup> and contacting the spirits/souls/spiritual part of ‘our world’. The key issue is the reason for these actions and the purpose directly related to the reason. In its deep structure it is the same, one, basic one, which takes the form of countless variants of realisation. To explain this I will use an example:

It was on Tuesday, the day when, like Saturday, the curse is most powerful and most easily attached. I was just passing near the house of the Dajlowc family when I saw Dajlica crossing the threshold of the hut. I stopped, curious. Her grandchildren were hovering around her knees. Dajlica shouted at her daughter-in-law: “You whore, take the children! Don’t let the children sit next to me. I am going to curse”<sup>5</sup>. Then she took off the kerchief from her head and sat down on the threshold with her hands crossed on her knees, in the posture prescribed for cursing. [And] she began to wail in a penetrating, creaky voice: “Elena! Come out of the gate, you bitch! Why are you as silent as an egg under a hen, you bitch? Come out, bitch, let me see you! Eee, you must not have been seen by the Lord! The sun probably didn’t warm you! Slavkinah’s money, that you took, must have been your offspring! You must have enjoyed it, you had nothing else at home! Neither in front nor behind! God forbid it should be your wealth, God forbid it should be your children. God forbid it should be your health! I said, God heard. Let not a single curse fall dry! Let them all cling to thee, as to that mother’s milk which thou hast suckled! God, gosh! Did you hear what I said?” And from behind the ajar gates of Stamejca’s house one could hear only the desperate protest of the cursed woman breaking free again and again: “You there, you there, what did you say! You cursed yourself, you shall collect the harvest of your own mischief! Why did you get so worked up, you old bitch? Was it good for you when two of them came to you? So was this one: She wanted a man, so she left. Sow! Bitch!

(Obrębski 2022: 140–141)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the *open body* concept in: Ulturgasheva 2017, according to which any person at any given time can come into contact with spiritual reality, of course, under certain conditions. This means, as I present later in the text, any person can apply magical activities in everyday life.

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to Mircea Eliade’s concept, in full awareness of its limitations.

<sup>5</sup> All bold highlighting in quotes are mine, JR.

<sup>6</sup> Polish original: Było to we wtorek – w dzień, kiedy [podobnie] jak w sobotę, klątwa posiada największą moc i najłatwiej się [przyczepia]. Właśnie

Stamejca defied customary law and allowed Slavka to escape. The girl, who had spent the night with a man, could no longer return to her family home. There was no choice – the community was forced to recognise her as married and to accept the denial of the principles of the law under which she lived. However, she was placed in a no-win situation, i.e. one from which she knew no way out (the common law of the community in such a case provided no “antidote” other than to accept the fact), this fact further triggers a “procedure of last resort” to fulfil a need he cannot otherwise be fulfilled. Not knowing at what point the curse will catch Dajlica curses all day long, from dusk to dawn, driving Stamejca mad with this hours-long shrill wail.

In the above example, we are dealing with a situation in which the culprit is known. However, if the person who did the evil is not known, one of the most dangerous magical acts could be performed, i.e. the blowing of wolf veins – in order to learn the name of the witch and kill her. In other circumstances, one could be led to someone’s infertility or fertility, wealth or poverty, happiness or unhappiness. However, it is not the wishful variant that is important but the fact of need. Need is always at the root of magical action and it determines its shape. People magically want to create and destroy, act and counteract, conceive and kill, give and receive, love and hate, understand and forget<sup>7</sup> – is important that they cannot achieve this through actions that can be explained rationally, i.e. according to the current (for them!) state of knowledge. At such moments they undertake activities that connect them, or the people professionally involved (witches and

