

# Plants, Women, Magic. Contemporary Polish (Kuyavian) Folklore Based on Herbal Medicine

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Danes se je zanimanje za fitoterapijo in etnobotaniko povečalo. Ta pojav je bil povod za kulturni projekt »Etnopanterija dežele Dobrzyń«. Na dogodku so udeleženci raziskovali znanje o zeliščarstvu in etnografiji, vključno z vraževerji, verovanji in z vlogo rastlin v folklornih besedilih, hkrati pa so posredovali informacije o zgodbah, praksah in načinih uporabe zelišč v kraju svojega bivanja, med starejšo generacijo ali na podlagi lastnih izkušenj. Rezultat prenosa znanja med učitelji in udeleženci je bila velika količina zbranega folklornega gradiva. Članek je poskus povzemanja zbranih podatkov in njihove analize z antropološkega vidika.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: ženske, rastline, zelišča, medicina, folklor, kuhinja, verovanje, vraževerja

Nowadays, interest in phytotherapy and ethnobotanics has increased. This phenomenon was the reason for the cultural project "Ethno-pantry of Dobrzyń Land". During the event, the participants explored the knowledge of herbal medicine and ethnography, including superstitions, beliefs, and the role of plants in folklore texts, while simultaneously providing information about stories, practices, and methods of using herbs in their place of residence, among the older generation or relying on their own experiences. The transfer of knowledge between the instructors and participants resulted in a large amount of folklore material. The article is an attempt to summarise the collected data and to analyse them from an anthropological perspective.

KEYWORDS: women, herbs, plants, medicine, folklore, cuisine, beliefs, superstitions

## INTRODUCTION

This article is devoted to the cultivation of herbal traditions in Poland and activities aimed at maintaining them in the Dobrzyń Land, as well as juxtaposing them with ethnographic data from the area occupied by the Polish population from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the case of Poland, these so-called "Slavic antiquities" are treated as the legacy of old, pagan culture, whose relics have been preserved in the form of folklore content, oral literature, superstitions, and rituals. The analysis of the material serves to indicate the relics of old culture functioning in the consciousness, memory and practices of contemporary Polish women, to distinguish those that have been changed or have become incomprehensible and those referring to the structures of *longue durée* according to Fernando Braudel's

concept (1971). It assumes the existence of thought structures within a given culture, influencing behaviours and phenomena observable in the present time. In the process of enculturation, these structures are encoded into us; they influence our perception of reality, of which we are often not aware and do not consider, because they seem “normal” and “obvious” to us. Many of the structures of *longue dureé* can be observed in the use of plants or folk medicine in modern life. Currently, in Poland, there is a great interest in both herbalism and folk tradition (ethnobotany) or, more broadly, in magical cultures. Herbal treatment and its use for ritual purposes are not appropriate only for folk cultures. Ludwik Stomma lists the main features of the Polish peasant lifestyle, characterised by, among other factors, geographical and consciousness isolation, agricultural life, Catholic religiosity with magical and ritualistic influences, oral transmission, respect for the elderly and tradition, treated as sacred, inviolable and eternal order and the existence of binary oppositions shaping the peasant worldview (Stomma 1979: 131–142). For the purposes of this article, I define magic cultures as those in which the prevailing paradigm is the belief that we have the means to influence the course of events, the behaviour of nature or other beings at a distance by making certain gestures or uttering certain words (Bailey 2006: 1–2); for example, when we place objects that the burglar leaves behind on aspen, the thief will start shaking like that tree (Marczewska 2002: 178).

The first section of this article presents a brief overview of the literature that inspired the project, the methodological approach used in this investigation, the aims of the project, and the cultural background. The second section of the paper will be devoted to contemporary folklore texts and their anthropological analysis.

#### ETHNOPANTRY OF DOBRZYŃ LAND: THE PROJECT RATIONALE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The study of human-plant interaction and folk medicine has always been a research interest for ethnographers and anthropologists. In the article *Ethnobotany-its scope and various subdisciplines* (1995), Jain lists four main areas of ethnobotanical research. In the present article, I focused mainly on the first two: “1. work among the present day aboriginal or primitive societies and recording surviving folklore about plants. 2. Scrutiny of literature, such as on ethnobiology, traditional medicine, old administrative reports, ethnologies, floras, archaeology, etc. for data of ethnobotanical interest” (p. 8). Polish literature on this subject abounds in references to herbal treatment, but what is missing is a broadly based insightful analysis that would take into consideration the physiological properties of plants, their chemistry and their influence on human health, on the one hand, and the understanding of plants in a symbolic and ritualistic dimension, on the other. Interesting elaborations about the synthesis of ritual, magic, and healing properties of plants can be found in Richard Miller’s research (*The magical and ritual use of aphrodisiacs*, 1993; *The magical and ritual use of herbs*, 1979), but he is focused on exotic plants. The particular elements of folk customs reported here illustrate that, within the traditional rural community, there was a specific way of reasoning, rationality that had its roots in

the knowledge of natural cycles, animal behaviour, the influence of herbs on the body, as well as the understanding of the world as an arena where many phenomena are the result of supernatural forces, for example, the activity of demons or casting spells. The simultaneity of these two types of reasoning is characteristic of folk culture.

