

Notes de recherche

Ukrainian Folk Medicine in Canada

ANDREA K. KLYMASZ

There is a revival of interest in folk remedies in modern society; the established validity of Western medicine is being questioned while holistic, naturopathic and other medical systems gain renewed vigour.¹ Unlike such popular health systems as chiropractic and psychic healing,² Ukrainian folk medicine is largely unrecognized in Canada, yet it remains viable. Typically, Ukrainian folk healers in Canada are women who have learned the art of healing from their mothers or other relatives. This oral transfer of healing techniques has lately been replaced by tape recording the incantations to be used for future reference.³

The Old World Experience

Historically, Ukrainians and other Slavic peoples treated ailments within the family, of which some member (usually an elderly woman) was experienced in treatment and nursing. However, diagnosis and healing of disease with a supposedly magical or supernatural pathogenesis was left to specialists: medicine men and women.⁴ The magical causes of sickness were believed to be demonic possession, inimical witchcraft and punishment by offended deities. Great distress, fear and other strong effects were, in the opinion of the Slavs, of great significance in the occurrence and development of certain maladies and could even cause death.

Therapeutic agents among the ancient Slavic peoples included hydrotherapy, massage, blood-letting and some surgical procedures. Steam baths were not only preventive measures: they were an important procedure in curing certain diseases. Massage also had a justification: it endeavoured to press the disease out of the body. In the same way attempts were made to suck out the malady through blood-letting. Children were especially endangered by evil spirits and were therefore decked with amulets and sometimes called false names. The most popular amulets

were made from the teeth of bear, boar and wolf; birds' bones; objects of metal, glass and amber; and the roots of some plants. Most commonly, the amulets were hung around the neck or wrist, either threaded or in a leather pouch. This pagan custom has adopted the symbols of Christianity and continues to be in use today.⁵

The Canadian Experience

Ukrainian folk medicine in Canada continues to use many of the ancient Slavic techniques.⁶ Practices performed on the patient's person constitute one of two major types of technique. The measures taken here seek to remove or chase out the illness that has invaded the patient's body. This group of practices favours three techniques, all of which can be readily performed: hot wax in cold water; fire; cupping.

Some people believe that the most dangerous source of diseases is a spell, cast by either a person's gaze or praise.⁷ A cast spell places "evil" within the victim. This condition is commonly referred to as evil eye. The divination and treatment process for evil eye involves melted wax or hot coals placed into cold water. The water must be untouched; it can be drawn from a tap or well. A dish or bowl of water is placed over the patient's head and the healer pours in the wax, while reciting the Lord's Prayer in Ukrainian three times. The wax forms a shape in the cold water, symbolic of the person or thing that has frightened the patient. As part of the healing process, the patient washes his or her face with the water and drinks some of it. The patient is now cured—unfrightened and free from evil eye. Hot coals may be used instead of wax.

Inflammation in the eye (*roža*) or any other part of the body is treated by placing a red cloth over the inflamed area. Nine cotton balls, soaked in alcohol, are placed on the cloth and set aflame. The heat that radiates through the

cloth cures the inflammation. The skin disease erysipelas is also treated by tying a red sash on the infected area, then placing oakum on the sash and igniting it.⁸

Striking pain in a person's arm or back due to muscle cold or pneumonia is treated by cupping.⁹ The insides of several jars are wiped with alcohol and lit with a match. The burning alcohol eats up the oxygen, creating a vacuum; when the jars are placed, open end, on the skin and affected area, the skin is immediately drawn up into the jar. The drawn tissue contains "bad blood" and is punctured to allow the blood to be drawn out.

The second major group of healing techniques includes practices that are performed neither on the patient's person nor on any objects related to the patient. This group includes prayers to placate offended people or spirits, as well as the use of sacred pictures, icons, amulets and pendants believed to harbour healing powers.¹⁰ Holy pictures and icons are believed to transmit powers from God or the supernatural world when prayed to for the healing of mental and physical afflictions. The wearing of amulets (usually but not exclusively religious in nature) by children is meant to ward off evil eye and bad spirits; similarly, the wearing of pendants and amulets by adults is intended to ward off or eliminate dangers.

