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## Podlasie Whisperers (*szeptuchy*) as Folk and Religious Healers

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**Abstract** This article delves into the topic of folk healers (whisperers) in the Polish region of Podlasie. The whisperers employ various healing methods, including prayers and incantations, to address a range of ailments. The individuals referred to as whisperers include both genders and are specialists in folk medicine, performing procedures aimed at healing illnesses, resolving family issues, and neighbourly problems. This researched phenomenon belongs to the folk-religious sphere in the Hajnówka and Bielski counties, intricately intertwined with the culture and tradition of Orthodoxy.

**Keywords** whisperers, Podlasie region, folk religiosity, healing rituals

**Abstrakt** Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest tematyce podlaskich szeptuch, czyli ludowych uzdrowicieli, zamieszkujących głównie powiaty hajnowski i bielski w województwie podlaskim. Szeptuchy są to głównie starsze osoby obojga płci, które specjalizują się w medycynie ludowej, wykonując rytualne zabiegi mające na celu zmianę niekorzystnych sytuacji, nie tylko chorób, ale także problemów rodzinnych i finansowych. Zjawisko to należy do sfery ludowo-religijnej, która na badanym terenie jest powiązana z tradycją prawosławia.

**Słowa kluczowe** szeptuchy, Podlasie, religijność ludowa, rytuały zamawiania chorób

### Introduction

Folk healers called whisperers (*szeptuchy*) are a well-established medical-religious institution in the Polish region of Podlasie.<sup>1</sup> Many of the popular whisperers are a subject of constant interest in Podlasie as well as in other regions of Poland. The media, along with individuals who claim to have been helped by whisperers, contribute to the reputation of whisperers as folk practitioners capable of addressing a wide range of ailments, ranging from skin problems, to mental illness to financial or family problems.

The whisperers are a phenomenon rooted in the multicultural environment of Podlasie, heavily influenced by the Orthodox religion, and a part of a broader

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the book by Ewelina Sadanowicz (2024), *Szeptuchy. Religijność ludowa na Podlasiu*, Białystok. The publication aims to contribute to the academic discussion on Podlasie's whisperers in the English-speaking scholarly discourse, fostering a more comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of this phenomenon.

Eastern European folk medicine and religiosity. The rituals performed by the whisperers come from the principles of folk religiosity. The words turned into prayers and incantations, the gestures and actions used in these rituals either reflect those used in Orthodox religious rituals or serve as their equivalents.

The existence of various forms of folk medicine in the past in Podlasie is confirmed by historical documents such as diaries, journals or materials on customs and traditions in Podlasie.<sup>2</sup> These data indicate the richness of manifestations of folk medicine and other unconventional methods (such as herbalism) in the treatment of diseases and other ailments. After the Second World War, there was still a *kostoprav* who specialised in setting bones, or *powituha* who was a midwife delivering babies. Today's whisperers are most likely the last elements of this elaborate network of folk medicine in Podlasie. The aim of this article is to answer the following research questions: Who are whisperers, and where does the term "whisperer" originate? What ailments do they cure and how do they label these ailments? Do whisperers adapt their healing methods and practices to changing views of health? How have traditional folk healing practices persisted in different regions of Poland? What is the sociological profile of whisperers, including their living conditions, age, gender, and geographic locations?

## Research methods and materials

In order to carry out in-depth research and uncover the deep meanings governing the behaviour of the informants, I used ethnographic methods, involving prolonged contact with the group under study. The core research material comprises free in-depth interviews which I conducted in several municipalities in the Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski districts of the Podlaskie voivodeship with the whisperers, their "patients", and with the representatives of Orthodox clergy. In addition to interviews, I carried out observations, both participatory and non-participatory. Prayers and incantations used in the healing rituals were also analysed, as well as Orthodox publications concerning protection against magic. Additionally, press articles about whisperers were studied.