The source material for this paper is based on traditional messages as well as information from 19<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographic journals: *Wisła, Zbiór Wiadomości do Antropologii Krajowej, Materiały Antropologiczno-Archeologiczne i Etnograficzne*. The works collected by Oskar Kolberg and contemporary ethnographic studies in the field of folk medicine and ethnobotany, by Valeria Kolosova, Zbigniew Libera, Adam Paluch, and Marzena Marczevska, among others, were also taken into account. Studies of the Ethnolinguistic School of Lublin are also a valuable source for my work, in particular *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych, T. 2 Rośliny* (2017-2019). Extensive information about plant superstition can be found in the works of Polish ethnobotanist Adam Fisher (1889-1943), for example, *Rośliny w wierzeniach i zwyczajach ludowych. Słownik Adama Fischera* (Łuczaj et al. 2016) but also in the everyday practices of Polish people. The role and symbolic image of women in traditional culture constitute an essential element of my research upon which I relied, for example, the study *Wizerunek kobiety i mężczyzny w językowym obrazie świata ludności wiejskiej (na przykładzie gminy Zakliczyn nad Dunajcem)* (Piechnik 2009), *Ludowe mity o stworzeniu człowieka* (Tomicki 1980) or the book *O hultajach, wiedzmach i wszetecznicach. Szkice z obyczajów XVII i XVIII wieku* (Baranowski 1988).

I must note the scientist Michael Ostling, working on Polish historical and folklore material. One of his papers, *Witches' Herbs on Trial* (2014), is devoted to the witch figure as a herbalist and the plants listed during trials against such women. Traditional thinking about women and wild plants indicate a specific “relationship” between them. Contemporary material from field research includes information collected from the participants of the cultural project “Ethnoproxy of Dobrzyń Land”, carried out from June to October 2019 by the employees from Dom Muz in Toruń (a municipal cultural institution) and the Association for the Heritage of Indigenous Culture, of which I am a member.

Throughout Europe, an increasing interest in ethnobotany (in the field of science and as a hobby) can be observed; for example, studies on current and bygone herbal remedies in England were recounted in the book *Country remedies: Traditional East Anglian plant remedies in the 20th century* (Hatfield 1994), in which the author published previously unknown ethnographic material, drawing an interesting picture of the evolution of herbal treatment in eastern England. Ten years later, she published *Encyclopedia of folk medicine: old world and new world traditions* (2004). Ain Raal and Renata Sõukand (2005), in an article devoted to an overview of previous research in Estonian ethnobotany, indicate:

Findings of this research will lead not only to new potent medicines (a noble goal in its own), but first and foremost to new theories of recipe development and the interpretation of new (medical) information within the framework of old beliefs. This may help us to understand the influence that popular books and Internet resources have exerted on medicinal herbs today (p. 195).

I fully agree with that point of view; this article and previous cultural projects can contribute to the development of Polish and European ethnobotany.

The project “Ethnopantry of Dobrzyń Land” owes its name to the activities carried out in the historical land on the Vistula River, because one of its assumptions was regional education and local community activities. Its participants are residents of the region; however, it should be emphasised that not all of them come from the Dobrzyń Land and, unfortunately, the following materials cannot be treated as documentation of the tradition of the whole region. I also supplement the collected material with statements made by the participants of other herbal classes, which I have been conducting since 2017. During that time, I have often been asked about the effectiveness of magic treatments with plants (e.g., Should one think before and after harvesting them about the intention, spell, request for herbs to make a treatment more effective? Is it true that plants collected on Midsummer’s Eve have more power? etc.).

The project “Ethnopantry of Dobrzyń Land” consisted of several workshops, during which twenty women from the Dobrzyń Land region obtained knowledge about phytotherapy, the practical use of plants in modern and folk medicine, and their application in peasant culture. The workshop aimed to provide knowledge about folk herbalism, to obtain ethnographic material about it from the participants of the project, as well as to examine how much this heritage is still alive. I applied an experimental method of collecting ethnographic material. After each class, participants were given a “homework assignment” consisting of collecting ethnographic data, such as proverbs, legends, fairy tales, sayings, beliefs, the use of plants in medicine and cuisine, rituals related to plants, gardening, kitchen superstitions, and similar, known to them from their homes and family oral tradition. They were asked to interview women from their family and their neighbours who could possess and pass on such knowledge. Some participants did not provide any material, explaining it by the lack of informants or the disappearance of knowledge on the subject in their environment, while others were very active in searching for traditional records. Although the project is completed, I continue to receive some new valuable data from the participants. The activity proposed to the workshop participants was aimed at drawing attention to the texts of folklore as a source of knowledge about the culture. The attendees were also given instructions on what to ask the representatives of the older generation, what to pay special attention to (for example, the age of the interlocutor, regional names, information on how the plants were obtained, in what situations they were used, and how the relationship between the woman and nature and the activities of the housewife were treated). It turned out that a large group of beliefs and superstitions functions nowadays not as a historical curiosity but as a living manifestation of continuity of thinking known from Polish folklore. Superstitions that the participants catalogued during interviews with representatives of the older generation were often respected by them. The outcome of this method was extensive source material, some of which was included in the post-project publication.

