



UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ  
The scientific journal **FACTA UNIVERSITATIS**  
Series: **Linguistics and Literature** Vol.1, No 3, 1996 pp. 175 - 178  
Editor of series: *Nedeljko Bogdanović*, e-mail: [nedeljko@filfak.ni.ac.yu](mailto:nedeljko@filfak.ni.ac.yu)  
Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU, Tel: (018) 547-095, Fax: (018)-547-950  
<http://ni.ac.yu/Facta>

**SORCERY PRACTISE AS THE KEY TO THE UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE MYTHO-MAGICAL WORLD IMAGE**  
**Ljubinko Radenković,**  
**"The World Symbolism in the South Slavs' Folk Magic"**  
**Prosveta - Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts - Institute of Balkan  
Studies, Niš - Belgrade, 1996**

**Žarko Trebješanin**

Faculty of Defectology, Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Ljubinko Radenković, PhD, our distinguished folklorist and ethnologist, has been dealing extremely successfully with incantations, practicing of sorcery and folk magic for almost two decades. His previous investigation in the field of this ancient and mysterious aspect of folk culture has climaxed in the two recently published synthesized books: *"Folk Sorcery Practicing of South Slavs"*<sup>1</sup> and *"The World Symbolism in the South Slavs' Folk Magic"*<sup>2</sup>.

In his latest, but not the last book, titled *"The World Symbolism in the South Slavs' Folk Magic"*, this persevering researcher of ours, the excellent theoretician and steady scientist, reveals to us the logic of a mytho-magical thinking that allows for no arbitrariness. His starting points were the verbal incantation texts and the nonverbal ritual actions in the folk magic, and he has applied an almost detective-like method of decoding the hidden meanings of the lexemes used for the practice of sorcery. Through a patient and sagacious analysis of magic actions and devices, Mr. Radenković investigates incantations and sorcery practicing to discover what is invariant and basic in them, thus constituting material elements of a unique model of the world that lies in the fundamentals of the whole national culture and all its manifestations (mythology, religion, folk literature, etc.).

*The basic hypothesis*, which represents a starting research point, is a well-grounded

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Received October 15, 1997

<sup>1</sup> In original: "Narodna bajanja kod Južnih Slovena", Prosveta - Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts - Institute of Balkan Studies, Belgrade, 1996

<sup>2</sup> In original: "Simbolika sveta u narodnoj magiji Južnih Slovena", Prosveta - Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts - Institute of Balkan Studies, Niš-Belgrade, 1996

notion that the character of various magic actions, ritual procedures and magic devices, regarded as phenomena, is not accidental, but strictly determined and systematic.

*The aim* of the research undertaken is the reconstruction of the hidden *code system of the mytho-magical thought* of Slavic peoples. Real objects and ritual actions in magical communication represent the lexemes of a firmly organized symbolic system. Taken on a more profound structural level of meaning, an almost infinite phenomenological variety of magical actions and instruments may be reduced to only *seven* crucial elements, representing the key material units or subsystems of a unique archaic world model. The seven most important elements, which create the image of the world in folk culture, are: *man, animals, plants, metals, space, colors and numbers*.

The first, central, and perhaps most significant subsystem is MAN, or more precisely, HUMAN BODY that is used as a complex symbolical code system in expressing the image of the universe and man's position in it. The human body, as an organized and differentiated space entity in which particular parts are distinguished, communicates in a symbolic language when each of the parts is perceived in a system of binary oppositions. It is differentiated into *upper-lower* parts, in the sense of *pure-impure*. Being symmetrical, the human body, its limbs and organs are divided in space according to the system of *left-right*, implying the traditionally established meaning of *good-bad*. Different subsystems of the human body may also be comprehended after the principle of *central-peripheral*, where the parts closer to the center have the meaning of *constant*, and more remote parts mean *variable*. In the symbolism of the human body, *clothing*, particularly *belt*, the human *voice*, have the meaning of *culture*, that is, they are discriminatory characteristics of the *human, organized world* as opposed to the ritual *nakedness, dishevelment and dumbness* as the characteristics of the *wild, disorganized, inhuman world*. Only if we regard the body as a suitable heuristic model in describing the world, or as an organized symbolic system in which each part has a separate meaning, we may adequately and fully understand numerous magical actions and rituals, like those in which *nails, hairs, sexual organs* or *saliva* are used.

In the mytho-magical world image and in magical rituals, the SPACE is not "mute", it "talks", that is, it represents a convenient nonverbal code through which certain messages may be communicated. It is not homogeneous and continuous, like in a physicist's concept of space. On the contrary, it is heterogeneous, discontinuous, dichotomous, meaning that it is sharply divided into *sacred* and *profane, one's own (social) and strange (wild), pure and impure*. Certain space is liminal, as it represents a "natural" border between the human - social and inhuman - nonsocial worlds, so it is suitable for the role of a mediator in practicing of sorcery. Such border zones, or "impure" places, are the *house threshold, doorway, hearth, woodpile, fence, village limits, cemetery, rubbish heap, crossroads*, etc. Beyond the limits of human, social space, there is a wild, inhuman space where demons are dwelling. Barrenness and inaccessibility characterize this dangerous space. For this reason, any impure, demonic force is expelled by incantations *into the high sea, in water, in waste woods*, "where the dog isn't barking, where the rooster isn't crowing, where the fire isn't burning, where the brilliant sun isn't shining, where the bell isn't ringing".

