

## Temenos Lecture 2016

# How and Why to Talk about Witchcraft? Discourses on Witchcraft and Uses of Bewitchment Narratives in 21st Century Rural Eastern Slovenia

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### Abstract

The article, based on fieldwork conducted in rural Eastern Slovenian region, discusses specifics of various discourses – Christian, rational, New Age, and, in particular, witchcraft discourse – that the inhabitants of the region use in discussing witchcraft. It shows the occasions in everyday life in which the witchcraft discourse may be mobilised and strategically used by people for their own benefit. Later, it compares the discourse used by traditional magic specialists in the unwitching procedure, performed when misfortune is ascribed to bewitchment, with the discourse used by a contemporary New Age therapist in therapy performed for the same reason. The author argues that in basic elements they resemble each other, the main difference being that the key underlying premise of the traditional unwitcher, i.e. that the source of misfortune threatens from the outside, loses its importance in the New Age therapy. In this, the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

*Keywords:* discourse, witchcraft, magic, New Age, Slovenia

In summer 2000 I first arrived, together with a group of students, in a secluded rural region of eastern Slovenia to conduct field research. As part of a joint project between the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana and a regional institution, our aim was to record folklore that could serve the institution's mission

to promote the local heritage. What I hoped for were etiological legends about various features of the landscape and other legends related to particular places in the region, yet knowing that these tend to be rarer than the so-called 'belief legends', I also instructed my students to inquire about narratives on the dead, witchcraft, and the supernatural in general – just

in case. However, when the groups met in the evening to share the results after the first day of fieldwork, as well as in the following evenings, one thing became clear: *the* topic in the region was witchcraft. Narratives on witchcraft were abundant and clearly predominated – one could say that witchcraft was the dominant tradition (cf. Honko 1962, 127f.) in the region.<sup>1</sup>

The region in which we were doing our research is mostly remote and hard to reach, with poor traffic connections.<sup>2</sup> The farms are small, the land divided into small parcels, and the people mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture, particularly fruit growing and viticulture, and perhaps keeping a cow or two, a few pigs and some hens. The inhabitants of the area are mostly Roman Catholic. This was an extremely impoverished region until at least the beginning of the seventies, when it experienced changes in economic development and living conditions became somewhat less harsh: the electricity and water supply became available to more households than before, many houses were rebuilt, free medical care became available even to farmers, who made up the majority of the population, and several factories and tourism facilities were established at the periphery of the region and offered job opportunities. This, improved the standard of living of at least part of the population and, due to daily migrations, triggered the improvement of the roads and traffic facilities; better roads also allowed the use of tractors, which improved agricultural yields. Furthermore, this was also the time when television started to make its way into the region's rural households.<sup>3</sup> (cf. Mencej 2017, 35–9.)

All these changes triggered the loosening of the bonds of the close village communities (cf. Sok 2003, 39f.) and changes in the communities' social life. In the research area the key setting for the communication and evaluation of witchcraft narratives and the basic context which allowed for the maintenance of witchcraft discourse and the persistence of witchcraft as a social institution had always been shared work, particularly in the autumn and winter evenings, when people gathered together in this or that house to husk corn, shell beans, and pluck feathers, but also during crop harvests,

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1 The paper was adapted from several chapters of my book *Styrian Witches in European Perspective. Ethnographic Fieldwork*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, and it partly overlaps with my paper *Discourses on witchcraft and uses of witchcraft discourse*, published in 2016 in *Fabula* 57 (3–4): 248–62. The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) / ERC grant agreement № 324214, and from the Slovenian Research Agency under the programme *Slovenian identities in European and global context*.

2 Due to the delicate nature of the topic the exact location of the region is not given.

3 The first TV transmitter stations were installed in the region in 1971 and 1972.

wine harvests, pig slaughtering, and other domestic activities related to the rural economy that brought villagers together (cf. also Devlin 1987, 198; Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1991, 13f.). Due to the economic changes, and in particular daily migrations, but also the improvement of agricultural machinery, however, the evenings of shared work more or less ended in the seventies (Sok 2003, 116).

Once the main setting for the communication of witchcraft narratives was no longer there, witchcraft discourse inevitably started losing its adherents and communal support. Those who were still thinking within its framework were no longer in a position to estimate public opinion and could no longer rely on having support for witchcraft accusations and actions within the village community as a whole, which must have ultimately led to the withdrawal of their beliefs and actions to within the family unit and the restricted circles of those who still communicated among themselves and on whose support they could rely. However, while witchcraft as a generally accepted and more or less publicly supported social institution lost its value as a result of the economic and social changes in the seventies, it had not yet died out completely. While people may not have had the opportunity to speak about it as openly and as often as they used to, and could not always expect to receive public support if they spoke and acted openly from within the witchcraft discourse, their personal belief may nevertheless have continued, albeit in a restricted form and limited in expression. Bewitchment practices have continued to be practised, although not by everyone and certainly less frequently than in the past, and witchcraft as a social institution has, to a limited extent, continued to provide a means for the explanation of misfortune and to regulate social relationships for at least part of the population.

In this paper I shall focus particularly on the discourses on witchcraft. I shall first present various discourses within which people may talk about witchcraft: witchcraft, Christian, rational, and New Age discourse. I shall then discuss various uses of witchcraft discourse, i.e. various situations in which it may be employed, with various purposes and various intentions.

### **Witchcraft as a discourse**

While during our fieldwork we often heard narrations about practices and behaviour related to witchcraft, we never witnessed any – the narratives in which these practices and behaviour were interpreted in terms of witchcraft were the only available source of information about witchcraft in the region

and were thus the only means for the researcher to be able to grasp the underlying experience and understand the narrators' underlying propositions. On the other hand, they were also an essential means for people to structure, interpret, and share their experiences: while people may have witnessed and performed countermeasures against witchcraft and participated in the identification procedures, or even performed bewitchments themselves, the narratives were a prerequisite for their proper understanding in the framework of witchcraft discourse, in the upholding and maintaining of witchcraft as a social system, and were also the main means of providing people with strategies about how to respond to witchcraft assaults (cf. Stark 2004, 86; Eilola 2006, 33). Through these narratives the inhabitants of the region were socialised in terms of a particular discursive construction of the world, which informed their experiences and helped them make sense of them (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 137-138, 142).

Indeed, scholars of traditional witchcraft have often understood witchcraft as a particular sort of discourse used by the narrators, and have even claimed that cases of bewitchment were not only expressed, but manifested especially or solely in narratives, thus emphasising the importance of language in witchcraft. Jeanne Favret-Saada, researching witchcraft in Mayenne, France, wrote how she had first planned to research witchcraft practices but soon realised that all she came across was language, and that the only empirical facts she was able to record were words: '[...] [A]n attack of witchcraft can be summed up as follows: a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to, who will on that ground say he is bewitched.' (1980, 9) Consequently, Favret-Saada concentrated not on practices but solely on narratives: the facts of witchcraft cases are a speech process, she claimed, and a witch a person referred to by people who utter the discourse on witchcraft and who only figures in it as the subject of a statement (1980, 24f.). While Favret-Saada reduced witchcraft solely to narratives, de Blécourt broadened the understanding of witchcraft discourse to also include concepts and actions. In 1990, and again recently (2013, 363, 369), he argued that the label 'witch' only makes sense within a particular system, 'not so much a "belief system", but something that can best be termed a "discourse", as it is primarily through language that it can be accessed', and defined a discourse as 'a coherent system of concepts, stories, and actions'. Stuart Clark has also emphasised the importance of language in witchcraft reality. He discussed the question of how language authorises 'belief' and argued

that to make sense of 'witchcraft beliefs' one needs to begin with language. Clark understood language not as a direct reflection of an objective reality outside itself, but rather as something that constitutes it:<sup>4</sup> it is language, i.e. the linguistic circumstances, that enable the utterances and actions associated with witchcraft beliefs to convey meanings that should become the object of attention, and not its relationship to the extra-linguistic world, i.e. a question of whether it corresponds with an objective reality or not. What is real about the world to the users of a language, he claims, is 'a matter of what sorts of reality-apportioning statements their language successfully allows them to make' (Clark 1997: 6, cf. 3–10).