Moreover, I also had the opportunity to become acquainted with the people who provided information on herbs and medicinal plants and their use in healing. Only one of them was educated in herbal medicine (she took a course in herbal remedies); others

relied solely on family traditions and their own experience in this respect. They decided to take part in the project because of the opportunity to participate in practical activities, the willingness to acquire herbal knowledge and learn about the culture of their grandmothers, while at the same time combining the cognitive and entertaining aspects (i.e., a pleasant time spent in a female group).

The first classes concerned methods of ethnographic material collection. The participants were prepared to search for information about plants in cooking, medicine, and beliefs. They were solving exercises consisting of the description of proverbs and customs and their interpretation in an attempt to explain what is hidden in these short sentences and what image of culture can be read from them. In Poland, a well-known proverb, “stolen does not make you fat”, means that eating stolen products does not result in fattening. It was an example showing the changing economic conditions in the Polish countryside and the accompanying worldview. Nowadays, it is used as a humorous excuse for minor acts of theft, because now we prefer foods that do not contribute to weight gain. In the past, when food was often scarce, “fattening” was desirable. In this short expression, the participants noticed the informational layer of the old culture – the deficiency and the resulting respect for food, as well as the moralistic one – the theft of food (an evil deed) – would not lead to the feeling of satiety; the food obtained through thievery would lose its properties that satisfy hunger. As historical data indicate, the lack of food was at the centre of everyday worries and the main existential experience of European peasants. Trials and tribulations of the folk fairy tale protagonists also suggest that this was the reason why “third sons” or orphans under the care of an evil stepmother had to go beyond “orbis interior”, where they experienced various adventures (Darnton 2012: 39–59). They often shared the last piece of bread with the needy, who turned out to be a benefactor, a fairy, a magician or a Christian saint, rewarding them for a noble gesture with a magical object. It was truly a great sacrifice, worthy of the highest praise.

I conducted the next classes in the field, teaching women to recognise medicinal species often found in Kuyavia; I talked about their use in old and modern medicine, household and the most common beliefs. The plants I talked about whose names and uses were known to some of the participants were: walnut (*Juglans regia*) used to alleviate diarrhoea and abdominal pain; common soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*), a natural detergent; black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) as a resistance enhancer against demons. Some ladies have also encountered the custom of pouring water after bathing newborn babies under an elderberry bush, hanging strongly aromatic herbs by the window and the front door of the house: common tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*), grand wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) used to deter insects and, in the past, to protect the house from demons and evil. Magical use of *Artemisias* was common throughout Europe: “[...] mugwort puts away madness, and in whatever house it is no evil crafts can have power, and evil eyes will be turned away. The roots used to be collected on St. John’s Day.” (Black 1883: 201).

The next two meetings were devoted to the processing of herbal raw material: the processes of producing natural vinegars, tinctures, macerates, cosmetics, medicinal ointments and their use in phytotherapy. We used those raw materials that were also available



Fig. 1. The common tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*), a photo taken during fieldwork (photo by Joanna Chmielewska).

in previous centuries: beeswax, ethanol, lanolin, wine vinegar. This method resulted in bringing the participants closer to the old ways of producing galenical preparations and to creating conditions in which the participants recalled the home remedies of their grandmothers and mothers.

Field classes in “wild cuisine” were conducted by botanists, who presented edible species, such as the white goosefoot (*Chenopodium album*), parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), wood avens (*Geum urbanum*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), which were then used to prepare meals, including the popular springtime *brejka* and soups of wild plants with the addition of goats. The participants also had classes at the Ethnographic Museum in Toruń, where they learned methods of engaging with the public and organising meetings for local communities on the region’s cultural heritage and art classes under the supervision of the artist Anna Pilewicz, using dried plants.

It was decided that only women would be involved in the project. We were interested in the knowledge of their female ancestors. The culture in which they grew up set quite clear boundaries between the “male” and “female” worlds. The significant influence of this type of opposition in ethno-linguistic research on Slavic culture was emphasised by Ivanov and Toporov (1965), for example, right-left, top-bottom, house – forest, we – they, male-female, inside-outside, life-death, and similar. (Rudenka, Zukosky’s 2014: 19). The collection of herbs and kitchen duties belonged to women in the Polish countryside. A man was symbolically connected with a cultivated field-domesticated plants, a tame space created by human action, where the known principles of the human “orbis interior”



Fig. 2. A collection of edible species during “wild cuisine” classes (photo by Joanna Chmielewska).



