



## **I. Magic, Witchcraft and Cultural Frameworks 1: Contemporary Russia and France**



Rural settlement of Oshevskii Pogost in Kargopol'skii district.  
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# Witches, Sorcerers, and Demons in a Remote Corner of Northern Russia at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Christine D. Worobec

Northern Illinois University, USA

ORCID: 0000-0001-6535-4641

Christine D. Worobec is Distinguished Research Professor Emerita in the Department of History, Northern Illinois University (USA). She is a specialist on Russian and Ukrainian peasants, women and gender issues, and lived Orthodoxy in the modern era as well as witchcraft in Russia and Ukraine in the early modern and modern periods.

Correspondence: worobec@niu.edu

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## ABSTRACT

Ethnographic materials from Kargopol'skii region at the turn of the twenty-first century demonstrate that while paradigms of witchcraft and beliefs in the supernatural still existed, the paradigms had been somewhat narrowed when viewed within the historical context of the *longue durée*. Due to a reduction in the scope of bewitchments, entire communities no longer experienced epidemics of demonic possession brought about by the evil intent of an individual. Instances of bewitchment in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras became restricted to individuals who believed that they became ill because of the evil eye or a hex. The range of illnesses subsumed under bewitchment also decreased. Yet, depersonalization of witchcraft accusations did not occur. Kargopol'skii residents continued to identify individuals whom they or a family member believed were witches and sorcerers. The gendered feminine discourse of the nineteenth century had also been weakened somewhat. Finally, community violence against witches was not discernable in the Kargopol'sk discourse. In essence, these rural communities remained tied to a rhetoric of magic to explain imbalances within the social fabric caused by individual transgressions of boundaries, suspicions against individuals for causing illnesses, and other violation of norms that could only be corrected by way of counter-magic and the restoration of "the notions of social equality and social" harmony.

## KEYWORDS

Kargopol'skii region; bewitchment; magic; evil eye; forest demon.

In his 2004 synthetic history of witchcraft around the globe, Wolfgang Behringer reminds his readers of the critical significance of witchcraft: "Like religion, the witchcraft paradigm is a universally existing pattern to explain the *condicio humana*." A specialist on the virulent witch hunts in early modern Bavaria, Behringer also points out that "anthropological research" has recently underscored "the *modernity of witchcraft*." In other words, witchcraft "can no longer be considered as a marker of [what had previously been labeled] 'primitive cultures,' or of a distant historic past, but of complex societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century." Even in such a highly industrialized and urbanized

society as late twentieth-century Western Germany, Behringer notes that a significant minority of between 10 and 15 percent of the populace believed in witches (Behringer 2004, 7, 21).<sup>1</sup> If he had had access to comparable figures for the United States and Russia, his conclusion about witchcraft having relevance in the contemporary period would have had even more resonance. According to a 23-24 September 2003 poll of "900 registered voters nationwide" in the United States, 24 percent acknowledged that they believed in the existence of witches (a percentage that was 10 points lower than beliefs in either UFOs or ghosts) (Blanton 2004). Figures for the Russian Federation were even more startling.





A December 2003 poll found that almost 50 percent of the Orthodox populace believed in witches (Il'ichev 2004; "Bol'shinstvo" 2004). In neither the US nor Russian case did pollsters ask respondents whether they believed that "bad people could cause diseases." Had they, the percentages in the affirmative, as in the German case, would most likely have been somewhat higher, at least with regard to Russia (Behringer 2004, 21).<sup>2</sup> Clearly, in all three societies of Western Germany, the United States, and the Russian Federation witchcraft lore remained a fundamental part of the cultural lexicon, even among skeptics who rejected the existence of witches.

At the same time, the extraordinarily high percentage of Russians believing in witches and by extension in witchcraft stands out. It suggests that the concept had greater significance for a society that in the 1990s was experiencing a free press and undergoing a transition from the security of a full welfare system to one subject to the vagaries of the capitalist market. The collapse of the Russian health care system and various economic crises had spawned rabid interest among the urban population in homeopathy and herbal medicine, traditional healing involving extensive knowledge not only of herbs but also of magical charms and incantations that ensured the efficacy of the herbal and other remedies, as well as witchcraft and sorcery. Pent up interest in subjects that had been taboo and censored in the Soviet period also need to be considered. A profusion of books specifically about witchcraft, clean and unclean spirits, and magic lined the shelves of Russian bookstores (Zorya 2021). Newly founded newspapers reported on these topics as well. According to a journalist, Jules Michelet's 1862 book "Witch," which was first translated into Russian in 1929 and then reissued in 1997, had become a bestseller. Unsurprisingly, it had also been embraced by members of secret, occult, and mystical societies (Vintilova 2003).

Indeed, Russian journalists were fascinated with the place of witchcraft and sorcery in contemporary society in central Russia, even if they sometimes questioned current fads.

According to a 2002 article in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, chronicling prominent *znakhari* [healers who treat ailments with incantations, herbs, and potions] in the greater Moscow region, there were 35,000 traditional *stselitili* [healers using herbs], magicians, and *znakhari* in all of Russia. The same article claimed that every second resident of Moscow and Moscow *oblast'*, including Vladimir Putin before he became president, had sought the services of a *znakharka* or diviner at least once (Smirnova *et al.* 2002). Andrei Viktorov of *Nezavisimaia gazeta* speculated that every twenty-fifth resident of Moscow had gone to a sorcerer at least once and that one out of two were swindled (Viktorov 2002). Newspaper advertisements such as "A hereditary witch will heal you of illnesses, remove the evil eye and bewitchment, family curses, put right [your] family life, help [you] in business..." were common (Lycheva 2002). A self-proclaimed witch, whose Moscow office was adjacent to the British Embassy, promised to solve business problems with a money-back guarantee (O'Flynn 2004). Another advertisement promised far more extensive knowledge of treatments: "Lifts all spells, relieves depression and stress. Protection from curses. Help in business. Spells for success. Healing. Exorcism. Love spells. Member of the secret lodge of *kolduny* (sorcerers). Tatiana Sergeevna ..." (Butler 1994).