The archaic, symbolical idea of certain ANIMALS is determined by their position in relation to *the cosmic tree* on one side, and to *the distance* from man, on the other. When the *axis mundi* is taken as a criterion, the animals near the crown of the tree are the *birds (eagle, falcon, dove, raven, owl, etc.)*, in the middle part, the tree trunk, are *dog, cat*,

*horse, cow*, and in the lower part, near the root of the tree, are *serpent, frog, mole, mouse, fish*, etc. According to the other criterion, the distance from man or God's shepherd, along the horizontal axis - starting from the nearest toward the farthest animals - there are: *horse, sheep, cow, bull, goat, donkey, hen, swine, dog* and *cat*. As for the wild animals, the closest to the God's shepherd are: *bear, deer*, then next to them *wild boar, fox*, and at the farthest distance there is *wolf*. It is not before we get to know these coordinates of the mythical zoological universe, before we understand the zoomorphic code, that we can incontestably interpret the ambivalent nature and ritual-magical role of, let's say, a *rooster, dog, serpent* or *horse*.

The symbolical status of a PLANT and its function in sorcery practicing are determined by the comprehension of it as the suitable means of expressing an abstract idea of stability, development and change. Moreover, the plant is regarded as a mediator between a man and the other, divine and demonic world. It is a suitable model for the presentation of the world triplex spatial structure (the tree of the world: the crown, the trunk and the root). According to their threefold scheme, plants may be categorized as high (trees), middle-size (creepers, climbers) and low plants (bushes, grass). At the same time, a plant, which germinates, grows, becomes covered with leaves, blooms, ripens, dies and gets born again, is convenient to express the concept of the time circulation, as well as the idea of death and rebirth. The semantics of particular plant species is influenced by their characteristics (color, flavor, appearance, etc.). Plants with strong flavor and odor (*garlic*), or plants covered with thorns (*hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose*), are frequently used in magic. Certain plants owe their extraordinary symbolical status and magical function to their characteristic of transformation or to the fact that they die and are born again (*grapevine, flax* and *hemp*). Mythical, miraculous plants are "*raskovnik*"<sup>3</sup>, "*modra sjekavica*"<sup>4</sup>, *mistletoe*, and *four-leaf clover*.

The symbolical meaning of particular METALS is determined by their *color, hardness, origin*. *Gold*, reddish-yellow in color, represents an underground reflection of the Sun, thus being a steady attribute of the chthonic world in the folklore, while on the other hand, *silver*, being *white* and *radiant*, is the attribute of celestial deities. *Iron* (meteoric), the attribute of Saint Elias the Thunderer, is a convenient apotropaic device. *Mercury* is demonic. *Lead* is a mediator between a man and demonic forces.

The symbolism of COLORS is very old and universal in the folk culture (myths, poetry, sorcery, riddles, annual and life cycle of rituals, etc.). The fundamental combination is the triad of *white-red-black*. The steady meaning of the *black* color is chthonic, demonic (darkness, underworld), which may clearly be seen in the magical devices as a *knife with black sheath, black thorn, black tomcat, black hen*, etc. On the contrary, the *white* color is associated with light, purity, chastity, daytime. In incantations, *white hounds* and *white eagles* represent the main opponents of evil forces, which fight against them and win, thus taking away illnesses. The border color is *red* (fire and blood), it is demonic and therefore used in magic for fertility, and in wedding and posthumous rituals of transition.

The symbolical status of NUMBERS originates from the etymology of the word

<sup>3</sup> In Vuk Karadžić's "Lexicon Serbico-Germanico-Latinum", "raskovnik" is a certain (most probably imaginary) herb thought of having the capacity of unlocking every lock or latch and opening any cover, particularly those hiding some buried treasure. The herb is also considered capable of revealing all secrets.

<sup>4</sup> According to Vuk Karadžić, "sjekavica" (*carduis species*) is a kind of grass under which, it is believed, a fortunate person may find a valuable ring.

denoting "learning", "measuring", "naming". A number has a classificatory function; it separates finite from infinite, discontinuous from continuous, organized world from chaos. *Even numbers* are harmonious, symmetrical, lucky, while *odd numbers* are asymmetrical, misfortunate. Particular symbolical value is attributed in the folk culture, mythology, rituals and poetry to the numbers *one, two, three, seven, nine, twelve* and *forty*.

The book of Professor Ljubinko Radenković, PhD, titled "*The World Symbolism in the South Slavs' Folk Magic*", based on an impressive empiric material that has been worked out and interpreted in accordance to the latest theoretical and methodological accomplishments of the Russian semiotic school (which regards the culture as a symbolical system), represents a highly original, capital and exemplary work of modern Serbian and Slavic anthropology. In my opinion, it is more than a synthetic study of the folk magic semantic matrix. For its ultimate reaches, this valuable book is a valid and reliable theoretical and methodological model, an inception or a sound nucleus of a comprehensive, systematic and thorough *encyclopedic dictionary of symbols in traditional culture*.