Fig. 3. Preparation of galena preparations during classes (photo by Joanna Chmielewska).

functioned. The women, in contrast, were more connected with wildlife, the spaces away from the house, from which medicinal plants were obtained, and in the image of peasants, the farther area, the greater the dangers it hid. This belief was linked with the existence of the borderline dividing the world in which peasants lived into their own (tame, as well as foreign) wild and unbridled space, and at the same time one in which the source of various powerful magical, divine and devilish powers have their source (Grochowski 2009: 38–52, Stomma 1986, 1979; Tomicki & Tomicka 1975). These can be used, for example, for healing purposes or harming others; therefore, quacks or folk healers (folk doctors) were perceived as ambiguous people. On the one hand, they strongly emphasised the help of God and the saints during the act of healing; on the other hand, they were suspected of contact with the devil's forces because their knowledge and skills were not "human" possibilities and were a potential danger, regardless of whether the gift came from God or the devil (Libera 2003).

Thus, both women and treatment were close to each other not only from a household point of view (domestic treatment was almost exclusively provided by women) but also from a symbolic point of view. The household, whose heart was the kitchen and its oven, was also the kingdom of women because they were responsible for preparing food, preserves, drying herbs, which served as a handy first aid kit (Paluch 1984: 223, 305). It was mainly housewives who created herbal and cuisine heritage. Women's work, if done by men, would condemn them to ridicule and misunderstanding; such a situation is even unimaginable because of the "qualitative" otherness and traditionally understood "inferiority" of a woman (Tomicki, 1980: 57–64). Some information remained available only within one gender; therefore, only women were involved in the project, as it was easier for them to obtain the material, especially from the older generation, but also because traces of the stereotypical division of activities into female and male remain very visible in contemporary Polish culture.

It should be added that in these areas associated with the female element, many men not only could not but were also afraid to enter because they did not understand the sphere. All the above-mentioned gender-related phenomena of traditional culture are secondary to the biological differences between a man and a woman, the fact that a woman has the ability to give life; her giving birth is the borderline between life and death, and her set of "dangerous" characteristics has its epicentre in her womb. In light of previous findings, cyclical bleeding had a strong connection with that world (the strange world, the world of death, chaos), and the monthly secretions were perceived as unclean and with magical potential. Sickness in peasant culture was treated as a "little death", and the sick person as a person in the zone between life and death, and thus he or she should be treated by someone who feels more comfortable in this zone – a woman.

#### HERBAL AND CUISINE TRADITIONS

The folklore texts understood as oral literature are an invaluable source of knowledge about the history and culture of rural life. A written form of expression was not a popular

method of collecting information, as wisdom was transmitted through proverbs or songs. Research in oral literature reveals how the perception of the real world was constructed by previous generations. Superstitions and beliefs permeated with magic or religion are frequently present in folklore texts. In this part of the article, I will focus on this kind of discourse related to plants and cuisine customs.

Each of the issues has been chosen to outline the broadest possible picture of cultural continuity, manifested in ways of dealing with illness or relationships with nature. I compare the data obtained with healing-magical practices known from folklore and attempt to analyse them in terms of mental structures in culture, ordering given behaviours or superstitions.

One of the superstitions, catalogued by the participants and subject to lively discussions, is the ban on making preserves during menstruation, which is quite common throughout Poland (Marczewska 2012: 212 – footnote 271, Paluch 1984: 306):

My grandmother, when I asked her about it, said it was a custom from the old times, and it was simply because of hygiene. She told me that women had skirts to the ground and that menstrual blood just flowed on their legs; sometimes, they wore rags tied to the belt, but some slobos did nothing. As far as seasoning is concerned, the grandmother said that they hadn't cared as much about washing hands when making preserves; as this blood flowed, there were more bacteria and seasoning fermented. I also heard from one lady from the Kamionki area that when she was young (in the 1920s) she did not talk to men about female matters, and at the same time, it was believed that sex, or often even touching a woman at that time, was the dirtiness of a man, even if he was her husband. So women wore either a red ribbon or a flower in their hair at that time, and men avoided them. (Anna Żoładz, 2019)

The participants emphasised that they complied with this rule because sometimes the jars “did not pasteurise” or the seasoning spoiled in the short time they were prepared during their menstruation. The rest of the statement also points to the unpragmatic dimension of the superstition. It is a clear signal that up to a century ago, women were treated as unclean beings, especially during menstruation. This impurity, apart from obvious consequences in the patriarchal culture, such as the lower social status of women, resulted in their engaging in herbalism, because plants could be used as medicines (white magic) but also dangerous poisons (black magic). The knowledge of their properties and use was dangerous, powerful, often tantamount to making a pact with the devil, because it gave the possibility to restore and take away health, to manoeuvre on the border of life and death. A woman felt much better in this mediation sphere than a man did – deprived of the element of impurity and power from outside our world. This case has shown that the female body has special magical connections. The 28-day female hormonal cycle and lunar month are also why women are symbolically connected with the moon. The faith in the influence of the lunar month is reflected in Polish folklore.