Within the framework of witchcraft discourse people therefore relied on concepts, exchanged stories, and performed actions<sup>5</sup> that conveyed specific meanings and carried specific messages which could only be properly understood from within this discourse. In applying the term discourse in my research, I refer to it in its broadest anthropological sense, as 'socially situated language-use' (Cameron 2001, 7), 'speech in habitual situations of social exchange', implying intrinsic ties between speech and behaviour, and the embeddedness of speech-making in routine social relations and behaviours (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 134; cf. also Valk 2011, 850).<sup>6</sup>

### **Witchcraft discourse**

Objects like eggs or bones buried in the ground do not have any particular meaning in and of themselves – they can lie in one's field or under thresholds or in the byres and pigsties for various reasons other than witchcraft. When a neighbour borrows something on the new moon, one would probably not even notice the correspondence with the moon phase. There are many causes for calves to be stillborn. People get angry and threaten others for various reasons and with various intentions. All these objects, acts, words, behaviour, etc., however, acquire a particular connotation when one is thinking, talking, and acting from within the witchcraft discourse. For people think-

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4 cf. Bruner who argues that since people organise their experiences and memories of events mainly in the form of narratives, narratives not only represent but also constitute reality, and are versions of reality (1991, 4f.).

5 Yet while concepts are part of the discourse, they pertain to the level of conceptual reality, whereas stories and actions *articulate, express* the concepts.

6 cf. also Henry and Tator's definition of discourse: 'Discourse is the way in which language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions.' (2002, 25)

ing, talking, or acting from outside the witchcraft discourse they will bear very different connotations, or they will have no particular meaning at all.

The specifics of witchcraft discourse in the region can already be observed at the level of language: several idioms typically uttered within the discourse conveyed meanings that were completely different from the connotations they had were they uttered from outside the discourse, and could only be understood in this particular sense within it. When people thought they were bewitched, the typical expression was 'This was done', i.e. connoting an act of a malevolent agency. To say that 'something was done' or that 'someone did it' invariably pointed to an accusation of bewitchment carried out intentionally by somebody who wished them ill.

Yes, they said that if you found an egg [placed on your property], that your hens wouldn't lay anymore, that this was done. That was heard.<sup>7</sup> (95)

I: [He said:] Mother, I am ill, my toes are hurting. And he was moving around for a while and then he went to see the fortune-teller. She said: What hurts you? It was done.

F: What did she say?

I: That it was done. That it was done. (29)

While the characteristic expression for bewitchment that was considered to be the consequence of the malice of neighbours was 'This was done', when referring to a bewitchment that occurred at night, and usually resulted in losing one's way, people would typically use expressions such as 'witches carried me', 'witches chased me' or 'witches led me astray', 'witches mixed me up', or 'witches drove me':

I: But another time ... another time I went right there on my way home from work, but then I went at twelve o'clock. I walked there many times, many times every day ... to work and back, you know, but suddenly I can't find my way home, suddenly I can't find my way home, I don't know which is

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<sup>7</sup> The transcriptions of the interviews are done verbatim. Due to space limitations I have omitted the parts of the texts in which authors were discussing topics that were not relevant for the present topic, explaining local words and expressions, etc. Numerous archaisms and aspects of the local dialect which are evident in the Slovenian transcriptions have been rendered in modern or standard English in translation. F in the transcriptions indicates a folklorist and I the informant. All of the tape-recordings and transcriptions are stored in the archives of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana.

the right path. There was this path and another path, I saw, the paths met, a little way ahead, I saw a house, I saw our home, but I couldn't get to it. I was twenty years old.

F: But how, what did your parents ...?

I: They told me that the witches led me astray. (128)

'To know' is another typical expression which only within the discourse refers to a very specific sort of knowledge and needed no additional clarification – it always referred to the knowledge of witchcraft. Outside it, it could refer to any sort of knowledge, and would usually need an additional object clarifying the verb (one knows *something*). Similarly, to say about somebody that 'they know' referred exclusively to the person that was considered to have magical knowledge: either a witch or an unwitcher.

F: Is there anybody here who is still believed to be able to bewitch?

I: That someone would know? That is how people used to say: that someone knows. Not here, no, not any more. (53)

I1: Yes, they said there were witches. It is true that they knew. This is correct, this could be [true]. (...) Up there, close to where we had a vineyard, there was one such [woman]. That one really knew. (25)

I1: And they also said that here, across the river, up in the forest there was a man who could predict the future from cards, but they said that...

I2: ...that he knew what he was doing.

I1: That he knew many things. (25)

Within the discourse certain *behaviour* also acquired very specific connotations. Not to respond to somebody, not to look someone in the eye, and not to give or accept a gift or a loan from someone communicated a very clear message to the addressee that they were considered witches in the eyes of the person behaving in this way. The refusal to talk to the neighbour in the following narratives was a common and generally acknowledged behavioural strategy of people who acted within the witchcraft discourse to prevent the witch from gaining or retaining power over them, as clearly demonstrated by the following narrative:

There was a miller here [...] Well, he was saying: Good Lord, witches! We sometimes talked with him. He said: 'Can you imagine, she came to visit me,

the damned bitch!' 'But what did she do to you?' 'She came to ask me for a vessel, for a sieve to sprout wheat. I, poor devil, said: Here, you have it, take it! What she did to me, everything possible, only death I didn't await from her! My cows died, pigs died..., and plenty of other things happened! 'But why,' I asked him, 'why would she do that to you?' 'Because,' he replied, 'because I gave something of mine to her. I shouldn't have done that.' Then he said: 'Then somebody told me: 'You go there to P., there is Gretička there. She will tell you.' That woman was called Gretička, she was kind of a witch. She told me: 'Janez, you go home. You have to gather brushwood from three different streams.' And I did. 'What do I need to do next?' 'Then you should burn the brushwood by the stove and the first person to drop by to see the fire will be the person that bewitched you. That's why your livestock keeps dying.' I don't know how much he paid her for that, he must have paid her something. 'So I went back home and I gathered the brushwood and put on a fire by the stove. She warned me: But Janez, when this person comes in to see the fire, you should not say a word, just point at the door for her to leave.' [laughs] He said: 'So I picked all that up and put it on the fire and there she is, that damned bitch who asked me for a sieve.' 'Christ, Janez, what are you burning?' I only pointed at the door. 'Good Lord, Janez, are we not friends anymore? But we are neighbours.' 'So I pointed at the door once again, and the woman still didn't want to leave. So I held her by the throat and pushed her through the door out of the house. And uttered no word. And I have had peace ever since.' [laughs] These are stories, bed time fairytales! [laughs] (149)

Dragging sheets over another person's wheat on certain days in the annual cycle (usually Pentecost), borrowing something on particular days, burying objects on a neighbour's property, for instance, were actions that were understood as bewitchments only within the witchcraft discourse. Outside it they would be either meaningless or they would trigger questions about their aim and meaning.

Otherwise they also used to make witchcraft on Pentecost Monday. Up here, in the area, there was a woman, a widow, and she fastened an apron around her waist and ran around P.'s wheat in order to take over the loot, you know, so that she would take their profit, so that they wouldn't have any profit from the wheat, while they would. And that little that she got, she wrangled into her chest. But that didn't help, that was witchcraft, it was nothing. (53)



I heard tell that the young one [the daughter of the woman that was believed to be a witch] also became a witch. He said that when it is new moon, the first day of the new moon, she always comes to borrow something, to get something – and that you shouldn't give [anything to] her. She usually comes to get something that they have at home, they know that she has it at home, and yet she comes to borrow it. Last year she came to get eggs for brooding and when their eggs hatched, they had no chickens that year. (141)

I: A piece of bacon too could be found buried in the field.

F: And what did this mean?