One of the features of ethnography as a research strategy, is the combination and flexible use of a variety of research methods.<sup>3</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson see the relevance of this practice in minimising threats to the accuracy of analyses, and in analysing data from different sources they emphasise finding divergences and theoretically explaining them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Бобровский 1863.

<sup>3</sup> Flick 2011, p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Hammersley, Atkinson 2000, pp. 237–238.

The choice of a qualitative research method for data collection was the result of several factors. Firstly, explaining a community's attitude towards a cultural phenomenon such as folk medicine requires in-depth analyses and a holistic approach that enables a "deeper and more complete understanding" of the problem.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, one of the tenets of this work is the belief in the crucial role of the local cultural context in the study of the whisperers, and "field research is particularly suited to exploring those attitudes and behaviours that can best be understood in their natural setting".<sup>6</sup>

A purposive sampling was adopted in this study, resulting from the qualitative nature of the research. The respondents were divided into three groups:

1. "experts", i.e. clergy of the Orthodox Church and well-known Orthodox lay persons of authority,
2. "patients", i.e. Orthodox residents of the Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski districts of the Podlaskie Voivodeship
3. whisperers

Between 2016 and 2022, I conducted a total of twelve interviews: seven with "patients", two with experts and three with whisperers, as well as many informal conversations with people in Hajnówka, Białystok, Narewka, Orla, and other smaller towns. In addition, I observed the rituals of the whisperers and, being recognised as a member of the researched community and enjoying the trust of the people being studied, I have often witnessed private conversations about whisperers and folk medicine.<sup>7</sup>

The division of respondents into patients, experts, and whisperers makes it possible to capture similarities and differences in the ways whisperers are perceived between clergy and lay people declaring themselves Orthodox.<sup>8</sup> In-depth interviews with whisperers were conducted to outline the full extent of the phenomenon.

The group of "patients", i.e. Orthodox residents of the Hajnówka and Bielsk districts, was determined and collected in such a way as to reproduce the diversity of communities in the sample.<sup>9</sup> Assuming that the reception of a phenomenon changes with the established criterion, the research sample should reflect this fact. Research on the social reception of the phenomenon of whispering and its relation to Orthodoxy requires the determination of basic variables that could affect the variation of the research results. The age, level of education, place of

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<sup>5</sup> Babbie 2004, p. 310.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, pp. 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Flick 2011, p. 56.

residence (urban or rural) and degree of religiosity of the respondents are taken as such variables in a given study. An indicator of the respondents' religiosity will be their own declarations of faith and frequency of participation in religious practices. In addition, the selection of extreme cases was adopted. These are people with a clearly positive or clearly negative attitude towards whisperers. This ensures maximum variability in the sample and, most importantly, allows "looking at the problem from the extremes to capture it in its entirety".<sup>10</sup> An additional criterion was the engagement with the phenomena under study, whether the research participant has visited a whisperer, whether they have a strong interest in understanding its nature and its meaning, and whether they are willing to participate in an interview.<sup>11</sup>

Such a practice is most accurately justified by Uwe Flick:

We therefore look for key cases in which the experience, knowledge and practices of interest are revealed. In this way, our sample should meet the criterion of representativeness – not in the statistical sense or in the sense of reproducing the actual distribution in the initial population. Rather, the cases we select should represent diverse meanings. What the phenomenon under study has in the consciousness and life practice of the people under study.<sup>12</sup>

The empirical material gained through research on a group of "experts" provides access to expert knowledge of the Orthodox Church. The primary selection criterion for this group was their high status within the community. The basic criterion in the selection of the sample of "patients" was the involvement and interest of the potential respondent in the phenomenon in question. This was particularly important in the case of people with negative attitudes towards the activities of whisperers, who, it can be assumed, will avoid participating in the whisperer's practices. The term "patients" refers to the respondents' experience as participants in the rituals and healing practices of whisperers, although direct and personal participation in these practices did not determine a person's participation in the research. The most important criterion was the involvement and interest of the potential respondent in the phenomenon. This is of great importance especially in the case of people with negative attitudes towards the whisperers, who, it can be assumed, will avoid participating in the whisperers' practices.