Pickled cucumbers should only be seasoned when the moon is D-shaped, when it “waxes”. Then the cucumbers are full; none is empty. And that works. I used to pickle cucumbers “from the same source” at the D-shaped moon, and another time at the C-shaped moon. At “C”, half was empty, and those at “D” were all full. (Marta Ćwiklińska, 2019)

It also refers to the period of treatment or collection of herbs (Libera 1995: 45–46). Nowadays, many beliefs concern the influence of the moon on growth or wealth. Especially among women, the habit of cutting hair right after the new moon is alive so that it regenerates quickly, growing beautiful and lush. The participants also mentioned the superstition that flowers should be replanted when the moon “grows”; otherwise, they may not take root and die before the moon is in the right position. Plants are treated in a magical way, which is confirmed by the second statement of the participant:

You don’t give potted flowers, grafts to somebody, and once you get them, you can’t thank for them. The flowers don’t grow then. So you should steal them. My mother’s neighbour, when she likes a flower, asks my mother to put it on the staircase, then she will steal a twig and graft the flower. (Milena Krajewska, 2019)

Superstition seems to be quite archaic if we look at its mythical layer. It indicates the magical treatment of words, as well as the magical, mediatorial properties of theft. As myths, fairy tales or healing formulas state, an object found by chance or stolen is more powerful (Wasilewski 1979: 80-81). In the case of a plant, this magical property can simply be understood as vitality, bloom. A preserved superstition can be a relic of older beliefs, an expression of the mythical plane of folk culture. It can also be interpreted in the mythical-biological dimension, associated with the growth of the plant. A plant is a living organism growing in a given space; moved from one place to another, from one house to another, it may die (it is worth noting that this applies to so-called grafts, or offshoots from the main plant and flowers living but not cut), especially when the transaction is sealed with an exchange of the words “please” and “thank you”. Then we symbolically close the situation that has definitively been concluded. The graft handed over in this way we cut from the matrix using these words; there is no longer any connection with it. The plant, in order to live, bloom, and multiply further in another place, must remain in the situation of an open, symbolic connection with its source, in a way deceived, deceitfully transferred.

It is also worth noting the folklore principle of “a gift for a favour”, which is still alive. In 2017, I asked a herbalist (about 80 years old) to bring me a seedling of garden angelica (*Archangelica officinalis*); the plant was already quite sizable at the time. When asked about the price, the saleswoman said that I should give as much as I thought appropriate, even one zloty, but I must give something, or the plant will die. She also said that this principle was written in the Bible. This is another example of the remnants of the

specificity of folk culture, as its members believed that the principles which determine the order that prevails in their communities are the only right ones, established by God himself, thus inviolable. It should be mentioned that representatives of traditional culture generally did not read the Scriptures, and some of its contents were only known from the sermons of the Church. The principles were created by people on the basis of their ideas, and only secondarily were they attributed to God.

It is now necessary to explain another form of obtaining a plant. It is a “theft”, but in this case it is done in a specific way because the person who is “robbed” knows about it; only the plant is “cheated”. The second peasant principle – “what’s found, is not stolen” (finders keepers) makes the found object become the property of the finder, frees him or her from a rematch, as well as from saying the word “thank you” crowning the transaction. In one statement only, the numerous principles of extensive peasant magic logic have been preserved, allowing the graft to be passed on without any gestures that would symbolically seal the transaction and deprive it of its connection with its original place of growth.

The above example illustrates the thought structures according to which the growth of a plant depends at the same time on the provision of convenient soil conditions, access to light, water, but also magical behaviour, in this case, verbal magic and mediatorial activities. The magic treatment with plants, indicated by one of the participants, is throwing peas:

When I was a kid, I had some warts on my skin. When my grandmother saw it, she told me to take as many peas as warts and go to the river, turn my back on it, throw them away and come back without turning back. Soon all the warts fell off. (Mirella Górzyńska, 2019)

The method described above is well known in Polish folk medicine of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Łuczaj et al. 2016: 156–157, Paluch 1984: 121–122). Peas were used for healing purposes because of their appearance, according to the principles of sympathetic magic in which “the similar will cause the similar”. Its tiny seeds resembled spherical growths sticking out on the skin, having many names: warts, scrofulas, papillomatosis, milia, paps, and similar. A patient suffering from various dermatological diseases, including smallpox, manifested by skin lesions, was said to have “a body covered with peas”. No wonder that in order to get rid of unpleasant lumps from the skin, it was enough to throw this “pea” behind. Mirella Górzyńska mentioned that other ways to remove the warts were also tried, but they were ineffective, only the grandmother, having heard about the problem, gave the effective “prescription” known to her. All the elements of the healing ritual mentioned by the informant are important. The number of peas must correspond to the number of warts. The second condition is to throw them behind your back, standing with one’s back towards to the river, which, when flowing, will take all the growths with it and move them to another place, making it impossible for them to return to your skin. The last condition is to leave the place without turning back. Between our world, in front of our eyes, and our backs, behind which another, magical and dangerous dimension sits, we become a border. We and our skin, which is to feel the effects of the

magic treatment. It has been accepted to say that the border separates something, leaving aside the fact that when talking about it, we always point to the existence of two areas which, paradoxically, however, merge. Because our own body forms this border, it can be healed. Peas travel from the front, through the border, behind us. Moving peas from the front to the back, we carry this disease behind us, exactly where it belongs, into the space of chaos, the unknown, where it came from (Marczewska 2012: 113–150). Turning around, we would shake the order of two spheres: eyes would turn to chaos, back to the order and health. Mixing the space would make it impossible for scrofulas to remain in the area “beyond us”. Nobody explained to the girl who was a few years old at the time how this treatment was supposed to work, but one can guess that going to the river and remembering her grandmother’s words meticulously, she was convinced of the power of those healing method. You might also think that just after she threw the peas behind, she left the place quickly. The ban on turning around could have caused fear, forcing the child to leave the dangerous place, contaminated with the act of ritual healing, as soon as possible. Feeling the fear of something behind our backs seems to be something completely natural, especially when this “something” will never be well known, because it cannot be seen by us.