I: Well, as long as people believed in witches, [that meant] that someone wanted to bewitch the field so that it wouldn't bear fruit. (58)

While a discourse can be understood as 'an authoritarian and coherent web of ideas and statements, prescribing a normative worldview, and upholding certain social norms and values' (Valk 2011, 850), discursive exchange is not fixed: it is mediated by the creative individual improvisation of its conventions. Although the discourse provides a means of expression, it does not necessarily determine what is meant by it – different personal meanings can be imparted to discourses by individuals, and it is their personalisation of discursive structures that keeps them alive (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 141f.). One could, for instance, adapt a discourse to provide a meaningful interpretation when the 'usual' interpretation within the discourse does not fit one's understanding and purpose. As we have seen above (cf. inf. 149), not to answer someone when thinking from within the witchcraft discourse as a rule conveyed a clear message that the one who is not being talked to is being accused of witchcraft. According to the following narrative, however, the 'accused' person transformed the interpretation of the silence into evidence of the opposite. Instead of acknowledging that the behaviour of the neighbours who remained silent in spite of his repeated attempts at communication suggested that they have identified him as a witch, he interpreted their silence as a proof of *their* bewitching act.

And he said that that his father came, his younger son drove him by car to the place where they had dug out the foundations to build a house, and they arrived by car. And he said that they went to that place and the old man stood there and uttered no sound. He asked them what they were doing

and he said that they kept totally quiet. And he said that they had managed to build their house in no time. While he was struggling with building his house, it only took them one year to build their house. He said that it was like they took his success<sup>8</sup> away, everything went wrong afterwards. (53)

Witchcraft discourse, however, was not the only possible discourse people in our region could employ when narrating about witchcraft. Several discourses coexisted in the region and were available to people to build a functional model for their lives and, moreover, there were various ways of combining them (cf. Wolf-Knuts 2002, 149). Apart from thinking, talking, and acting from within witchcraft discourse, people might choose to talk from within a 'rational'<sup>9</sup> (scientific) discourse. This is the discourse supported and propagated by the educational system, and by various media, especially radio and television, which are nowadays available to most of the population in the area. Moreover, this discourse is often endorsed by the representatives of the church, even though clergy might also draw upon another discourse within which witchcraft may be explained – i.e. 'Christian' discourse. Lately, New Age discourse is also starting to affect the ways in which witchcraft is being conceptualised and talked about, even though, for now, only to a very limited extent.

### Christian discourse

Christian discourse is a discourse which is occasionally embraced by the clergy, and only marginally by the people in the region (when talking about witchcraft). This discourse does not deny the reality of the effect of malevolent magic deeds, but ultimately ascribes it to the agency of the devil. This is how the act of burying objects in a neighbour's field, typically understood as a bewitching act within the witchcraft discourse, was interpreted by a Catholic priest:<sup>10</sup>

8 The narrator used a rather unusual dialect word, explaining it in standard Slovene as 'success, effect, speed'; the meaning more or less coincides with the word 'luck' (cf. Honko 1962, 119f.; Schiffmann 1987, 161; Stark-Arola 1998, 116).

9 I use the word 'rational' not as my personal evaluation of the discourse, in the sense that I find this discourse more rational than witchcraft discourse, or that I implicitly claim that witchcraft discourse is irrational. Witchcraft discourse represents just another sort of rationality, based on a set of beliefs which are culturally valid, albeit not compatible with the Western elite's views. The 'rationality' of the discourse thus refers exclusively to the emic position of those who used it as an opposition to the perspective of narrators who employed the perspective of witchcraft. I would like to thank Kaarina Koski for her remarks on rationality and the use of the term. (On the cultural grounds of rationality see Tambiah 1993; Eze 2008.)

10 This particular priest does not come from the strict research area, but the practice of burying objects is not limited to our region alone; it is also common elsewhere in Slovenia.

A man once came to me and said that nothing ever grew on the field where he was planting. And then he noticed that his neighbour was always burying some things in it, which were causing the vegetables not to grow. We call this spells [...] this is the external manifestation of the direct work of the devil. [...]

Later he explains the 'spells' as

the most frequently used manner of harming others, when via certain objects which are first given to Satan to imprint his evil power into them, one can harm others. [...] Spells do not depend so much on the material as such, as they depend on the will and hatred of the person who wants to harm others with the help of Satan. (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwmUaU0jYK0>>, accessed 5 May 2015)

Obviously, the priest did not understand the act of burying the object, as narrated to him by a client, as witchcraft – in fact, the term is not mentioned at all. While he believed in its harmful consequences, he instead interpreted it a manifestation of 'Satan's' deed. The procedure of an unwitcher, which within the witchcraft discourse was often understood as necessary to counteract the effects of witchcraft, was also understood as the devil's work within the Christian discourse, and to visit magic specialists was no more than to summon the devil:

Black, or I should say white<sup>11</sup> magic, means to direct evil against a certain person through magic formulas and rituals in which Satan is being summoned, in order to affect a sequence of events or to affect people on someone's behalf. [...] In order for a fortune-teller to affect a certain person, they need something of theirs: hair, nails, an undergarment or a photograph. [...] Now, the problem is that I know people who claim to be very religious, they go to mass, but on Monday at three they scheduled a bioenergeticist, on Wednesday at five they go to their fortune-teller... Well, you can't follow two different paths – if you do, the devil will come. (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwmUaU0jYK0>>, accessed 5 May 2015)

Christian discourse, within which bewitchments were ultimately ascribed to the agency of the devil, was not strongly embedded in our region. Even the

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11 He probably made a mistake and must have meant to say the opposite: 'White, or I should say black magic [...]'

name Satan, common in Christian discourse (cf. Wolf-Knuts 2002, 152), never appeared in the narratives of the people we interviewed; instead, euphemistic appellations such as *hudič* (*malus*), *vrag* (*inimicus, hostis*), *hudobni duh* (evil spirit) were used in the sense of 'devil'. Occasionally, however, both discourses, the Christian (attributing the malevolent magic actions ultimately to the devil) and the witchcraft (attributing them to malevolent people, i.e. witches), partly overlapped: while the witchcraft discourse attributed bewitchments to the agency of witches and the Christian discourse ultimately to the agency of the devil (without any mention of witches), people would sometimes attribute the source of witches' power ultimately to the devil. As Wolf-Knuts has observed, people were forced to combine Christian doctrine and 'knowledge of religious topics apart from Church teachings [...] otherwise it would be impossible to maintain a functional world view. This does not have to be logical, neither does it have to be consistent, and it does not have to avoid contradictions' (2002, 148). Typically, however, the relationship between the devil and the witches was only evoked when explicitly asked about, and seems to refer more to a general stereotype of witches being evil and evil being ultimately related to the devil, than being an intrinsic part of the discourse.

*Actions* too may acquire different meaning in the Christian discourse than they have in witchcraft discourse. An example of how the same action can be interpreted differently within the two discourses is the annual blessing of the homesteads with holy water, performed by priests. While the blessing according to Christian doctrine was understood as '[...] an appeal to God to be merciful and close to the person who receives a blessing or who uses a blessed item or stays at a blessed place' (<<http://zupnija-stolna-nm.rkc.si/zakramentali/>>, accessed 6 May 2015), people thinking within the witchcraft discourse understood the same ritual as a protection against witchcraft, and priests were occasionally called to perform the blessing not only as a preventive measure, but also against witchcraft when misfortunes, interpreted as a result of bewitchment, had already occurred. In the eyes of the people blessing rituals helped prevent (further) bewitchments even if the (church) officials held witchcraft to be mere superstition (cf. also Dobler 2015) and never consciously and willingly performed rituals as aimed against witchcraft.

### **Rational discourse**

However, it seems that even the priests in our region did not often resort to the Christian discourse within which evil deeds of envious neighbours,

would ultimately be ascribed to the agency of the devil. As the educated elite they seemed to prefer to draw on the 'rational', 'scientific' discourse, pronouncing all talk about witchcraft to be 'superstition' (cf. Valk 2015, 149). During my field research in 2000 I talked to the local parish priest, who boasted that after having read the results of a study of local 'beliefs' done by students at the local primary school (which had taken place not long before our conversation) that indicated a belief in witchcraft among the local population, he vehemently warned against 'superstition' in a sermon.