All healing procedures incorporate various objects. The objects in the two major groups of healing techniques can be separated into three functional categories: natural and primary elements; agents of transmission; and receptacles.

Natural and primary elements include water and fire, which are pure and non-malleable. This category could also include beeswax and coal or charcoal, which are products of nature. All these elements are purifying within the Ukrainian folk healing techniques outlined. The use of water and the act of drinking it and washing one's face in it are symbolic of purification and functions to rid one's self of evil eye. Agents of transmis-



▲
Fig. 1
Vorozka ("The Soothsayer") painting by Jeanette Shewchuk of Warren, Man., showing the traditional Ukrainian divination/healing technique of pouring molten wax into a bowl of cold water held over the patient while reciting a prayer. (Courtesy of Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. K86-594)

sion include the red cloth, alcohol and cotton balls used to treat inflammation. The use of a red-coloured cloth for erysipelas is a sympathetic remedy, since erysipelas produces scarlet-red blotches on skin.¹¹ Holding utensils, containers and receptacles include the jars used in cupping, for example. The bowl or dish used in curing evil eye functions as a holding artifact and also belongs in this category.

It is likely that all three categories of artifacts are universally applicable and not limited to the Ukrainians in Canada. However, the objects may be used differently in keeping with the specifics of other ethno-cultural patterns and conditions.

NOTES

1. For general discussions of folk medicine see Wayland D. Hand, *American Folk Medicine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) and Edith Fowke and Carole Carpenter, *Explorations in Canadian Folklore* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985) pp. 237-52.
2. By "popular health systems," I refer to systems that are too print-oriented to be clearly folk but which do not sufficiently dominate the cultural mainstream to be considered "official." This would include such systems as chiropractic, psychic healing and Christian Science. See David J. Hufford, "Folk Healers," in *Handbook*

- of *American Folklore*, Richard M. Dorson, ed. (Bloomington, Ill.: Indian University Press, 1983), pp. 306–13.
3. As technology changes, so does the method of transferring information. There is a Ukrainian healer in Gilbert Plains, Manitoba, who has a cassette of her healing prayers and incantations given to her by a previous healer. Collected in 1987 by Andrea K. Klymasz.
 4. For discussions of ancient Slavic medicine and Ukrainian folk medicine, see Mirko Drazen Grmek, "Ancient Slavic Medicine," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 14, no. 1 (January 1959) pp. 18–40; the entry on "Folk medicine" in the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) pp. 907–8; and P. Kemp, *Healing Ritual: Studies in the Technique and Tradition of the Southern Slavs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935).
 5. For a contemporary use of amulets see Gregory Gizelis, "The Use of Amulets Among Greek-Philadelphians," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1971), pp. 30–37.
 6. My current research shows that Ukrainian-Canadian healers still practise some of the healing techniques mentioned, primarily to cure evil eye.
 7. See Kazimierz Moszynski, "Medycyna" in *Kultura Ludowa Stowian*, vol. 2, pt. 1 ("Kultura duchowa") (Warszawa: Ksiazka i Wiedza, 1967), pp. 175–232; and Peter H. Stephenson, "Pshrien: Hutterite Belief in Evil Eye and Concepts of Child-Abuse." *Papers from the Fifth Annual Congress*, 1978 Canadian Ethnology Society, Paper no. 62, Joan Ryan, ed. (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service, 1980) pp. 113–7.
 8. Erysipelas is a febrile disease characterized by inflammation and redness of the skin and subcutaneous tissues due to streptococci bacteria. The visible symptoms are round or oval patches on the skin that promptly enlarge and spread, becoming swollen, tender and red. The affected skin is hot to the touch. Headache, vomiting, fever and sometimes complete prostration can occur. See *Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health* (Philadelphia, Pa.: W.B. Saunders, 1978), p. 354.
 9. Moszyński, "Medycyna," point no. 155.
 10. See the entry on "icons" in the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 2, and the recently announced publication of Stefan Moutafov, *Bulgarian Icons Devoted to the Science of Healing* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Academy of Sciences, 1988[?]).
 11. This is an example of "like curing like." Moszyński, "Medycyna," point no. 158.