This essay focuses not on the ways in which capitalism and current crises transformed historical features of Russian witchcraft, but rather on aspects of witchcraft beliefs at the turn of the twenty-first century that had currency in a specific location in rural Russia – Kargopol'skii district in Arkhangel'skaia *oblast'*, near the White Sea. Without the larger context of witchcraft beliefs circulating in early post-Soviet Russia, however, these personal stories or *memorates* from an isolated region within Russia might appear to be quaint and therefore unimportant. The interaction between urban and rural areas remained significant as people regularly traveled to the countryside for the summer months, while others moved back to the countryside upon retirement. Still other urban

dwellers sought out the help of rural healers and witches in rural areas, even in the far north, for specific ailments or sought to gain practical and one suspects even magical knowledge from them (Stepanov 2012, 144-45).

Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery had been ubiquitous among Russians of all estates, including the clerical one, until approximately the end of the eighteenth century. The Russian nobility eventually abandoned beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery as a result of the introduction of advanced education and ideas of the European enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Church strictures against various “superstitions” had less impact than scientific medical thinking. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, peasants continued to believe in witchcraft, although they continually modified its characteristics as economic and social change occurred and western notions of witchcraft by way of print literature made their way to the countryside. Violence against witches and sorcerers among rural populations still occurred in the post-emancipation period into the 1920s as communities sometimes avenged by way of extra-legal justice crimes that they believed were committed by way of witchcraft (Worobec 2001, chapt. 2). Brutal murders and witch burnings periodically attracted the press’s attention in these decades. For every reported incident numerous others undoubtedly remained hidden from official eyes. State campaigns against superstitious, including all religious, beliefs were once again launched in the early 1930s in conjunction with brutal collectivization which set out to destroy the traditional communal village. Yet, healers who dabbled in white magic in healing people and animals and countered the spells of witches and sorcerers who continued to disrupt the social fabric remained crucial in rural communities throughout the Soviet era. Those unwitchers did so with incantations evoking God, Christ, the Mother of God, and saints and snippets of Orthodox prayers. Atheistic propaganda, censorship, and coercion might have driven the discourse surrounding magic underground into safer private spaces, but they did not destroy it (Olson and Adonyeva 2012, 223).

Ethnographic materials from Kargopol’skii region at the turn of the twenty-first century demonstrate that while paradigms of witchcraft and beliefs in the supernatural still existed, the paradigms had been somewhat narrowed when viewed within the historical context of the *longue durée*. As a result of a reduction in the scope of bewitchments, entire communities no longer experienced epidemics of demonic possession brought about by *maleficium* or the evil intent of an individual. Instances of bewitchment had in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras become restricted to individuals who believed that they became ill because of the evil eye or a hex. The range of illnesses subsumed under bewitchment also decreased. Yet, depersonalization of witchcraft accusations did not occur. Kargopol’skii residents continued to identify individuals whom they or a family member believed were witches and sorcerers. The gendered feminine discourse of the nineteenth century has also been weakened somewhat. Finally, community violence against witches was no longer discernable in the Kargopol’sk discourse. In essence, these rural communities remained tied to a rhetoric of magic to explain imbalances within the social fabric caused by individual transgressions of boundaries, suspicions against individuals for causing illnesses, and other violation of norms that could only be corrected by way of counter-magic and the restoration of “the notions of social equality and social” harmony (Olson and Adonyeva 2012, 223).



### Folklore Materials from Kargopol’skii *raion*

This essay is based on the field notes of folklorists from the Russian State Humanities University in Moscow, who between 1993 and 2004 conducted expeditions to over 50 villages in Kargopol’skii *raion*.<sup>3</sup> The *raion* is one of nineteen administrative areas in the Arkhangel’skii region and includes the city of Kargopol’, which is located on the left bank of





faiths], they argued that Russian peasants in the nineteenth-century countryside were practitioners of paganism over which only a thin layer of Eastern Orthodoxy had been laid over the centuries since the Christianization of the Rus' in 988. Although Christianization took a long time to gain a foothold in various areas, the process of Christianization by its very nature amalgamated and transformed older beliefs. The nineteenth-century ethnographers' insistence on the almost purity of modern peasants' pagan beliefs also stemmed from their disdain for the Russian Orthodox Church – a sentiment shared by a significant segment of educated Russian society. They considered the church unresponsive to the needs of society at large, while acting as a bureaucratic bulwark of the autocratic state beginning in 1721 with Peter the Great's abolition of the Moscow Patriarchate (Worobec 1994, 12-13). The concept of *dvoeverie* came to dominate scholarship on popular religion in Russia as being barely Christianized into the twenty-first century, both in Russia and abroad. The paradigm has only been challenged relatively recently (Worobec 1994; Levin 1993; Rock 2007). The Kargopol'skii informants' answers to ethnographers' questions nonetheless provide clues about their Orthodox faith in references to God as part of their speech patterns, the Mother of God, prayers, and other inferences.<sup>4</sup>

The informants of Kargopol'skii *raion* interviewed at the turn of the twenty-first century about witchcraft, sorcery, the evil eye, and the spoiling or hexing of individuals and animals were born between the 1917 Revolutions and the late 1930s. Their lives were shaped by the ravages of collectivization, the purges, World War II, the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most of the informants were native to the area. Some had moved within the region because of marriage. Those who lived in towns during much of the year and returned to the countryside only for the summer as well as those who came from afar to settle down or retire in the area will be identified in the analyses. Most informants were literate but, on

the whole, had limited education. Finally, almost all informants related personal experiences, giving their stories a veracity that generalities fail to do. The fact that some of the stories contain motifs and stylistic features that are typical of folktales, as Elizabeth Warner points out with regard to her own 1995 field experience in Pskovskaia *oblast'*, does not diminish these informants' beliefs in a world of magic and the supernatural (Warner 2000, 84-85).