One important piece of information is that the girl got rid of troublesome warts after the procedure. Among other ways to cure the ailment, a poultice of greater celandine (*Chelidonium maius*) juice was mentioned. Its orange, thick milk is rich in alkaloids with strong bactericidal, fungicidal, virucidal, and anthelmintic properties. Raw or dissolved in alcohol, administered orally, is a strong poison, and in small quantities, it has an anthelmintic effect. When applied to the skin with lesions (e.g., warts) causes them to die and fall off. *Chelidonium maius* and its healing properties are very popular in folk medicine also in other European countries, for example, Belarus (Sõukand et al. 2017: 34, 39). Folk methods of treating diseases were also based on the famous principle of Paracelsus (*Dosis facit venenum*), as many dangerous and easy to overdose plants and fungi, for example, jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*), lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), or ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*) were mentioned in ethnographic writings as means used in folk medicine.

A mentioned principle that traditional peasant regiments are perceived as a God’s order is also illustrated in a valuable statement by Agata McCaughey. It perfectly exemplifies the interpenetration of the mythical and pragmatic sphere in the treatment by plants, as well as the already mentioned tendency to argue the validity of certain behaviours with God’s intervention:

The mother of my colleague from Gniezno comes from a family where women have been using herbs and prayers to cure diseases for years. And so, when Zofia discovered nodules in her armpits and breasts, she immediately picked up the broadleaf plantain’s leaves for compresses. Day and night, she wore fresh leaves in her bra, believing in the story that women in her family pass on from generation to generation. A woman, suffering terrible pain in her breasts, prayerfully asked God what to do to recover. In

response, she heard to give her sore breasts to be licked by a lamb, and the pain will disappear. Trusting in God's will, the woman plucked broadleaf plantain leaves, which were called the lamb's tongue in her region, believing that in this way the Word would be fulfilled and she would be missed by the painful "nodding of the sheep's head". She was changing leaves dutifully, wrapping her breast with a fresh compress. The pain subsided, and the woman recovered. Zofia has also recovered and is doing great. (Agata McCaughey, 2019)

This case supports the view that the source from which the prescription for the painful breast was obtained is a natural healing tradition combined with faith and magical thinking. It was supposed to be the words of God that indicated the exact treatment. Interestingly, the woman did not follow God's instructions, despite the trust she placed in the words of the Creator heard during the prayer. Instead of immediately following the command, she preferred to interpret it in a way that could also be applied to the sympathetic magic, since licking her breasts with a lamb's tongue has been replaced by a compress of broadleaf plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), a plant that had the same regional name, probably because of the shape of the leaves or a slightly "rough" inflorescence. The above behaviour indicates a utilitarian treatment of God's words in healing, which can be properly interpreted, modified, or even improved, because this way has proved painless, in contrast to the recommendations heard in prayer.

The way Zofia was treated has been known for generations. Broadleaf plantain's leaves in traditional medicine were applied to wounds, contusions, inflammation and swelling (Paluch 1984: 71; The author also mentions folk names, including *jęrzecki*, *języczki*, *języczki polne*). During the herbal workshops, the participants mentioned on various occasions that when they were children, grandmothers or mothers (men doing similar treatments were never mentioned) applied rubbed broadleaf plantain leaves to them to reduce swelling and bleeding and to accelerate healing of broken knees or torn elbows after an unfortunate fall. Phytopharmacological studies indicate that this plant, very frequently mentioned on the pages of ethnographic journals, has astringent and anti-inflammatory properties that may have been most effective in treating painful nodules (Parus, Grys 2010: 162–165). The belief that the method was passed on to the ancestor in a miraculous way, through the lips of God himself during prayer, indicates that healing in this way is not only a medical but also a religious activity. Thus, the family tale of God's words, modified by their recipient by the power of sympathetic magic, has established a belief in the effectiveness of the broadleaf plantain in similar ailments, and we can be almost certain that the tale of the miracle during prayer is much younger than the treatment by the broadleaf plantain.