The selection of cases and reaching to the whisperers in the selected study area, i.e. Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski districts, where the largest number of whisperers live, was not difficult, but gaining the respondents' consent for an

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Moustakas 2001, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Flick 2011, p. 61.

interview often proved impossible. Therefore, in the group of whisperers, consent was the basic criterion. I only interviewed whisperers who gave their explicit consent to participate in the study. I also applied the principle of transparency during the research so all informants were educated about the purpose of the analyses I was conducting.<sup>13</sup> All informants and respondents were made aware of the purpose of the analyses and their participation took place with their explicit consent.

A thematic analysis approach was implemented. This involved a systematic process of identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning within the qualitative data collected from interviews, observations, and documents. The initial coding was conducted on the interview transcripts and field notes to identify recurring themes related to perceptions, experiences, and beliefs about whisperers and folk medicine. The identified codes were then grouped into themes, such as the role of whisperers in the community, the perceived effectiveness of their practices, and the relationship between folk medicine and Orthodox religious beliefs. Moreover, data triangulation was used to deepen the analysis by comparing findings from different sources, such as interviews with patients, experts, and whisperers, as well as observations of rituals and analysis of relevant publications. This helped to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Also, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences in the ways whisperers are perceived among clergy, authority figures, and laypeople within the Orthodox community, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social norms.

Several difficulties appeared during the field research. In particular, access to whisperers proved to be a major challenge. Gaining their trust and consent to be interviewed often proved impossible, as *babkas* are reluctant to talk about their healing practices due to their sensitive nature and fear of revealing information. Convincing whisperers to participate in the study required long-term relationship-building and gaining their trust, in which recommendations from mutual friends were helpful. A great help in gaining consent for the study, not only from the whisperers but from all the groups surveyed, was the researcher's affiliation with the surveyed group, which made it possible to gain the necessary contacts and made it easier for the respondents to open up.

In addition, the researcher sometimes faced the resistance from the Orthodox clergy, who were reluctant to agree to be interviewed and some refused to participate in the interviews. The clergy saw the study of the phenomenon of whisperers as its legitimisation. Other priests gave cautious statements, often opening up only towards the end of the interview. For this reason, interviews with clergy lasted even for up to three hours.

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<sup>13</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 15.

For the reasons described above, it often proved difficult to combine the demands of research and respect for local traditions. Each time, the author had to take into account cultural sensitivities and adapt to the group under study in order to avoid disrupting social dynamics or offending the subjects.

### Theoretical framework

This article examines the whisperers from the point of view of ethnology, which places whisperers in the category of folk culture and, within it, of religiosity and folk medicine. In what follows, I will attempt to sketch the theoretical framework of the phenomenon described, drawing on the work of such scholars as Stefan Czarnowski, Joanna Tomicka and Ryszard Tomicki, and Mircea Eliade. The basis of these considerations will be the argument that the healing practices of whisperers constitute a syncretic link between Orthodoxy and folk traditions, reflecting the context of Podlasie.

This socio-religious landscape of eastern Podlasie is nowadays only fragmentarily created by the folk culture but it is of fundamental importance for understanding the healing rituals performed by whisperers. Whisperers operate in a symbolic and sacralised reality that constantly refers to a myth which, in the case of Podlasie as well as Poland as a whole, usually has a provenance common to all Slavs. The basis of this mythology is the dualistic myths explaining the creation of the world through the actions of the demiurge and the devil, to which Christian myths inextricably overlapped with the advent of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> These myths served as a basis for beliefs and values and shaped human perception and behaviour. By ritually recreating the actions of sacred persons and basing one's daily choices on them, man was able to constantly reside in an ordered, meaningful reality and live according to divine principles. All actions performed in accordance with the deity's instructions gave certainty of success and predictable results.<sup>15</sup>

The mythic principles of the world divide reality into two opposites: a safe, familiar one and an alien reality full of danger.<sup>16</sup> This sacred alien reality, *sacrum*, can be both the domain of demons and deity.<sup>17</sup> Symbols and ritual prohibitions allow a clear demarcation between these two spheres, ensuring the safety of the person who moves between them, i.e. mediates. Mediation involves crossing boundaries, whether spatial, temporal or those relating to the course of

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<sup>14</sup> Tomicki, Tomicka 1975, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim 2010, pp. 30–32.