### Identifying Witches and Sorcerers

Several comments are necessary regarding the nomenclature employed in the discourse about witchcraft in the Kargopol'skii countryside. The informants used various words to identify sorcerers and witches, predominant among them being *koldun* [sorcerer], *koldun'ia* or *koldovka* [sorceress], *ved'ma* [witch but also literally "someone in the know," i.e., having specialized knowledge of witchcraft], *znaiushche* [those in the know] and *babka* or *babushka* [which can refer to any older woman but in this case implied someone who dabbled in either black or white magic or both]. Sometimes interviewees identified sorcerers and witches simply as evil people, or a particular individual as "that old woman."

Kargopol'skii rural folk also used the complicated term *znakharka*. Generally, the word refers to a healer who employs incantations full of Christian language and charms for benevolent actions and who tends to act as an unwitcher, that is, someone who undoes a hex or the evil eye. At the same time, a healer is capable of doing both good and evil. M. F. Koshina, who lived in another area (Ust'ianskii *raion*) within Arkhangel'skaia *oblast'* and was thus not part of the group interviewed in Kargopol'skii *raion*, explained to the ethnographer Lisa Mikhailovna Ivleva in 1993 that a *babka-znakharka* could make life difficult for a person, "if you don't please her" (Ken 2004, 201). As was the case in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,



a blurring of the line between white and black magic could occur in modern times. While black magic could involve the aid of evil spirits, more often it did not. Far more important was its intent to cause a person or animal harm. White magic, of course, focused on helping people and animals. Because both healers and witches resorted to secretive practices, whispering and mumbling incantations over remedies and potions, clients did not always know when the healer was beseeching the help of benevolent or evil powers. As the informant Koshina pointed out, healers knew both good and evil incantations and could dispense one or the other (Ken 2004, 199). The outcome of an incantation or the intent of the healer decided whether she or he was benevolent or malefic.

Although strong gendered discourse does not appear in the Kargopol'skii informants' answers to the gender-neutral questions the folklorists posed to them, some gender characteristics do emerge. While residents believed that the evil eye constituted a power that either women and men could wield (sometimes unconsciously), they attributed female witches, sorcerers, and healers who used charms and incantations with a special ability to affect women's and men's fertility either adversely or positively. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of individuals that Kargopol'skii informants targeted in the historical past "as knowing" the male forest spirit were men because shepherds who tended to pasture animals in the dense forest had been exclusively male. Their rituals were imbued with magic, and some were even feared to be sorcerers. After pasturing of animals in forests became a thing of the past, women's secret knowledge of the forest demon became predominant. The forest demon's human victims were either children or adult women. It would appear that women, because of their sexuality and a division of labor accorded to them at times, enjoyed different powers and specialties than men or took over men's specialties when circumstances changed. This type of gendered discourse arose out of the nineteenth century, even though the more modern version was more restrained

than its historical antecedent. Contrary to nineteenth-century stereotypes of witches, Kargopol'skii female witches were not identified by the interviewees as having tails and abnormal sexual proclivities. Informants also did not associate them with causing droughts and crop failures, other signs traditionally associated with women's ability to affect fertility adversely.

Neither did Kargopol'skii informants target female or male witches as milk thieves, even though they repeatedly talked about cows lost in the forest. By contrast, rural folk in Riazanskaia and Pskovskaia *oblasts* interviewed in the 1990s repeatedly referred to milk thieves. However, they did so only in depersonalized or generic terms, noting that witches of both sexes stole cows' milk (Ken 2004, 187, 214, 217, 232). Had they been asked to identify individual witches, residents might have targeted more women than men as more women than men milked cows and processed the milk. Nineteenth-century Russian peasants overwhelmingly equated milk thieves with female witches.

In keeping with historical trends, the Kargopol'skii materials are unsurprisingly devoid of references to Satanism, the witches' teats, and the black Sabbath involving ritualized desecration of the host, orgies with the devil, and sometimes cannibalism. Unlike the case in Western Europe, notions of Satanism were virtually absent from witch trials in the seventeenth century that the Muscovite secular authorities conducted in response to denunciations or petitions of sorcerers and witches from below. This absence may be explained by Russian Orthodox ecclesiastics' disinterest in Satanism. Unlike its Catholic and later Protestant counterparts, the Russian Orthodox Church had not developed a theology of a collective Satanic conspiracy that threatened the cosmic order ideology, which rested in part on the dangers of women's sexuality, whereby witches indulged in sexual orgies with the devil and demons. Muscovite society had subscribed to a script whereby the effects of magic could be terrifying but the magic itself was confined to the acts of individuals operating on their own. In addition, males were more apt to be



prosecuted for witchcraft than women because of their greater mobility and higher literacy rates within a realm that had severely circumscribed freedom of movement, culminating in the legal recognition of serfdom in 1649. Although Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century introduced Satanism as a significant marker of witchcraft, this Western concept never really took hold (Kivelson 2011, 47, 49-50, 54-56; Kivelson and Worobec 2020, 3-8). European notions of witchcraft affected Russian folklore in the nineteenth century by way of Russian translations of Western print literature, but nonetheless remained marginal to the paradigm of Russian witchcraft. As formal criminal trials against sorcerers and witches halted shortly after emancipation of the serfs in 1861, more women than men became suspects of witchcraft and the victims of violent assaults at the village level into the early twentieth century (Worobec 2001, 86-108).

Demons, a fundamental component of Christian cosmology, did and still populate the landscape in Kargopol'skii *raion* and other areas of rural Russia, particularly in the bathhouse after midnight; areas around mills, rivers, and the forest; and crossroads, all liminal spaces where people felt most vulnerable to danger. For Kargopol'skii residents, the forest demon constituted the most powerful spirit. Shepherds, and more recently women, with magical powers, as we shall see, either did the demon's work for him or aided residents against his powers.