Such a devaluation of witchcraft to lore that has outlived its usefulness, that has grown outside the bounds of accepted views, incompatible with the modern rational mode of reasoning, was part of the Enlightenment process of discrediting and displacing previous modes of thought and behaviour and labelling them primitive and superstitious, in order for 'rationalist', 'scientifically proved', 'logical', enlightened forms of knowledge to become the dominant social discourse. The labelling of traditional beliefs as 'superstitions' was a means of weakening their potential opposition to the scientific way of knowing, which has been the practice of those in positions of intellectual, political, and economic power (cf. Motz 1998, 341–4). Discourses convey social meanings in the sense that they often transmit concepts of power that reflect the interests of the power elite: by defining their opponents as superstitious and dismissing their discourse as irrational, backward, and foolish, while on the other hand declaring their own discourse to be 'self-evident' and 'common-sensical' (cf. Henry and Tator 2002, 25), those who wanted to be excluded from the 'superstitious folk' marginalised the proponents of witchcraft discourse and established their own discourse as dominant. Rational discourse, however, was not embraced by priests alone. Although not predominantly, many people spoke from outside the witchcraft discourse and took a rational stance, proclaiming those that believed in the reality of witchcraft to be 'superstitious', 'stupid', 'foolish', and the like – these designations were typically adopted by people talking within this type of discourse. The following examples relate the act of placing an object on another's property and getting lost in the woods at night through the lenses of 'rational' discourse:

People used to bury eggs at crossroads so that when you crossed them, you [would experience] misfortune, or a plague. These were superstitions. (23)

Yes, this they would say too: when they went to the forest at night and suddenly they got lost. And they wandered about for the whole night long and

they would say that witches led them astray. And that such lights burned – the same, these were witches. Folk used to be very superstitious! Well, nowadays, this is no longer. (49)

### **New Age discourse**

The people living in the villages and small settlements were unaware of and did not use New Age discourse, which is more typical of urban environments. Indeed, the only person who occasionally used this discourse was the grandson and great-grandson of unwitchers from a famous family of fortune-tellers, Ivan H., who did not officially live in the researched territory but just across the border in a neighbouring region – nevertheless, his family had been intrinsically linked to witchcraft as a social institution in the region since the beginning of the 20th century, as people from the region sought help from this particular unwitching family whenever they assumed their misfortune was due to witchcraft. When talking to me, he used particular terminology, like ‘bioenergy’, ‘bioenergeticists’, and ‘energy’, which can be identified, in a broader sense, as a typical or even as a key concept of New Age discourse (Valk 2011, 862; cf. Mencej 2015, 8). Indeed, this particular narrator tended to switch from witchcraft to New Age discourse and back again, but it is not unusual for the narrators to combine various discourses in the course of the interviews, and individual narratives can be moulded by more than one discourse (cf. de Blécourt 2013, 363). While throughout the interview my interlocutor mostly talked from within the witchcraft discourse and clearly expressed his firm belief in the power of witches and the reality of witchcraft, he switched to New Age discourse on two occasions: first, when talking about his great-grandmother, the famous unwitcher, whom he designated as having strong ‘bioenergy’, grounding his statement with the claim of another bioenergeticist:

She is a hospital nurse [...] everybody likes her, she’s got such energy. She saw a picture of Una [his great-grandmother], and she immediately said: This one had power, she really was a bioenergeticist! This you must know: A bioenergeticist recognises another bioenergeticist. (164)

and second, when talking about priests, whom he clearly also held as magic specialists and considered utterly suspicious and dangerous. Discussing their ability to bewitch, he referred to them with the expression ‘they knew’, typically used within witchcraft discourse, yet at the same time he associ-

ated their ability to bewitch with the 'system of chakras'. The teaching of chakras comes from the Hindu religion but has become known to laymen in the West mainly through New Age discourse (cf. Heelas 2003, 1), and in the given context I consider it as typical of New Age discourse. In addition, he equated priests' exorcisms with witchcraft in the sense that they both take power away from people – power that he equated with 'energy' – resulting in an illness:

F: How could a priest be harmful?

I: He performed exorcisms, he practised witchcraft.

F: But how did he do it? What could he cause by it?

I: Illness. If he took your power, he took your energy. Now we are getting somewhere, we have arrived at the basics: up there we have points, this is a system of chakras, seven points. You are getting energy there – yes or no? Good, that is all perfect, right? But as they, the priests, know about that, they know that if they took energy from someone... - not everybody could do this, they have to have power, they have to know, and even if they didn't know, they had power, everybody can have power, but in their case they have to practise. Others, bioenergeticists – they give [energy], while these [the priests] take it away.

F: But how can they take it away?

I: They take it away in an instant. I don't know how, but they can. A bioenergeticist took energy away from me by phone. (164)

Choosing to speak from within the New Age discourse enabled the narrator to talk about witchcraft as real, not dismissing his personal belief in its reality, while at the same time using (pseudo-)scientific and rational rhetoric to analyse and explain it. It enabled him to discuss witchcraft without degrading it to mere 'superstition', which he would have done were he talking from within rational discourse, while at the same time to present himself as a rational, educated, and analytical person. This switch to New Age discourse seemed to have imparted to the narrator the authority to elevate his own position to one that was equal to that of magic specialists in terms of knowledge. By doing so, he also refrained from talking from the position of a (potential) victim who feared their knowledge and power, which he would have had were he using the witchcraft discourse. Instead, he took the position of the one who 'knows' as much as priests and is able to compete with them. His family background was certainly not insignificant in this regard, as it gave him the authority to

take such a position in the first place – a position that was obviously not available to other narrators.

When talking from within the witchcraft, Christian, and New Age discourses, people who believe in the power of magic do not need to deny their personal views. Rational discourse, on the other hand, represents the opposite: it is the ‘discourse of disbelief’. Scientific and pseudo-scientific rhetoric could be used in the rational as well as in the New Age discourse, while elements of Christian discourse could be partly integrated into witchcraft discourse, as mentioned above. Moreover, New Age and witchcraft discourses, or rational and witchcraft discourses could be used by the same narrator, and even intermingled in the course of the same narration, with the narrator slipping from talking from within the ‘rational’, or New Age discourse, to talking from within the witchcraft discourse and back again (cf. 53 below). The introduction of rational discourse, however, does not necessarily reveal the narrator’s true attitude toward the reality of witchcraft. There are a number of reasons why an individual may choose not to disclose it to the researcher, and such a use of a rational discourse could just as well be a strategy to conceal one’s belief from the researcher (cf. Mencej 2017, 47–59). But rational discourse was not the only discourse used strategically when thinking and acting within the witchcraft discourse in everyday communication, and not only in the communication with outsiders like us. Witchcraft discourse could also be used strategically, even in communication with insiders, as I will discuss below.

### **Uses of witchcraft discourse**

As long as witchcraft discourse had enough open support in the region, it constituted the context in which witchcraft narratives were ‘shared with licence’ (cf. Ellis 1988, 66) and whose acceptability was governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than empirical verification and logical requirement (cf. Bruner 1991, 4f.). Even if narratives told from within the witchcraft discourse may have provoked doubt, smiles or laughter, or scepticism among people thinking from outside the witchcraft discourse, they were imparted an authority that could not easily be shaken. This enabled people to draw upon and mobilise them for various purposes and with various intentions. Not necessarily related to one’s personal belief or disbelief in the proposition, these narratives could serve as a strategy that individuals could appropriate and use to their benefit in everyday life – usually not as calculated and manipulative acts but rather as a strategy based on the habitus (Argyrou 1993, 267f.).