Traditional cultures knew many ways of dealing with pain; the following example is surprising with its ingenuity. Among the younger participants, it aroused a lively interest; to the older ones, it comes as no surprise because most of them knew it from their childhood:

Canvas, such as a handkerchief, was put on the anthill. After some time, ants that attacked it were flicked, so the handkerchief was soaked in formic acid. The handkerchief was put to the nose and inhaled to clear the airways. It was applied to the joints, soothing inflammation. (Grażyna Kasprowicz, 2019)

During the workshop, it was also reported that if someone suffered from rheumatism, they placed ants on their knees in order to obtain acid contained in their venom. Also, ointments were prepared from the ant venom. Formic acid applied to sore joints reduces pain and accelerates treatment. It is also present in parts of many medicinal plants, including nettle. A well-known and often repeated way of treating rheumatic pains is to cover yourself with fresh, stinging nettle leaves. During my workshops intended for families with children, I have frequently witnessed a situation when parents kept children from crying, explaining to them that if they are burnt with nettles now it will prevent them from joint pain in the future.

During the workshop meetings, I had the opportunity not only to collect material, but also to participate in conversations focused around herbalism, folk culture, according to many, unfortunately already gone, to hear the longing for the old respect for nature and the fruits of the earth, but also human relations and the oral transmission:

My grandmother had extensive knowledge about herbs which she received from her mother, but unfortunately my grandmother was not willing to share this knowledge with my mother, which means that I am deprived of it”, reports one of the participants, “I have to learn everything again.” (Maria Nowak, 2019)

The author of these words gave such information:

I read this advice somewhere on an Internet forum, when the forums, not Facebook, were still fashionable. The idea was that instead of giving the children garlic to eat, it should be rubbed into their feet/heels, because in this way, it will work as well. Kids don't like to eat garlic, so it's a cool way to apply it. Crush/finely chop a clove of garlic, apply it on the heels, put socks on it and go sleep. (Maria Nowak, 2019)

The lack of a link between grandmother and granddaughter, which is a link between generations of knowledge transfer, resulted in searching for it on the Internet. The informant found there the content having its source in folk medicine: “Sometimes, also in these ailments [rhinitis and cough], it is used externally, such as in Radomsko, Kalisz or Lublin regions, where the pulse, hands and heels are lubricated with rubbed garlic” (Paluch 1984: 30). This indicates that the Internet is now an area of research for old traditions and treatment methods practised by past generations. However, the folk threads that appear in the forums, are usually out of context, incomplete, devoid of the value that traditional

healing used to have, in which, apart from the action of the plant, healing was made as a ritual, legible and accepted by the community in which it took place. The method, known in folk culture, refers rather to the apotropaic properties of garlic (strongly irritating smell) and the concept of disease as a demon invading our body. Garlic as an apotropaion is popular in European cultures (Hand 1980: 323), for example, in England and Balkans, also in pop-culture, where is responsible for warding off vampires. The protection of the above-mentioned places was to deter the disease and not to affect nasal inflammation or coughing viruses through the healing skin. According to the information provided by Paluch, this method was supposed to be helpful in treating the common cold. The person who posted this advice on the forum used the folk method only on the pragmatic level. The cause (the placement of garlic on the heels, was to have the effect) to get rid of the cold. While garlic administered orally has such a healing effect, it can only have a ritualistic effect when applied to the feet. The fact is that someone who believes in the effectiveness of this method could feel much better, but in the given case, it was applied to a child who was not aware of the plant's pragmatic or symbolic influence. The phrase "I read it on the Internet" can be heard frequently among people interested in folk herbalism and try to use herbs today as an effective treatment. The example above illustrates clearly that folk medicine is not treated as an integral part of peasant culture, remaining in relation to the supernatural world, but as an isolated procedure, which often results in the use of methods that have no explanation in real life.

## CONCLUSION

The inspiration for the project "Ethnobotany of Dobrzyń Land" was mainly the desire to learn about herbalism and culinary heritage, based on wild edible plants, in its practical dimension. The result of the project is a great deal of material included in the article. The need to present all the findings originates from a conviction that the durable character of customs and traditions related to natural herbal treatments and culinary recipes of the inhabitants of the Dobrzyń Land region are worth analysing and documenting.

Nowadays, it is possible to observe a shift towards the ancestors' knowledge about health care through natural means. Initial observations suggest that there are two main attitudes to folk medicine. On the one hand, it is considered to be a group of unwarranted practices damaging to our body. On the other hand, it is regarded as an infallible book of wisdom, the secret of longevity and ideal life in symbiosis with nature. As is the case with extreme attitudes, the truth is somewhere in the middle, and each of the extremes is harmful. In addition, folk medicine is not only about prescriptions for particular ailments; it is largely the answer to the question: How did our ancestors think? The results of ethnographic research conducted during the project, as well as time spent on interviews and workshops, indicate that this is also the answer to the question of how it is commonly perceived. How far have we gone from our roots if we are often so gracefully able to combine an advanced level of chemical knowledge with the conviction of the miraculous power of the moon, the astronomical seasons, or feelings and intuition? The present

article is merely a contribution to further research and reflection on this subject. It is an outline on the basis of which it is possible to construct a broader interpretation of contemporary Polish and European culture and its transformations from an anthropological perspective. Another possible area for further research would be to investigate netlore, a new form of knowledge transmission, especially in folk medicine, in which changes in social attitudes can be observed.