Otherwise, references to the place other types of demons played in sorcery in the Kargopol'skii materials are cryptic. An illiterate female informant indicated that an unmarried male sorcerer openly conjured demons to do his bidding by sprinkling flax seed in straw. By noting that this threatening man hung himself at a young age, eighty-one-year-old Zoia Aleksandrovna Utkina quickly transformed the story into a morality tale. Another instance is far more indirect in its coupling sorcery with demons. It had to do with a puzzling murder. According to seventy-two-year-old Ekaterina Viktorovna Raskova of Pechnikovo-Striapkovo, when Gennadii Fedorovich's brother was

murdered about five kilometers from the village, the culprit could not be found. A male healer, she reported, was summoned to uncover the murderer's identity. In the end, however, the healer himself confessed to having committed the crime and died immediately afterwards. Utkina attributed the healer's actions to some, presumably evil, force acting on him. Perhaps, she mused, the healer had not done everything he was told to do (*Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha*).

Otherwise, the references to demons are by implication only and in all but a few instances (in which demonic possession was implied) confined to the belief that an agonizing death is one of the telltale signs of a sorcerer or witch. When witches or sorcerers died, demons were believed to fight over the possession of a sorcerer's soul (Ken 2004, 131). In two cases Kargopol'skii informants surprisingly did not identify the sorcerers as malevolent. It appears that in these instances only an agonizing death disclosed these men's identity as sorcerers. Thus, forty-seven-year-old Mikhail Vasil'evich Sergeev, who had returned to Iagrema after living in the city of Kargopol' almost thirty years, recalled his mother telling him about a sorcerer who lived in one of the nearby hamlets, where he lived "simply" or "unpretentiously." Unpretentious behavior is not a characteristic of sorcerers in Russian witchlore and practice. The individual in question, however, must at one point in his life have been a powerful sorcerer because he suffered terribly in death. Sergeev did not say anything to the interviewers (nor was he pressed to do so) about the sorcerer's deeds or reputation, but related the story of his death in some detail. Upon the man's apparent death, his wife arranged a (presumably Orthodox) funeral service for him, suggesting that she too did not know about his supernatural powers, which were all the more effective and disruptive because of the secrecy surrounding it. When she and her small son drove the body by sled to the man's native Tikhman'ga, the corpse came to life (as sometimes happened in folktales). Attached to the sled were a goat and calf. "He [the sorcerer] jumped as if out of his grave and



initially tore the goat to shreds. Then he attacked the calf." Presumably the animals were demons in disguise. Before the sorcerer could battle a cock that suddenly appeared, the widow grabbed the bird (which in Russian lore sorcerers used to summon demons) and ran off with it into the fields. When the cock screeched, the revenant-sorcerer stumbled and never got up again. Similarly, eighty-four-year-old Elizaveta Petrovna Shabunina talked about a sorcerer in Abakunovo who did a lot of good things for people, but who was tormented on his deathbed when he could not transfer his power to anyone else, another feature of Russian folktales (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha).

Sixty-five-year-old Evstoliia Nikolaevna Popova's story about a witch's cruel death was not so benevolent. In this case the woman, who Popova identified only halfway through her story as her mother-in-law, was evil. The old woman once traveled to see her in Leningrad carrying with her a suspicious bundle containing a cock's head wrapped in dog and cat fur. In Russian witchlore, practitioners were known to use animal fur in harmful potions. When the daughter-in-law asked her in-law about the contents, the woman explained that she had not always led a good life. Popova went on to say that the woman suffered on her deathbed. She pulled out her hair, and her eyes constantly moved from side to side (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha).

In their discussions of witchcraft and sorcery, the Kargopol'skii informants concentrated on three main topics, including the evil eye; bewitchment or "spoiling;" and finally the talents of both making animals and people invisible, and finding lost animals and people in dense forests. In the case of the evil eye, the Kargopol'skii rural folk perceived Russian sorcerers and witches to have inherent powers that made people ill. Bewitchment or "spoiling," on the other hand, involved the active use of spells and charms on the part of sorcerers to harm individuals. Powerful unwitchers were perceived to be capable of undoing the evil eye, bewitchment, as well as the magic associated with forest demon.

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## The Evil Eye

In trying to illicit information about the evil eye, folklorists asked Evstoliia Nikolaevna Popova (who had previously described her mother-in-law's tortured death) whether she was disturbed if people watched her when she planted cabbages. She responded:

I don't like it when they spy on you... Literally, two or three... three years ago. I was planting cabbage in that there, in that bed. Gleb Andreevich was walking by. "What is Nikolaevna planting there again?" [he asked]. But I don't like it when they are around, especially him; he has a bad eye, as they say. I say, "Yes, I am planting cabbage." And at night there was a freeze. In the morning I awoke [and] the cabbage was frozen. As if by command. Last year Gleb Andreevich also talked to me. "Well," he says, "Klavdiia," - he doesn't say this to her but to me - "where is she taking the raspberries? She has so many raspberries that the raspberry cane is even [bending]," - all the raspberries dried up. We didn't have any berries. . . .([The interviewer asked,] What did he do? Put the evil eye on it?) Apparently. See, he says that, and it happens. ...