Several examples can give us a glimpse into the various uses of witchcraft discourse in the region. When a young man suddenly withdrew from society and was then unable to find a job – probably suffering from depression or a more serious mental illness – ascribing his failure to witchcraft was a convenient and handy explanation. On the one hand it helped the family cope with the sudden change in their son’s behaviour, and on the other it offered an acceptable explanation of their son’s behaviour to the community at large, which, not acknowledging depression as a serious mental state, would likely proclaim him an idler and disapprove of his behaviour. Moreover, it might affect the reputation and consequently lower the social position of the family if the son’s behaviour were ascribed to an inappropriate upbringing. Ascribing the source of problems to witchcraft thus gave the family an opportunity to offer a suitable interpretation to the community which prevented its reputation from being destroyed (cf. Hesz 2007, 30f.).

I: Now let me tell you something else. When I was very small, we were husking corn, and we had an early apple-tree and we always went to shake that tree, these were the first fruits. And my cousin was very, very diligent and very smart, and he ran there before me. And he found seven small pads made from various pieces of cloth on the ground. And he picked them up. That boy stopped working, he shut himself away, and even nowadays there is nothing of him!

F: Did she [the village witch] put them there?

I: She wasn’t there, I have no clue where these small nicely made up pads that he put in his pocket came from... [...] He brought them home. Throw them away immediately! His mother was a bit superstitious and she said: Janez, why did you pick them up? He picked them up so that I wouldn’t take them before him. And he picked them up, but – the boy finished school, but he hasn’t done any work, never got a job, he’s on the dole, in short – nothing, he shut himself away...

F: Did this start immediately after?

I: Immediately afterwards! He was 16 or 18 at the time when he did this. This I strongly believe, that this did him harm, this I strongly believe! (53)

While buried objects have invariably been interpreted as a proof of bewitchment aimed against the fertility of the crops or against the fertility and production of the domestic animals of the person on whose property they were buried, the interpretation of the burial of bones as a means of triggering conflict in the community was quite unusual:

Sometimes they bury something [...] that is not visible and then everybody in the parish hates each other. One woman said that in the parish K. all neighbours were cross with each other. And then someone found those bones and they burnt them together and became friends again (35).

Such an interpretation of the source of communal conflicts and the 'discovery' of the bewitching object as well as the spread of the information about it must have ultimately been the conscious action of a particular individual who deliberately acted to achieve a resolution of the tensions in the community. The subsequent joint action of the villagers, i.e. the burning of the bewitching object that allegedly caused their conflicts, psychologically speaking, undoubtedly bound the inhabitants together and united them in counteracting a common enemy from the outside – the witch – and helped them resolve conflicts and re-establish friendly relationships in the community.

Keeping in mind that arranged marriages, mostly on an economic basis, were prevalent until at least late into the 20th century, it is no surprise that disagreements between marital partners were not uncommon. The interpretation of marital quarrels as a consequence of bewitchment undoubtedly offered a practical solution, at least temporarily, to the pair's problems – the notion that a witch was trying to separate the couple not only offered an excuse for their behaviour towards the family and the community, but also helped them unite against the threat of malevolent powers and redefine their relationship (cf. Argyrou 1993, 264):

I: She fought with her husband at home, she threw him out of bed, and she said: The moment I threw him out of bed, a witch in a shape of a toad jumped out from the bed [...] She said: You won't [succeed]! And I stabbed her [the toad], she said: I destroyed her, I trampled her! She said: Kaja K. lost her leg at just the same time! [laughs] And they have quarrelled with her about that ever since. (11)

If a mother interpreted the unacceptable behaviour of her son toward her as a result of bewitchment, this redirection of the blame from her son to a witch helped her accept and possibly forgive her son for physically abusing her. Moreover, the use of this interpretation in persuading other people that the true source of her son's behaviour lay not in his bad character or her failed upbringing, but in a bewitchment caused by a third party, helped her clear his son's as well as her own name:

I knew one [witch]... she lived in that house, she was old... her mother left her... and she lived there, unmarried, she still isn't married. And her son pretty much hated her and beat her and everything. So one day she paid a visit to the fortune-teller. She went there and she [the fortune-teller] told her it was done so that he was behaving badly, that this was done by... [...] and she gave her some remedy so that this son then started to beat his mother-in-law, and not her anymore. (142)

The conclusion of the narrative, i.e. the son beating his mother-in-law instead of his mother, indicates that she must have suggested to her son that the unwitcher had identified his mother-in-law as the witch. As the unwitchers never pointed the finger at a particular person as the witch, but only offered vague notions about their identity which were completed by the clients, her identity must have been either unconsciously invoked by his mother, or else she had consciously concocted her identity herself, perhaps because of the jealousy she must have felt when her son seemed to prefer his mother-in-law to her. This accusation, therefore, not only helped redefine the position of her son, and herself, in the community, but also improved her own position in her relationship with her son, even if at the same time it worsened the position of his mother-in-law.

Many narratives that presented misfortune as being a result of witchcraft can also be read as narrative strategies used by people when they transgressed the social norms; in these cases witchcraft was invoked to vindicate their behaviour, justify their actions, and redirect or annihilate suspicions of illicit deeds that the community would not sanction. The employment of narratives accusing a woman whom one was supposed to marry of being a witch, for example, might serve as an excuse for men who wanted to break off an engagement, as the identifying of their betrothed as a witch seemed to be a comprehensible and sanctioned reason for the cancellation of a marriage (cf. Devlin 1987, 199). Although no direct indication in the narrative below suggests that the narration was intentionally initiated by the man himself (it might actually hint at the neighbour being the source of the gossip – perhaps the rival in competing for the same man), it nevertheless indicates that the reputation of a woman as being a witch could provide an excuse for a man not to marry a woman he had been promised to:

I know that down here, my grandfather told me this, there were two neighbours who didn't have the best relationship. And my grandfather was

supposed to marry that woman and [they said] she was a witch. Well, this I can tell you about. That she was a witch and she went to her neighbour's byre and people found her doing some witchcraft there. That she was doing witchcraft. Then my grandfather said, my grandpa, he said: I shall not take this witch, I shall marry another! And this is how it happened. (79)

Parents unsatisfied with their children's choice of marital partner might also intentionally spread the rumours about witchcraft to prevent the undesired marriage being executed. In this case it seems that the usual subjects of rumours became the mothers of the future brides-to-be, who were accused of having bewitched their sons to make them fall in love with their daughters:

There used to be a great difference between a rich farmer and small cottager and if that farmer's son fell in love with a poor girl, they said that her mother bewitched him, that her mother did that, for her daughter to come to a large estate and to have a good life there. And then they said that the old one was a witch. They said that she bewitched. It was often like that. If that boy was firm enough, he married her and they left the house. But it often happened that the family won, that they would have enough to eat. There used to be a terrible poverty, terrible poverty! People lived very poorly; they had nothing to eat, to dress, nothing at all. Even if that boy loved the girl very much, he left her and married the one picked up by his parents, just that she was rich enough, but in secret he kept visiting that one ... (130)

The following statement explicitly refers to jealousy, rivalry, and wounded vanity playing their part in intentionally launched accusations of witchcraft by rejected men, as revenge against the woman who chose another:

F: But in your village there was no one who would say that some woman was a witch?

I1: Now, that someone is a witch? No, no, that was in the old days. You know what? I will tell you this. [pauses] If two [men] went to the same woman [to propose], and she decided on the other one, then this one [the rejected man] would say that she was a witch, out of vindictiveness. (108)

Tradition is a convenient excuse to rationalise one's behaviour (cf. Devlin 1987, 88, 73, 199). While it seems reasonable to assume that in many cases memorates about night encounters with witches who led people astray were intentionally invoked when one needed an excuse for behaviour that

would not meet with the approval of their family or the community, one cannot search for direct proofs that would substantiate such assumptions in the narratives themselves, since they obviously had to be presented in such a way that the disclosure of what the narratives were aiming to conceal would not compromise the narrator. Nevertheless, some narratives about night witches indicate that it is likely they were used when one needed an excuse for returning home late due to excessive drinking. Several narratives indeed suggest that the experience occurred in connection with drinking bouts after fairs or communal work. Using the notion of witches' work as an excuse for having spent a night in the forest after a night's drinking was certainly a suitable explanation that would have discharged the drunken men of any guilt and shame. Narváez has also argued that narratives from Newfoundland about people being carried away by fairies, similar to the narratives in our region, expressed youthful tensions with regard to courtship and illicit sexual relations, and served to cover up sexual assaults, to conceal sexual encounters or the sexual harassment of children, and similar (1991, 354, 357; cf. Lindow 1978, 45). Nakedness, exceptional in the narratives about nocturnal encounters with witches, as well as other allusions to sexuality, might indicate that some narratives may have indeed served to conceal sexual experiences, or at least reflected the sexual fantasies.