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przechodziłem niedaleko domu Dajlowców, gdy ujrzałem Dajlicę przekraczającą próg chaty. Zatrzymałem się zaciekawiony. Wnuczęta kręciły się koło jej kolan. Dajlica krzyknęła na synową: “Zabierz, kurwo, dzieci! Niech dzieci nie siedzą przy mnie. Będę klęła”. Po czym ściągnęła z głowy chustkę i siadła na progu z rękami skrzyżowanymi na kolanach, w postawie przepisowej dla klnących. [I] poczęła zawodzić przenikliwym, skrzypiącym głosem: “Eleno! Wylaż przed wrota, suko! Co milczysz, jak jaje pod kurą, suko jedna? Wyleż, suko, niechaj cię widzę! Eee, bodaj Pan ciebie nie oglądał! Słońce bodaj cię nie grzało! Pieniądze Sławkine, coś je wzięła, bodaj ci były twoim potomstwem! Nimi bodajżeś się cieszyła, nic innego w domu nie miała! Ni z przodu, ni z tyłu! Bodaj to ci było twoje bogactwo, bodaj to ci były dzieci twoje! Bodaj to ci było zdrowie twoje! Ja rzekłam, Bóg słyszał. Ani jedna klątwa niechaj nie padnie na sucho! Niech wszystkie się ciebie uczepią, jak to mleko matczyne, coś jessa! Boże, eee! Czyś słyszał, co rzekłam?”. A zza uchylonych wrót domostwa Stamejcy słyhać było tylko zrywający się raz po raz desperacki protest przeklinanej: “Tobie tam, tobie tam, coś rzekła! Samaś klęła, sama zbieraj! Coś się tak rozpieniła, stara suko? A tobie to dobrze było, jak przyszły do ciebie dwie? Tak samo i ta: zachciało jej się chłopca, [to] sobie poszła. Maciora! Suka!” (Obrebski 2022: 140–141). Fragment of Józef Obrebski’s field diaries from Macedonia in 1931–1932.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of the division of magical activities, see e.g.

sorcerers), to the other dimension of ‘our world’. Andrew won’t spend every day with AJ, because he can’t afford it (\$50 a day is an exorbitant amount for him), nor does he have the time, but he will be “touching the fenders of three black cars every morning, rubbing one’s hands in dirt from the street in the morning and evening, inhaling the smoke of a cigarette before bed time, chewing flavoured gum no more than twice a day, and lighting scented candles around his bed” (Parish 2015: 115). By touching, smelling, tasting he will come into contact with that part of ‘our world’ with which we explain the meaning of our existence.

Providing examples records from two seemingly completely different worlds was done intentionally by me. From a Macedonian village at the beginning of the 1930s, where every magical action was connected to the realisation of biological needs, such as eating, drinking, shelter, reproduction, or simply survival, and from New York a few years ago, where the Akan people, through spirit shrines in New York City, attempt to realise the American dream, or the need for self-realisation<sup>8</sup>. Both clearly show the importance of a need: survival (the only need Macedonian rural groups knew at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>9</sup> and a more dignified life, like others, unavailable to their ancestors (the Akan people). Both clearly indicate the need for ritual play, with the use of props, time, place, actors, etc. – in order to make the magic work. Both emphasise the importance of the mediator. And finally, both refer to ancestors. No matter how one defines and describes the spiritual part of ‘our world’, it is a world of distant, close, ancient, known, unknown ancestors of man<sup>10</sup>. What remains of them – what people believe remains. That which is inaccessible to our eyes through their biological limitations. Good and evil spirits (i.e. those who wish us well and those who wish us ill), spirits created from people who went through the whole ritual and moral complex of funerals and those who were never buried, prematurely born children, abortions, murderers, rapists and others thrown out of the group, etc., the vampire-ridden, eternally wandering, thirsty, hungry, but also happy, cared for, fed, etc. This part of ‘our world’ is as diverse as the visible one we experience every day.

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<sup>8</sup> I refer to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, with an awareness of the limitations of this scheme.

<sup>9</sup> I am aware of the simplification and certain stereotyping used. However, ethnographic descriptions, not only by Jozef Obrebski, but all printed and left in the form of manuscripts, which I reached between 2001 and 2017, clearly show how high the poverty level of the Macedonian countryside was.

<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, the words ‘the dead’ and ‘ancestors’ should be used very carefully as synonyms. The souls of the dead include the souls of both nearer and more distant human ancestors, as well as those whom a given group does not consider ancestors (although they often are, due to blood ties). In more detail on the difference between the dead and the ancestors, on the example of Serbian birth rituals, as I wrote in: Rękas 2010.