Here is a classic example of a woman believing that her neighbor, Gleb Andreevich, had out of envy cast the evil eye on her prized vegetable and her neighbor's berries. To ensure that her interlocutor would believe her, she not only singled out the fact that Gleb Andreevich's had a bad eye, but also noted that others thought so as well. The ability to cast the evil eye on plants, animals, and persons, according to Kargopol'skii residents, was not gender specific as both men and women could possess that power. Okulia Oleksina, identified by sixty-nine-year-old Klavdiia Mikhailovna Kapustina, "always had that [eye]. She was so dark" (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). A person's dark features had been a characteristic that Russians associated with



witches and sorcerers as early as the eighteenth century, if not earlier (Smilianskaia 2003). However, in the more recent understanding in Kargopol'skii raion, an individual did not necessarily have to be a witch or sorcerer to be able to cast the evil eye. According to eighty-four-year-old Elizaveta Petrovna Shabunina, you could simply tell by a person's eyes, even if she or he appeared on the television, whether he or she was cunning: "Well, there is either too much or too little of something in them." In fifty-nine-year-old Mariia Alekseevna Shumeiko's opinion, the majority of persons who gave the evil eye were dark, but one never knew for sure because even "good eyes can give the evil eye." Furthermore, the person casting the evil eye may not even know that they have the power to do so. At the same time, Shumeiko, who tended to be a summer visitor to Trufanovo (near her birth place) also noted that *babki* could pick out the individuals within their communities who possessed the ability to give the evil eye (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Raznoe). In this fashion, "older women provided a network of judgment and surveillance for the whole community" and solidified the "vertical hierarchy between generations." (Olson and Adonyeva 2012, 219, 199)

The consequences of the evil eye on an individual could be severe unless an unwitcher was able to reverse the curse. According to thirty-six-year-old Liubov' Mikhailovna Rumiantseva, her mother, when she was young, had been the victim of a female neighbor's envy. "Oh," the neighbor said, "you are so plump that you are radiant!" What might appear to us to be a compliment was perceived by Liubov's mother to be a threat. Reacting with trembling and aches all over her body, she took to her bed. Fortunately, her aunt Mania, a healer, was able to come the next day. Mania brought with her some rye flour, over which she said some incantation and then sprinkled her niece's face with the magic flour. The illness subsequently disappeared. (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha).

Kargopol'skii residents' understanding of the evil eye conformed with nineteenth-century

Russian beliefs and indeed beliefs in other parts of the world, where personal misfortunes were interpreted to be the result of other individuals' evil intent. Interpersonal relationships could be tense in tight rural communities with huts cheek by jowl with each other and with insignificant material resources. Envy constituted one of many ubiquitous human passions. The fact that Russian rural folk associated envy with malicious intent and actions tells us something about lingering non-organic understandings of the body and illnesses signifying disturbances in the social order. Sometimes in the narratives of bewitchment, interviewees noted that the illnesses witches induced could not be diagnosed or treated by medical doctors.



### Porcha or Bewitchment

Comparable to stories about the evil eye were cases of bewitchment, although the examples provided by the Kargopol'skii residents suggest that the illnesses they believed to be caused by spells and hexes were far more debilitating than those associated with the evil eye. According to seventy-year-old Tatiana Stepanovna Kalinina, some victims could suffer their entire lives from the bewitchment, while others experienced an agonizing death (which was not to be confused with the agonizing death of a witch or sorcerer) (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Raznoe). Fifty-one-year-old Valentina Ivanovna Kriukova, who worked at a technical college in Kazakovo and was better educated than most of the informants, explained to her interviewers in Gusevo in 1998 that her daughter Nadezhda had been bewitched recently. Valentina had not previously talked to anyone, not even her own mother, about her daughter's experiences, because it had been too dangerous. Three years ago, she explained, her daughter Nadezhda went to work at the Fominskaia station after finishing her teacher training. She stayed with the school director's family, where she befriended the director's



nephew Andrei. Soon the family was talking about the very real possibility of Nadezhda and their nephew marrying. Feeling uncomfortable with this presumption, Nadezhda told Andrei that she was not romantically interested in him. Immediately, she became so ill that she had to be hospitalized. Nadezhda had developed some sort of “female ailment” and a dangerous temperature of 38 degrees. When the doctors were unable to diagnose or treat the problem, Nadezhda announced to her mother that she needed to be baptized secretly, the secrecy of which was undoubtedly explained by lingering Soviet taboos against religion. Nadezhda hoped that the Christian baptism would reverse what must have been a hex that had led to her being “spoiled.” (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). Spoiling in this case signified demonic possession. Although there is no mention of the latter or its symptoms in the informant’s interview, exorcist prayers and rituals to expel the devil and all other malevolent spirits from an initiate were central to the Eastern Orthodox baptismal rite (Stewart 1991, 55, 208). When the baptism and exorcisms were ineffective upon Nadezhda’s return to work at the very place she was hexed, Nadezhda was forced to spend a few additional months in the hospital. In the end she turned to an old woman healer from Konosha whose specialized knowledge saved her. In reversing the spell, the unwitcher explained to Nadezhda that she had been bewitched by someone who had traced her footprint. “If you had not found me,” the unwitcher declared, “you would have been dead in six months” (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). Here was an additional sign that more than Nadezhda’s fertility had been adversely affected by the powerful hex. Nadezhda and her mother suspected Andrei’s grandmother of casting the spell to avenge her grandson’s humiliation. Hexing, as other informants explained, could also occur over food or drink (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Raznoe).

Fertility was nevertheless key to the more common form of bewitchment that Kargopol’ residents identified as having bedeviled newlyweds. In the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, weddings were considered to be vulnerable times for the sexuality of newlyweds and their guests. Russian peasants believed that sorcerers sought revenge for having been wronged by someone in the wedding party either before or during the marriage festivities, or worse yet, for not having been invited to the wedding. Peasants could explain a bride’s barrenness, a groom’s impotence, and demonic possession at a wedding as a result of a grudge that the malevolent individual bore against the bride’s or groom’s family. Not surprisingly, weddings increased stress levels among members of the wedding party and other guests as they expected misfortune to befall them. Brides believed themselves to be especially prone to bewitchment and demon possession because of their liminal position between maidenhood and wifehood (Worobec 2001, 99).