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ROŚLINY, KOBIETY, MAGIA. POLSKI (KUJAWSKI) FOLKLOR  
WSPÓŁCZESNY ZWIĄZANY Z TRADYCJAMI ZIELARSKIMI.

SARA ORZECZOWSKA



Zagadnienia związane z naturalnym leczeniem i użytkowaniem roślin w kuchni oraz gospodarstwie domowym stanowią ogromny zasób wiedzy każdej cywilizacji. Poziom tej wiedzy często decydował o kierunkach i możliwościach rozwoju etnosu, bowiem od niej zależała ilość pożywienia czy możliwości opanowania zakaźnych chorób. Świadomość zależności ludzkiego życia od warunków przyrodniczych, urodzaju, wykorzystania potencjału flory, powodowała, iż kwestie te powierzano nie tylko zdrowemu rozsądkowi i empirii, ale także siłom nadprzyrodzonym – bogom, duchom przodków, działaniom magicznym. Synteza tych dwóch systemów postrzegania rzeczywistości zaowocowała niezliczoną ilością przesądów na temat roślin, form ich wykorzystania i wierzeń z nimi związanych w polskim folklorze. Traktujemy je jako niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe, a zainteresowanie etnobotaniczną spuścizną w ciągu ostatnich lat zdaje się nieustannie rosnąć.

Zapotrzebowanie na wiedzę o naturalnych sposobach leczenia wiąże się z poszukiwaniem jej w tradycyjnych praktykach medycyny ludowej, zarówno na kartach pism etnograficznych, jak i wśród osób, posiadających daną wiedzę, która została im przekazana od starszego pokolenia w sposób ustny. Powyższe zjawisko było przyczyną powstania projektu kulturalnego „Etnospizarnia ziemi dobrzyńskiej”, podczas którego organizowane były warsztaty o tematyce etnobotanicznej. W trakcie jego trwania przekazywałam uczestniczkom zajęć wiedzę z zakresu fitoterapii i etnografii i jednocześnie pozyskiwałam od nich materiał folklorystyczny (opowieści, porzekadła, przesady, zwyczaje, praktyki związane z roślinami), którego poszukiwały wśród rodziny, sąsiadów i własnej pamięci (wiek uczestniczek był różny, wiele starszych kobiet sięgało pamięcią do ich dziecięcych lat i praktyk ich mam, babć). Artykuł jest formą podsumowania i refleksji nad danymi pozyskanymi w trakcie projektu. Zestawienie ich z informacjami z obszarów zajmowanych przez ludność polską w XVIII – XX wieku służy wskazaniu reliktywów dawnej kultury, funkcjonujących w świadomości i przekazie ustnym, a także przykładów transformacji tradycji. Wskazana cezura czasowa to moment w historii, gdy zaczęto gromadzić i spisywać ustne teksty folkloru wraz z ich kontekstem wykonawczym oraz opisywać codzienne i sakralne czynności chłopów słowiańskich. Badania nad przestrzenią kulturową i literaturą ustną pozwalają na ujęcie specyficznego sposobu postrzegania roślin przez uczestnika kultury typu ludowego, jako syntezy wiedzy przyrodniczej i religijności katolickiej z wpływami magiczno-rytualnymi. Rośliny bowiem zajmowały kluczowe miejsce nie tylko w lecznictwie, ale także w praktykach magicznych, obrzędowych i religijnych.

Pierwsza część tekstu jest przedstawieniem literatury przedmiotu i metod badawczych wykorzystanych w realizacji projektu, opisem założeń projektu, trendu kulturowego, oraz opisem zielarstwa w kulturze ludowej z perspektywy antropologicznej. Istotne jest także określenie statusu kobiety w społeczności, który predestynował ją do zajmowania się czynnościami związanymi z leczeniem i roślinami (z pominięciem roślin uprawnych, zbóż, które stanowiły przestrzeń wpływów męskich). Silnie zarysowany podział na zajęcia kobiece i męskie w Polsce utrwalany był przez stulecia i utrzymuje się w wielu miejscach do dziś. Wiedzę, którą chciałam pozyskać w trakcie projektu, posiadały głównie kobiety w podeszłym wieku. Tabu kulturowe, w którym zostały wychowane, nie pozwalało na rozmowy z mężczyznami na niektóre tematy, toteż zaangażowanie w projekt jedynie kobiet pozwalało na dotarcie do szerokiej gamy materiałów. Jednocześnie projekt pozwalał na zawiązanie specyficznych damskich relacji, których poszukiwały uczestniczki i co niejednokrotnie podkreślały.

Analiza materiału tradycyjnego i współczesnego, podjęta w drugiej części artykułu, jest ujęciem dziedzictwa zielarskiego w kategoriach określonych przez Fernanda Braudela jako struktury długiego trwania (*long dureé*), co przedstawiam na przykładach poszczególnych wypowiedzi uczestników projektu, konkretnych zachowań, wierzeń, powiedzeń. Na podstawie zebranego materiału wyodrębniam przykłady tradycyjnego myślenia, którego trwanie można odnaleźć współcześnie, transformacje poglądów dotyczących roślin i nowych trendów w podejściu do kultury zielarskiej w Polsce.

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