And depending on the type of need people turn to this part of the spirits. A girl who does not want to marry a certain man, and has no physical possibility to oppose the will of her parents, will magically ask the evil spirits living at the crossroads to make her infertile (Rękas 2010). At the same time her family and the groom's family will magically ensure her fertility by bestowing gifts on the threshold, doorway, corners of the main room and throwing crops across the roof – thus feeding and watering the ancestral spirits of the family who will wish the community well and not the individual who wants to break away from it. This is also how I read the importance of personal memories and experiences and references to ancestors in the text Jane Parish (2015). Uprooted, without loved ones in the form of graves, far from 'their land', *de facto* deprived of their ancestors, they find their influence thanks to the Akan priests. Just as the piece of metal in the case of the Akan priests in New York, the wolf-skin from the early 1930s in Macedonia enables contact with those who have passed away. Obrebski's Macedonians do not need to find a way to return to their roots. They are in constant contact with them. The Akan people in USA have to. They have no choice. They are ancestrally rooted. Here, too, I observe the difference between the magic practices between people in the land of their ancestors and people in the land of foreign ancestors. But let us first look at the text by Evans Pritchard:

Witchcraft is ubiquitous. It plays its part in every activity of Zande life; in agricultural, fishing, and hunting pursuits; in domestic life of homesteads as well as in communal life of district and court; it is an important theme of mental life in which it forms the background of a vast panorama of oracles and magic; its influence is plainly stamped on law and morals, etiquette and religion it is prominent in technology and language; there is no niche or corner of Zande culture into which it does not twist itself. If blight seizes the ground-nut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft; if women laboriously bale water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few small fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a wife is sulky and unresponsive to her husband it is witchcraft; if a prince is cold and distant with his subject it is witchcraft; if a magical rite fails to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft...

(Pritchard 1937: 63).

When you want to achieve what you don't have and when you have touched something you want to get rid of – you use witchcraft. Every day, at every slightest opportunity, getting up, washing yourself, preparing food, eating, working etc., all day long, from dusk to dawn. There are several substantively identical descriptions in Obrebski's field materials (Obrebski 2022). Wouldn't the Akan people live the same way if they hadn't changed 'their world'? If they had not left the land where 'their ancestors' are

buried?<sup>11</sup> Or would they invoke their ancestors in the same way as they do now in the USA, only the object of desire would be different? A different need shapes a different goal. But the pattern remains the same:

The interior felt like velvet to the touch and smelled like his grandfather's tobacco and boot polish. He recalled the white electric clock on the dashboard "that made the sweetest ticking sound." As he spoke to AJ, Andrew fantasized about the smell of candy he associated with his childhood, sitting in cars parked in his father's garage: Smell wild memories like boy, candy in a tub. Jaw breakers, Nik-L-Nips, suck the goodness out of here. Circus peanuts mixed in a fruity cloud of fluff ... marshmallow as you like from the back of a classic Torpedo ... sitting in luxury on leather cushions, banana flavor swell my nostrils and make my big heart huge

(Parish 2015: 115).

For spirits in 'our world' are connected to space, or perhaps it is better to say that in 'our, human world', created by us and for us, according to our rules and our language, spirits are connected to space. Very specific. It is wonderfully visible in the work of Olga Ulturgasheva (2017). Spirits do not go away, they are here where the deceased people are, they are still associated with bodies that no longer exist. People who died a tragic, violent, sudden death, who were not buried according to the ritual complex of funerals, cannot enter the cult of the ancestors. So they wander about, giving neither themselves nor living people peace.