In instances involving bewitchment at weddings cited by the Kargopol’skii informants, weddings remained vulnerable times for newlyweds, although demonic possession was far less common, and grooms were hexed more frequently than brides. Sixty-nine-year-old Liubov’ Alekseevna Farkova was conversant with a whole array of magical practices in her capacity as a healer who specialized in treating hernias or abscesses with incantations. This specialty went back at least to the mid-seventeenth century in the historical record when these specific maladies were common signs of malevolent witchcraft (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha; Ken 2004: 202, 203, 205; Kivelson and Worobec 2020: 198-99). Farkova reported that grooms were more likely to be bewitched than brides because the women tended already to have been pregnant. An evil doer whispered a spell or anti-love charm on an object in the liminal space of a home’s threshold over which the groom would walk or threw enchanted salt over the bathhouse stove, located in another liminal space frequented by demons and one in which the groom would bathe prior to the wedding ceremony. Farkova noted that the spell whispered over the bathhouse’s heating element, bits of which she heard



herself, constituted a variation of the following: “So that they live like... a she-devil [*tsertofka*] on a stone... like a male devil with a she-devil on a stone, cursing, biting, scratching one another – and so that is how the young couple will [act] – fighting, biting one another” (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). Spells of this nature clearly violated the bonds of matrimony (whether secular or religious) and carefully crafted social order.

Similarly, in a case described by sixty-six-year-old Ivan Nikolaevich Evseev, the mother of a spurned girl avenged her daughter’s humiliation and broken heart by hexing the young man during the celebration of his marriage to another woman. By way of an abusive spell, the malevolent mother targeted the man’s sexual organs so that not only would the couple never have intercourse and conceive a child, but that the husband would also not seek out other women’s company in compensation. Evseev noted, however, that such a powerful type of bewitchment constituted a relic of the past; examples of bewitchment in the more recent past could not match its strength (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Svad’ba).

Other informants provided a few examples in which the bride was bewitched. In one case a witch had administered a love potion to an unsuspecting young woman in her tea so as to entice her to marry a particular person. Subsequently, to ensure that the bride remained in love with her husband, the sorcerer administered another love potion during the wedding festivities. At least this was how sixty-eight-year-old Klavdiia Andreevna Mikhnova and her seventy-one-year-old husband Ivan Vasil’evich Mikhnov explained their becoming attracted to one other in the early 1950s (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Svad’ba). In other circumstances coercive magic could have dangerous consequences. A presumably unhappy future mother-in-law bewitched a bride, causing her to be deathly ill. The spell had to be reversed by a gypsy not only to remove the ailment but also to mitigate the social rift between families (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Svad’ba).<sup>5</sup> Another bride became an *ikotnika*

as a result of a bewitchment, which meant that she constantly hiccupped or croaked like a frog. When the sounds became severe, people became frightened. The informant, thirty-three-year-old Anna Eval’dovna Romanovskaia of Ukhta, did not explain that people’s fear arose from the fact that they thought that the woman was demonically possessed and that they too might become possessed. Another *ikotnika*, according to Romanovskaia, was run out of the village on suspicion that she also bewitched people (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Raznoe). Expulsion signified that the social conflicts that such suspicion aroused were too great for resolution within the rural community.

While all the examples involving impotence or possession in the Kargopol’skii interviews held women witches responsible, other disturbances at wedding festivities were ascribed to male sorcerers who sought respect as honored guests by demonstrating their powers such as halting the horses of wedding parties’ wagons that only they could undo (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Svad’ba).<sup>6</sup> Similar stories in Arkhangel’skaia oblast’ and Riazanskaia oblast’ circulated about sorcerers’ immobilizing the horses when the wedding party was on its way to church (Ken 2004, 194, 190). In one instance an informant from Kargopol’skii raion mentioned tales about sorcerers in the past possibly turning brides and grooms into wolves (Laboratoriia fol’klora: Svad’ba).<sup>7</sup> This act served as another way of disrupting an important social contract that over time had become based on free choice rather than arrangement.

The Kargopol’skii illustrations of illnesses that caused bewitchment by way of a hex are almost all confined to interpersonal relationships connected to fertility, which nonetheless had serious social consequences. While such examples were also prevalent in the nineteenth century, a much fuller array of often deadly illnesses (without concrete medical names) were connected to witchcraft and sorcery in this earlier period. Obviously, medical science had made great strides since the late nineteenth century and its much greater availability to a rural population at least by the 1960s had narrowed



the range of illnesses deemed untreatable by doctors. At the same time, the Kargopol'skii informants were not pressed by their interviewers to talk about other examples of *porcha* or bewitchment. It is possible that other illnesses could still be caused by bewitchment and social conflicts that needed to be resolved in order to restore balance to the social order (Olson and Adonyeva 2012, 229, 227).



### The Forest Demon

Besides subscribing to beliefs in the evil eye and bewitchment, Kargopol'skii residents identified a subset of male shepherds who in the past had special relations with the forest demon or spirit as well as female sorcerers and unwitchers who specialized in making animals disappear and reappear in conjunction with the forest demon's desires. "It is very easy to get lost in" the dense northern woods of Russia, "which can stretch for hundreds of kilometers," which in turn means that "settlements are widely separated from each other and connected by few roads" (Adonyeva 2019, 17). Essential for the grazing of animals, the picking of berries and mushrooms, the gathering of firewood, and for logging, the forest also serves as a liminal space where danger in the form of the forest demon also lurks. It is "a place where the natural and supernatural worlds intersect" (Smith 2005, 328).