Dammit. [laughs] There was one man, they called him J. Š. and he was from B. He was the kind of guy who was always dirty and greasy, which is why they called him Š. And he went to S. down into the valley, for a day's work. He was poor, maybe he had a wife and kids, and there was no food, and so he went and helped cut wood or grass, and things like that. And then down here, a little bit further from our mill – now it is a road but before it was a lane, a muddy farm lane, and another footpath crossed this lane so that you did not have to go through the mud, so that you could walk a little bit better, you know. And then one night, he was a little drunk and in a good mood and he went home in the evening. And he saw that at a crossroads of this lane and the footpath there was a fire. What could that be? And he goes closer and closer, and he saw four women roasting something. He said: I bet my head that they were roasting pig shit. [laughs] Whether they were or not I do not know. And he said: Yes, what else. And he knew them. Well, you fucking witches, what are you doing here? What are you doing here? I'll show you! You are witches. And he gave a detailed account of who those four women were. Shame on you! And on top of everything you are naked too! I'll show you! And he had to pee, and he peed into their fire [laughs],

so that the fire went out. Then the witches grabbed him and dragged him to B., into the stream below us. And they gave him a terrible bath: You wait, Š., we will show you, we will give you a little washing, so that you won't be so greasy. They bathed him all over his body, and they [laughs] they took all his clothes off and then whipped him with thorn branches, he said, with sticks they beat him on his behind. Of course. And they disappeared. They were gone. And he was left there and he woke up only at the break of dawn... (130)

Considering that the husbands were younger than the wives in 27.4 per cent of marriages, on average 5.8 years younger (Sok 2003, 141–4), and that the fathers were not always that much older than their daughters-in-law, the arrival of a bride into a new (extended) family could have perhaps occasionally led to illicit sexual relationships between the father and daughter-in-law, or triggered sexual violence. The following narrative about a daughter-in-law being a witch who tries to make an attempt on her father-in-law's life clearly transmits the father-in-law's interpretation of the event, even though told by a fellow villager. As nudity, as mentioned above, only exceptionally appears in the witchcraft narratives in our region, this detail could not be ascribed to the general stereotypical features of witches, and seems to imply the situation in which a rape, or perhaps a consensual sexual relationship between the father and daughter-in-law, was either attempted or indeed took place:

He knew that their daughter-in-law was a witch, right, he knew that she can bewitch, and she hated him, and she pushed him in [the water] when he was fishing, when he was drunk, to drown him. But he was so strong that he destroyed that, so that she didn't have power over him anymore. And he kept her there until the dawn. When the sun was rising, she was already naked in front of him. And then she asked him to let her. That is what my mother was telling me that it really happened. (4)

The detail of the nakedness of the daughter-in-law as a proof of her witchcraft could serve as a strategy to offer a suitable explanation to the people who caught them naked together, or, more likely, an answer to the silenced woman's accusation of her father-in-law of an attempted rape which she might have tried to prevent by pushing him into the water. In the latter case the obviously widespread acknowledgment of the father's version by fellow villagers seems to reflect the powerlessness of a woman's voice against a man's in the traditional community. The accusation of bewitchment in this case might have thus served as a strategy to interpret the situation in such

way as to avert socially damaging consequences (cf. Argyrou 1993, 267; Hesz 2007, 31f.): the reputation of a man accused of rape, or of an adulterous relationship with his daughter-in-law, would have suffered were he not to ascribe the event to her bewitchment. In this way, however, it was 'only' the reputation of the woman which was ultimately destroyed.

Not to be successful in domestic work, especially for women who were under strong family and social pressure to work hard, was considered intolerable behaviour and inevitably ruined their social position. When the results of their work were assessed as insufficient, attributing their ineffectiveness to witchcraft seemed a suitable way to explain it, as is evident from the following narrative:

One girl was reaping, without success. Nothing, nothing was ... the more she was hurrying on with the reaping, the less she ended up doing. Well, she went to reap a small parcel for three days. And then she finally noticed the toad. And then I don't know who told her that she should grab it by the leg and stick it into the ground with a stake, to stab it with a stake and stick the toad to the ground. And she did this. In the afternoon, toward the evening. And the next day the neighbour was bound there where she stuck that toad. (125)

The witchcraft discourse could also be evoked intentionally by workers in order to have an excuse to stop working after long hours of exhausting work:

I1: One time we went to do a harvest at night, when it was too hot during the day, but at two o'clock one woman said that she was going home. I said that we should harvest until two, but she said that she was going home, because the witches would come. Soon we saw light after light. Then the woman said that we shouldn't work anymore, because the witches would do something to us. Every night we stopped working at two, and then we went for tea and brandy, and to sleep. (127)

Witchcraft discourse might also be strategically employed in discouraging people from leaving their homes at night to do illicit things, like meeting others' wives or men, thieving and so on (cf. Stewart 1991), and may also have been employed as a means of education in the upbringing of children, to serve the pedagogical function of scaring them from wandering through the forests at night (cf. similarly in Lindow 1978, 44; Widdowson 1978, 35; Devlin 1987, 77):

F: Did they ever scare you, when you were young, not to walk around at night?

I1: Oh, you bet they did!

F: What did they scare you with?

I2: Well, that there are witches, right?

I1: That witches walk around... (127)

## Conclusion

To understand misfortune in terms of witchcraft certainly helped people to explain it, and thus find some consolation and release their tensions. Moreover, we have seen that interpretations within the framework of witchcraft discourse helped people understand, and even forgive, others' intolerable behaviour, and also unite them in the struggle against the witch and thus redefine their relationship. But while in all these cases a certain level of belief in the reality of witchcraft was imperative – and one can imagine that the truth of witchcraft reality was readily embraced by people in times of trouble, even if not relied upon when they faced no misfortune – witchcraft discourse could also be employed by people who did not necessarily believe in its reality. As long as witchcraft discourse had enough support in a community, its application could be used strategically for various reasons and with various intentions, not always as a conscious, but rather as an intuitive and spontaneous, act. It provided people with a communicative framework within which they could offer an acceptable interpretation of a situation or an action to the public when socially damaging consequences needed to be averted. The discourse could also be employed when social norms were transgressed for people to save face, not necessarily as a conscious act aimed at achieving an objective. However, the situation could change when the bewitchment narrative did not relate a personal misfortune which affected the narrator or their family but was based on the gossip of others, which implied a certain amount of intentionality and could be applied to manipulate public opinion (Hesz 2007, 32). As rumours and gossip are constitutive of, rather than simply reflect, social reality, these could be effectively used in competitive situations against other members of the community, especially rivals, to forward and protect an individual's interests, or employed to redefine a social hierarchy: lowering the social prestige of another member and strengthening one's own position in the community (cf. Bleek 1976, 527, 540; Gustavsson 1979, 49; Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999, 175; Stewart and Strathern 2004, 33ff., 56).