Ghosts of the Gulag represent a special case. Locals may deal with the deceased of local origin and prevent themselves from being disturbed by appeasing the dead, i.e. they feed the deceased by putting a shot of vodka, tea and food on their graves. By such gestures Eveny facilitate peaceful and non-disturbing behaviour of the spirits of the deceased. In contrast, Gulag ghosts do not respond to these rituals, and, above all, they have no human names for locals to address them by, and their graves cannot be located. Though Eveny classify all ghosts as *arinkael*, local dead and Gulag dead seem to manifest distinct degrees of otherness. *Arinkael* are former kinsmen who, by virtue of belonging to the world of the dead, have turned into predatory and malevolent spirits, but they are still conceived of as not-fully-other because they respond to the rituals. Gulag ghosts' full otherness is manifested in their unresponsiveness to ritual offerings. Therefore, their otherness has nothing to do with being of foreign origin but has to do with their making themselves alien, rejecting offerings and thus kinship relations

(Ulturgasheva 2017: 15).

Therefore, of course I am writing this metaphorically now, the priest in Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve) summons, once a year, those

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<sup>11</sup> Here, of course, I refer to the theory of the transition from a gatherer-hunter lifestyle to a settler lifestyle and to the concept of ancestral land as 'our land'. I do not elaborate on this because there is not space for it in this short essay.

spirits that nobody feeds all year long, that are hungry, thirsty, that wander without finding peace. For they also deserve attention. Firstly, so that they can be tamed at least a little, and so that they can give us peace for another year – after all, they are malicious, they cling, for example, to their mothers' breasts and suck their milk out. Secondly, however, in order to be able, if necessary, as an individual who would like to go against group interests, to ask them for help.

For centuries, scurvy was one of the most mysterious diseases, affecting mainly sailors and prisoners. Countless magical acts were performed to prevent and cure it. It was not until a Scottish doctor, James Lind, aboard the HMS Salisbury in 1747, conducted what is believed to be the first controlled study in medical history. He selected twenty sailors suffering from scurvy, hung their berths in pairs in the segregated, dark and damp bow of the ship and provided all with an identical diet, with a few given two oranges and one lemon a day. In this way scurvy lost its mysterious dimension and the magical actions used to fight it the need to perform. There are as many such examples as the number of diseases, atmospheric phenomena and other events known today, which were once incomprehensible – today they are an everyday occurrence to which we do not pay attention to anymore.

Ghosts and witches will disappear from this world if *homo sapiens* will be ready for it. One way out seems to be the thriving quantum physics and the concept of quantum entanglement. Another lies within the science of multispecies anthropology. Still another is the attitude of accepting one's own mortality and making it what it is, i.e. an element of life. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare 2007: Act I, Scene V: 16). We are not the navel of the world. We have set a trap for ourselves.

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## **ДУХОВИТЕ И ВЕШТЕРКИТЕ НЕМА НИКОГАШ ДА ИСЧЕЗНАТ ОД ОВОЈ СВЕТ**

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### **Резиме**

Овој текст претставува вид научен коментар на една од најстарите и една од најпознатите теми во човековата култура, постоењето на другиот (алтернативен) свет. Тој свет е исполнет со нематеријални битија, коишто се во можност да влезат во нашиот човечки свет и да дејствуваат во него, како и со постоењето луѓе-медиуми, преку кои светот на луѓето може да контактира со „оној свет“. Ова е основа на религиско сфаќање на реалноста, која не завршува заедно со смртта на телото, туку трае и по смртта. Во трудот се зема предвид тезата, која многу често се сретнува како во науката, така и кај пошироките маси, дека човекот не може да живее без верувањето во „оној свет“. Исто така, се зема предвид и тезата дека моментално сме во време кога науката треба да ни објасни дека тоа верување е неосновано и дека повеќе треба да се стремиме кон квантната физика. Како примери се земени две временски многу оддалечени теренски истражувања, од 1931 година, во Порече (Јозеф Обремски) и неодамнешното во Њујорк. Овие два примери покажуваат дека „ништо“ не е сменето од т.н. традиционално време. Иако во моментов сме во неверојатен пораст на научното знаење, сепак, не можеме да се одвоиме од вербата и од верувањето во нешто што не можеме да го разбереме и што е спротивно на научните докажувања и докази. За такво нешто сè уште не сме подготвени поради нашите култури, поради стравот од исклучување од заедницата, поради стравот од смртта. Смртта е лулка на боговите.