None of the informants in Kargopol'skii *raion* dared venture into the forest alone. Even in groups, however, an individual was not always protected as the forest spirit could easily entice a person away from her friends by making available rich patches of mushrooms or berries. Furthermore, the forest demon or his intermediary could reach out to the village by grabbing precious livestock. A child cursed by a parent with the saying "Go to the *leshii* (forest demon)!" – a variation of "Go the Devil!" – was perceived to be "condemned to death." Should cursed individuals have managed to escape the clutches of the greedy forest demon and return

home, they were perceived to be liminal figures. Between and betwixt the human and non-human worlds, they could not always be fully reintegrated into their communities (Kushkova 2006, 57, 60; Smith 2005, 104). So afraid were residents of Nizhnaia Nozhema – a settlement of 150 people in the Vologda region – of the forest demon in 2003 that they avoided entering the forest. They nevertheless tried to placate the demon by going up to edge of the woods to bow down to and greet him (Ogil'ko 2003). Kargopol'skii residents did not give any indication of being so unnerved by the forest demon.

Some of the fear might have been mitigated by the fact that Kargopol'skii informants appeared to be proud of their having been able to navigate the supernatural world in the past through the deals that shepherds made with either God or the forest demon himself to protect the animals that they pastured in the wilds of the forest. Thirty-nine of the informants identified themselves as having been shepherds at one time or other. Even though migrant shepherds from areas close to the Vaga River in Vologodskaia and Arkhangel'skaia *oblasts* as well as those shepherds who hailed from Poshekhon'skii district in Iaroslavskaia *oblast'* were considered by Kargopol'skii rural inhabitants to be the most knowledgeable about magical matters, local shepherds could take pride in their own knowledge and authority ("Traditsiia," 1). Kargopol'skii informants' descriptions of the tortured deaths of some shepherds, who were unable to pass on their knowledge to others, pointed out these men's relationships to witchcraft and magic. Other shepherds, on the other hand, clearly served God but in doing so were able still to interact with the magical world. Ivan Vasil'evich Mikhnov (who was born in 1927 in Trufanovo, moved to Severodvinsk in 1952 after serving in World War II, and starting in 1980 returned to Trufanovo for the summers) bragged about his grandfather being a shepherd his entire life. The grandfather possessed a special piece of paper, which served as a contract detailing a series of rules that shepherds had to follow in order to prevent wild animals from attacking



their herds and flocks and ensuring that they would not get lost in the forest. During the summer pasturing season, which began and ended on religious feast days,<sup>8</sup> Mikhnov's grandfather rotated daily among the houses, whose inhabitants gave him animals to pasture for a bed, food, and special clothing designed for a shepherd, which had to be changed every day as well. Throughout the season shepherds could not trim their beards or hair. Other informants mentioned the taboo against shepherds having sex with women during the season. Fifty-eight-year-old Ivan Ivanovich Kurov of Saunino-Kiprovo added that a shepherd was also not permitted to eat chokecherries and berries during season, noting that either the forest demon would beat the shepherd if he broke any of the contract's provisions or a bear would attack one of his cows. Kurov philosophized that "What God gives, he takes away." As a safeguard, should a shepherd not be able to read the lengthy contract, he could hire a wise old man or woman to teach him everything he needed to know (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Poiski propazhi). The paper on which the contract was written, however, retained its magical properties if the shepherd was illiterate or had not memorized its contents. It had to be waived over the animals at the beginning of the season ("Traditsiia," 3).

Kurov's reference to God was not unusual in the interviews regarding the forest demon. Numerous informants did so as well, invoking God directly or indirectly, referring to the Lord's Prayer, or telling someone to "Go with God." When a shepherd tied his belt, he uttered a prayer or incantation to Christ to protect him against the devil. An incantation invoking the apocryphal Mother of God's Dream served as another prophylactic (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Leshii and Poiski propazhi). Furthermore, the contract could include incantations referring to God, saints, and the Mother of God or actual prayers.

As shepherding in the forest began to decline in the 1950s, presumably with the clear-cutting of trees, knowledge of the forest demon increasingly came into women's hands.



Eugene Gavrilovich Sokolov's pre-1917 depiction of a forest demon. Public Domain. Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D0%95%D0%B2%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9\\_%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2\\_%D0%A1%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%BD%D1%88%D0%B5\\_%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BF%D1%8B\\_%D0%9B%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%B9.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D0%95%D0%B2%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%A1%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%A1%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%BD%D1%88%D0%B5_%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BF%D1%8B_%D0%9B%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%B9.jpg)

According to the inhabitants of Kargopol'skii *raion*, the forest demon could make domestic animals as well as people disappear. Sixty-year-old Lidiia Ivanovna Mironova explained that when she was young, their cow disappeared after giving birth. After searching for her for three days, her mother sent her to an old woman, who had a reputation of knowing a forest demon, for help. The old woman took the girl up to a hill, where they undressed and turned to the left in the very direction of the evil spirit. In response, a wind suddenly appeared and bent the trees. The woman sent the girl home and promised to follow her shortly. Within the hour, the old woman came to Mironova's home and announced that the cow was well and standing in the clearing, a spot where Mironova and her mother had traversed a hundred times before. Such animal finders

were quite common. Semishina Galina of the hamlet Isakovo, according to seventy-year-old Olimpiada Aleksandrovna Sergeeva, dabbled in sorcery as a way of finding lost animals. These women were not always called witches, but according to seventy-seven Evdokiia Vasil'evna Andonina, the dark woman in their village was evil; rather than call her a witch, people said that something was going on with her because she was in the know. Besides "they [supposedly the forest demons] cavorted with her" (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). Eighty-two-year-old Anna Terent'evna Karzina, on the other hand, noted that both sorcerers and sorceresses associated with the forest spirit, although she did not provide specific examples. Even a victim of the forest spirit could carry its stigma. Prior to collectivization, an eight-year-old girl who got lost in the forest and was released by a forest demon because she complained of the cold, became known as "Chertova poteriashka" (the demon's lost one) (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Leshii).