One may wonder what happened in contemporary society that witchcraft is no longer a suitable explanation of misfortune for the majority of the population. Do we no longer fear people that transgress the accepted boundaries of human space, behaviour, and experience and threaten our health, well-being, and prosperity? The improved economic situation, medical care, transport, and social security have to some extent lessened the feelings of insecurity and precariousness of life in contemporary society, and the lack of the social settings, that is, shared work in the evenings, in which the explanation of misfortune by way of witchcraft was given public support, additionally helped in the process of the abandonment of witchcraft for alternative explanations of misfortune. However, these changes, which in our region occurred in the 1970s, went hand in hand with another radical change that occurred in Western society in the late 1970s and early 1980s. If at the end of the Second World War the enemy, and anxiety related to it, was perceived as coming from the outside, in this period the object of horror was becoming increasingly located within society and especially inside the human body (whereas from the beginning of the new millennium they both started to act together and follow a similar pattern) (cf. Salecl 2004: 4ff.). Such a general societal change in the perception of the source of anxiety is clearly reflected in the change of the discourse on misfortune.

In July 2014 I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with a 54-year-old woman, Barbara, living in a modern house in the centre of a densely populated village on flat land, only a few kilometres away from the strict borders of the region under research. In her youth she had studied at the university in the capital, but had to abandon her studies just before obtaining a degree due to her family situation. She has since lived as a housewife, taking care of her family, a rather large garden, and some hens. An intelligent and articulate woman, she narrated about her knowledge and personal experiences with witchcraft and the supernatural for nearly two hours. I shall present just a part of the interview, in which she discussed her own experience with bewitchment, to illustrate the changes that the discourse on witchcraft has undergone in the last few decades.

In 2010 Barbara was repeatedly finding eggs buried in her garden, in places where the hens could not possibly have laid them. After a while she mentioned this to her sister-in-law, who explained that the eggs were buried there to cause her harm and suggested that it was her neighbour, who allegedly already had the reputation in the village of being a witch, who was burying eggs on her property. Like so many of our interlocutors, she too refrained from accusing her neighbour directly. Unlike our interlocutors,

however, she did not first resort to the traditional modes in dealing with the eggs herself, but immediately turned to a specialist for help. She too decided to pay a visit to a specialist outside the boundaries of her region. The specialist she turned to, Sarah, was, however, not a traditional unwitcher, but a New-Age practitioner from the capital. Her website advertises her as a transformative adviser and a soothsayer who is 'able to see and dismiss the reasons for the disharmony with the help of angels';<sup>12</sup> in her practice she actually combines various kinds of therapies. This is how Barbara described her séance with Sarah:

Barbara: And then I went to see someone in Ljubljana who deals with that ...

Mirjam: A fortune-teller?

Barbara: Kind of, yes ... Well, not only fortune-telling, she also gives angels' blessings. She has an above average bioenergy confirmed by the Jožef Štefan Institute,<sup>13</sup> so there is some truth about it. Well, she told me that this was done by someone living nearby, she told me so, but she was not allowed to tell who that person was. Nevertheless, she could see this person and this person allegedly wished me bad.

Mirjam: Did she describe her?

Barbara: No, that was all she told me. She said she would give me some blessings, of course, I had to pay quite a lot for that, but I must say that since then I haven't found eggs any more, whereas before I kept finding them, whenever I was weeding, I don't know, once a month, three times a year – since I have no time [to weed] often anymore – and they were always there.

Mirjam: When did you visit Sarah?

Barbara: This was about three, four years ago. Since then I have found no more eggs, even though we had a dispute [with the neighbour], so it may have been her or not ... She [Sarah] said she shouldn't tell [who it was] (...) She only told me that it was a woman living nearby.

Mirjam: Can you tell me how exactly the conversation went on when you went to see her?

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12 For more on angelic therapy see Kis-Halas 2012.

13 Slovenia's main scientific institute.

Barbara: Well, she said: Somebody wishes you evil ...

Mirjam: Did you tell her that you had found eggs?

Barbara: My daughter is her friend and my daughter told her what was happening. She [Sarah] said: Well you know, somebody wishes her harm, I know about these things, she said, it's best if she comes to me, and she will receive a blessing and that will pass. And it actually did pass. My husband said that I was totally crazy, and how can I even believe in such things. I said: You know what, I'm going, at least I'm going to see what there is in it, there's nothing to lose except for some money. And I did it and there were no more eggs.

Mirjam: How did she determine who was doing this to you?

Barbara: She sees in pictures, she has these tarot cards and she lays out those cards, and then just turns them over. She just turns one over. But she also put something else in my hand before that, so that I had to turn one over, and then she reads from that one. Such things, for instance. These are sometimes things, that it really gives you the creeps. Things happen that I don't believe, but when you think of some of these facts, when you see this ... Well, I tell you that human intelligence is so limited, we're never going to know what's going on around us. There is something above us, but what it is we do not know ... Some say it's God, some say it's something else, but in my own life I have learned that there truly is something above us.

When things happen that you can't [explain] ...

Mirjam: But did she at least describe your neighbour?

Barbara: No, she just said that it was some woman. She said that she couldn't divulge anything. That she lives nearby. Later, when my sister-in law told me [that it was the neighbour who was burying eggs], I suspected her, because I get along well with all of my neighbours. And I got on well with her before, she taught me how to bake, I really learned a lot from her, we worked together, and helped each other out and all ...

Mirjam: You never had any problems before that?

Barbara: None.

Mirjam: Why did she do that?

Barbara: I have no idea. I have no idea, not a clue! Just that my sister-in-law says that they are exceptionally envious. If someone is doing well, she wanted to do us harm.

Mirjam: Why couldn't Sarah say who it was?

Barbara: She says that in her work she is not allowed to tell. There are certain matters which are very sensitive, and they warn you: protect yourself against this person. Well, she warned me about one person, she said – this person is actually my brother [quietly] ... she said: Your brother is just the type [of person] who doesn't bring certain things. We understand each other, but we have never had any deep connection, you know, birthdays, holidays, at those times we see each other, and help each other out and such, but that there would be any deep relationship between us, that never was [the case]. But there was never any dispute between us either, since I'm not the arguing type.

Mirjam: Did you pay in cash?

Barbara: In cash, she has her price, and you pay it.

Mirjam: Did she offer you the chance to destroy the bewitchment, or for you to find out which woman it was?

Barbara: No, she did not give me those opportunities, but she said that that with which she had performed the blessing had destroyed the spell, that there was nothing more on me, whereas before she had seen some sort of negative aura – she has some professional terms for it – above me.

Mirjam: Did she use the term witch for her?

Barbara: No, no: person. She very specifically said that a 'person' lives near you who wishes you evil ... She only stated a couple of facts, right, so that you could explain it in one way or another ...

Mirjam: Did you ever say to that person that you knew it was her?

Barbara: No, never. I say that if I don't see something, I can't say [anything], it could be anybody. When people are so secretive, you just don't know, if you do not socialise with someone, you don't know what they're like.

The discussion with Barbara reveals many elements that we have encountered in the bewitchment narratives in our region: the narrator finding buried eggs but claiming that she cannot blame anyone because she did not see the perpetrator; assuring that she 'doesn't believe', yet at the same time swearing that there is more to it than meets the eye; the therapist giving vague suggestions about the identity of her victim's 'enemy' ('an envious woman living nearby'), but is not allowed to reveal her true identity. Just as the label *witch* was not necessarily used by the victims or unwitchers – they would often rather refer to *envious*, *bad neighbours* – the New-Age therapist also referred to her enemy as *someone who wishes her ill*. Moreover, when I later conducted an interview with Sarah myself, when asked to elaborate on 'secret enemies', she particularly underlined *envy* as the key emotion: 'Envy is usually the main emotion of all these ...'.

The procedure of the therapist in all basic elements also mirrors the typical elements of the procedure performed by traditional unwitchers (cf. Mencej 2015a): (1) *the confirmation of witchcraft*: the misfortune (in this case the anticipation of misfortune, i.e., the finding of bewitching object) is declared to have been caused by a person who wishes the client ill ('She told me that this was being done by someone living nearby (...) this person wished me ill.');

(2) *the identification of the witch*: the person is vaguely identified (an envious woman living nearby), whereas the precise identification is left to the client ('Well, she told me that this was being done by someone living nearby, she told me, but she was not allowed to tell who the person was. Nevertheless she could see this person (...) She only told me that this was a woman who lived nearby.');

(3) *the bewitchment is annihilated*: some medicine (angels' blessings) and probably instructions on how to use it against bewitchment is given to the client in order to annihilate the bewitchment ('She said she would give me some blessings, of course I had to pay quite a lot for that, but I must say that since then I haven't found eggs any more').

Despite all these similarities between the New-Age therapy and traditional unwitching, witchcraft was not mentioned once by the therapist – yet, as mentioned above, nor was it necessarily explicitly mentioned by traditional unwitchers. However, while during the consultation of the client

with a traditional unwitcher, the unwitcher as well as the client were both aware that they were talking about witchcraft when the unwitcher declared that 'this was done', even if the word witchcraft as such was not explicitly uttered, the New-Age therapist, although her own discourse in every way resembled that of the traditional unwitcher (she too declared that 'this was done!'), denied that witchcraft was at stake and decisively dismissed any assumption of bewitchment:

Plenty come here who have already been visiting a million other people [therapists]. And I help them in the end, I truly help them! They say they are bewitched. But I tell them they are not bewitched, these are negative thoughts, this [witchcraft] does not exist. When we work on this, purify this, they realise that I was right, because they free themselves of these thoughts, because they are free. They work on themselves at home, meditate, go on with their life, discover the talents they possess, and so on.

There is yet another difference between the procedure of a traditional unwitcher and the New-Age therapist. In their procedure traditional unwitchers usually gave some advice on hygiene, nutrition, and similar matters, and perhaps some traditional medicine, and prescribed the exact procedure aimed at the annihilation of the bewitchment and the identification of the witch – only when the witch was identified and the misfortunes then stopped was the unwitcher's role accomplished. The identification of the witch in the traditional unwitching procedure was considered crucial for the effective overcoming of the witch's power and the prevention of further bewitchments. The New-age therapist, on the contrary, while also giving advice (which negative emotions to eliminate, how to meditate and pray) and some objects (angels' blessings), and vaguely confirming clients' suspicions about their enemies, unlike a traditional unwitcher, redirected the client's focus of interest from the external perpetrator to themselves:

Sarah: We shouldn't condemn anybody. We all have secret enemies, nobody has a clear conscience, nobody in this world has one. The background of the situation needs to be disclosed: what is wrong with this soul, what kind of help is it seeking. I work on the principle of self-purification, that is, for people to grow, if you know what I mean. So that they realise that spells and black magic – that these don't exist. I show them that life energy is within them and that light is stronger than all these negative influences that disturb us from the outside. That they need to have strong energy, which they ought

to purify through meditation, since by realising what you must purify in yourself, by realising the cause, you get power. Because when you disclose your secret enemy, they lose their power, they automatically fall. The secret enemy can be, for instance, your boss who doesn't like you.

Mirjam: But how do you know who the enemy is?

Sarah: One realises that by oneself after a while. One undergoes a therapy with me, I tell them the background, here and there [you must work on yourself], then they work on themselves and function in this domain. These are just energies. Then the source is disclosed. These are just energies.

Mirjam: Do you ever tell them directly: This or that person is your enemy?

Sarah: No, never. I help them by directing them so that they can understand what is going on with them, why they are feeling so bad. Perhaps they need to forgive themselves or others, perhaps they are taking on guilt and have to free themselves from it. (...) No one can harm you by black magic. Black magic does not exist, but envy does and an envious person can destroy your life. But people explain this wrongly. When somebody's energy is stronger [than yours], they can do you harm. (...) But if your energy is strong enough, a million people can envy you, and yet this will do you no harm.

The protection against evil, and consequently against further misfortunes, is thus in the New-Age therapy no longer achieved by the identification of the enemy threatening from the outside and their counteraction, but ultimately lies *inside* the individual's own body and psyche. The process of personal growth, implying the elimination of negative emotions and the strengthening of one's 'energy' with the help of prayer, meditation, and therapy, is the process leading to the permanent and ultimate protection against all sorts of 'enemies' from the outside. One's life, health, success, and well-being thus ultimately lie in one's own hands and are under the control of each individual:

Mirjam: Can one protect oneself against another person's envy? Do you give them something for protection, like an object, or a talisman?

Sarah: No, nothing like that. No protection. I was studying this for years and went through several things myself. The best protection is a prayer, a conversation with God, everyone can maximally protect oneself, but one needs to do that by oneself, you alone can protect yourself!

The traditional unwitcher's suggestion of redirecting the bewitchment back to its source, that is, to the witch, was seldom mentioned by the interlocutors, and when it was, no one admitted to having accepted the proposal. Barbara did not mention that the therapist offered her this option either. However, this last step of the traditional procedure is carefully 'hidden' in the discourse on 'personal growth' within the New-Age procedure too:

Mirjam: Can one stop envy, harm coming from another person – can you stop such a person?

Sarah: They alone stop themselves. When you purify what was being imposed on you by another person, the energy automatically returns to that person and they have so much work with themselves that they forget about envy and everything else. This is called a reversal of energy in Taoism. You just return what was being inflicted upon you to the source.

I have argued that the main role of the traditional unwitcher in our region was to help relieve the victim of the responsibility for the misfortunes that befell the household, by redirecting the blame to the witches coming from outside the household. The anxiety felt by the victims when the household did not prosper was certainly grounded in economic insecurity, but it was also strongly related to their social position in the community – when it was threatened, they needed, with the support of an unwitcher, to transfer the responsibility from themselves to an external source. The identification of a witch from the outside was thus crucial for releasing the tension that the victims experienced due to the expectations of the community imposed on them. (cf. Mencej 2015a) While in the context of traditional witchcraft the key underlying premise was that the source of misfortune threatened from the outside, this premise, while still implicitly present in the background, loses its crucial importance in the further steps of the 'unwitching' procedure in New-Age therapy – instead, the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

This basic difference between traditional and contemporary procedures aimed at the resolution of personal misfortune, and ultimately, at the release



of anxiety, seems to reflect the changes that have occurred in the last few decades in contemporary, individualised neoliberal society, in which individuals are encouraged to look at their own life as an artistic product or an enterprise (Kamin and Ule 2009; Salecl 2011) and to take it into their own hands. Yet, just like the specialists of the past who helped people relieve their anxieties in times of misfortune by relocating the blame from themselves to another member of the community, and thus ultimately helped them maintain their social position when it was threatened, contemporary New-Age specialists also help people relieve the tensions in times of misfortune by helping them to resolve, or at least to stay in control of, their own anxieties – and thus at the same time, ultimately, to maintain their social position in society.

‘Unwitchers’ who have adapted to the New-Age discourse and the demands of contemporary society thus continue to be in demand by people in times of anxiety, triggered not only by economic uncertainty but also by the problems people experience with regard to their social roles. At the same time, however, they help protect contemporary neoliberal society at large

from any ‘disturbances’ by individuals who are not constantly maximally productive and fully in control of themselves, as society expects them to be (cf. Salecl 2004: 2f., 7ff.). Thus, while in the New-Age therapy the witchcraft discourse is carefully veiled and the process of resolution of the source of anxiety accommodated to the demands of neoliberal capitalism, ‘witchcraft’ has, nonetheless, remained a part of our lives. There is only one difference: in times of misfortune, we no longer obtain relief by finding our ‘witches’ on the outside – instead, we have learned to search for them within, and have become trained to take responsibility for any failures in our lives, health, careers, and jobs – even when ‘not guilty’.

\* \* \*

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11/ a man, a farmer.

23/ a man, born in 1936, a technician, lives in the capital.

25/

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49/ a woman, born 1925, a housewife.

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58/ a woman, b. 1923, a midwife, a housewife.

79/ a woman, born 1923.

95/ a woman, born 1932.

108/ a man, born 1933, a farmer.

125/ a woman, born 1925.

127/

I1: a woman.

I2: a woman.

128/ a woman, born 1932.

130/ a woman, born 1926.

141/ a man, born 1931, a locksmith.

142/ a woman, a hairdresser.

149/ a woman, born 1920, a housewife.

164/ a man, born around 1950, a technician.