Sexual imagery is more prevalent in the descriptions of remedies that overwhelmingly female victims of the forest spirit had to take in order to return to their communities after getting lost in the forest. Several of the female interviewees talked about removing their clothes and putting them back on inside out as the panacea for finding their way out. While reversal of clothing suggested inversion, a clear sign of a demon or in this case a forest spirit, the removal of clothing particularly from adult females suggested a sexual ploy whereby women bought the forest demon's cooperation. Even though fifty-eight-year-old Valentina Nikolaevna Kaplitsyna expressed skepticism about the practice, saying that reversing her clothing usually did not work, she gave an example when the ritual did succeed (although she attributed her success to coincidence): she was a married woman with children when she took her daughters into the forest, undoubtedly to pick mushrooms, and they lost not only their way, but also their baskets. It was only after going into the bushes to undress and reverse her clothing that the baskets magically reappeared and they were able to find their

way out of the forest along the railroad track (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha). Invisibility of objects and animals served as a common trope in these stories. Zoia Nikolaevna Bous explained that when she got separated from her cousin and his family in the forest picking mushrooms and could not find her way out, she did what people had told her to do in such instances: "you had to get completely undressed and take your shirt by the inside and place it against the tree and say, 'forest father, lead me out.'" The forest father did guide her out. Whenever she subsequently ventured into the bog, she always crossed herself to protect her. Even more suggestive of the possibility of sexual deviance is the description that seventy-four-year-old Mariia Ivanovna Zhuralova gave about the time when seventeen women from her kolkhoz in Zhubino went into the marsh to pick cloudberry. After they lost their way, they undressed and slept in the forest three nights. Subsequently, the older women reversed their clothing but ordered the unmarried girls to proceed through the forest naked. Zhuralova added that the women must have said prayers because they found their way out of the forest (Laboratoriia fol'klora: Leshii). The prayers supposedly functioned as insurance against the forest demon's sexual wiles.



## Conclusion

The Kargopol'skii interviews on witchcraft and sorcery indicate a world where magic and the witchcraft paradigm continued to have relevance, creating a pervasive culture of suspicion and fear. A rhetoric of witchcraft and concrete examples of unexplainable troubling occurrences were pinned on individuals who occasionally crossed social boundaries. Personal misfortune and strange illnesses that did not respond to modern medical treatments were still understood in personal terms as the result of a neighbor's or in-law's evil intent that needed to be neutralized by healers or

unwitchers for the sake of community harmony. A gendered distinction between male and female witches existed at least with regard to female witches who affected individuals' fertility and sexual potency as well as consorted with male forest demons. Male sorcerers' powers could nonetheless be powerful in bewitching people in other ways or in placating the forest demon. Within the magical and frightening world of the forest male shepherds gained authority by assuming magical powers through contracts with God, incantations with Christian properties, and Orthodox prayers. The range of illnesses subsumed under bewitchment, as we have seen, had shrunk.

While depersonalization of witchcraft had not yet occurred in Kargopol'skii *raion*, it is striking that no community disasters (such as crop failures, drought, and animal epizootics) were ascribed to witchcraft. Indeed, in all the interviews, there was only one example of adversity affecting an entire community. In this case in 1931 an old woman, who was a stranger to this particular hamlet of 56 homes and by definition suspicious, witnessed a fire that destroyed eleven homes and barns. Later she successfully predicted on two separate occasions that fire would begin again. Given the ubiquity of fire in villages constructed of wooden buildings that were close together,

the fortuneteller's prognostications were bound to be correct. Yet seventy-seven-year-old Aleksandr Ivanovich Biziukov who told the story about this strange "old" woman said nothing further. Only suspicion remained in the air. Clearly, no violent actions against the woman were taken. (*Laboratoriia fol'klora*: Kolduny, sglaz, porcha).

Indeed, community violence against witches and sorcerers is strikingly absent from the Kargopol'skii narratives, when compared to the historical record of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In only one instance did villagers "force" a possessed woman to leave their community on suspicion that she bewitched people. As Robin Briggs has reminded scholars in his study of early modern European witchcraft, societies subscribing to witchcraft beliefs possessed a variety of coping strategies regarding malevolent individuals. "There were many techniques for limiting one's personal exposure, and for controlling the suspect's behavior," not all of which involved physical violence (Briggs 1996, 408). Successful counter-magic and other treatments at the hands of healers continually restored a Kargopol'skii community's equilibrium, while the secrecy of both the treatments and sorcery enhanced the authority of all magical practitioners.



## NOTES

1. The percentages were based on polls conducted in Western Germany between 1973 and 1986.
2. While in 1986 approximately 13 percent of people in Western Germany admitted to beliefs in witchcraft, 21 per cent blamed evil people for triggering diseases.
3. The interviews having to do with witchcraft, sorcery, and unclean spirits as well as other topics were generously made accessible to researchers on a website funded by IREX and the Carnegie Foundation (*Laboratoriia fol'klora*).
4. For an anthropological study of witchcraft beliefs among Old Believers in the early post-Soviet period in mainly the Verkhokam'e region of Permskaia *oblast'* see the work of Olga Khristoforova (2010). Old Believer communities formed in the mid-seventeenth century in opposition to what they considered to be the heretical church reforms of Patriarch Nikon and continued to practice older Orthodox rituals into the post-Soviet period.
5. The informant, Mariia Fedorovna Gerasimova (born in 1925), was interviewed in Krechetovo-Shil'da-Kol'tsovo in 1996. She was talking about her sister being the victim of a bewitchment.
6. The informant, Anna Andreevna Biriukova (born in 1917), was interviewed in Evsino-Ruch'evskaia in 1996.
7. The informant, Alevtina Petrovna Koroleva (born in 1928), was interviewed in Sloboda-Bol'she Kondratovskaia in 2001.
8. The pasturing season began on St. George's Day on May 6 and ended on either the Day of the Prophet Elijah (August 2) or the celebration of the Protection of the Mother of God Icon (October 14). A half-season contract ended half way through the summer on St. Peter's Day (July 12).

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