<sup>17</sup> Kowalski 2007, p. 310.

a person's life,<sup>18</sup> in order to break away from the human world and enter the divine and demonic world from which illness is believed to originate. This contact is made possible by symbolic procedures and attributes used by the mediator, in particular boundary objects and phenomena with ambiguous symbolism. These can include spatial boundaries such as the threshold of the house, temporal boundaries such as midnight, but also bodily secretions that simultaneously belong and do not belong to the human body.<sup>19</sup> In addition, because of the ritual danger of contact with the sacred, symbolic attributes and actions also help to protect the mediator during the rituals of the passage. Ludwik Stomma writes about illness as an abnormal condition and in order to remove it, one has to pass through the phases of leaving illness and entering into healing.<sup>20</sup>

These problems belong to both phenomena within folk religiosity and folk medicine, because within the traditional mythical-religious worldview, the boundaries between these domains are fluid. It is not possible to identify a group of phenomena that are exclusively medical or exclusively religious<sup>21</sup> and such delineation is most often not reflected in the results of field research.

Studying whisperers from the perspective of folk medicine, it is worth looking at the analyses of Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, who researches complementary medicine, which encompasses "all forms of healing beliefs and practices – regardless of their provenance – that exist outside official, so-called scientific medicine".<sup>22</sup> According to the principles of traditional folk culture, whisperers act as intermediaries between the human world and the sphere of the sacred, drawing on a mythical worldview in which health and illness are linked to the cosmic order. From the perspective of contemporary research on folk medicine, their activities can be placed within the framework of complementary medicine, which co-exists with official medicine. Whisperers adapt to the changing reality and incorporate into their practice, among other things, the diagnosis of diseases in the context of stress or psychosomatics, while maintaining traditional methods based on prayers and ritual actions. Their activities testify to the flexibility and adaptability of folk medicine, which, despite socio-cultural changes, still provides support for health problems.

Another point of theoretical background to the phenomenon of whisperers within folk culture is folk religiosity. Orthodoxy largely shaped the practices of whisperers, providing a frame of reference for the whisperers' prayers, symbols and attributes and providing an ontological basis for them. One of the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 307.

<sup>19</sup> Eliade 2008, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Stomma 1986, p. 155.

<sup>21</sup> Libera 1995, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Penkala-Gawęcka 1995, p. 182.

researchers who contributed to the development of the concept of folk religiosity was Stefan Czarnowski, who used the term “religious culture” in his work. The famous first sentence of his work *the religious culture of a community is not the same as the religion it practices*<sup>23</sup> perfectly explains the researcher’s approach to religiosity. According to him, religion is inextricably linked to the social environment in which it occurs, and the community shapes religion, just as religion shapes the community. Consequently, the type of religiosity of individual societies will vary depending on the cultural, historical, social or linguistic context of the community. This research approach allows us to analyse how the religious culture characteristic of Podlasie has shaped the practices of whisperers.

### Comparative perspective: folk healing traditions in other Polish regions

In most regions of Poland, folk healers using traditional methods of folk medicine and having the sanction of the local community are a thing of the past. While up until the Second World War in Podhale or the eastern part of Mazovia there were still folk healers, nowadays folk medicine is a residual knowledge. There are remnants of a once extensive system of belief and healing to be found, nonetheless, today folk medicine have often lost its original meaning.

However, Podlasie is not the only region in Poland where folk traditions have been preserved, folk doctors can be found in Kashubia, the Lublin region and the Rzeszów region, among others. In each of these regions, as in Podlasie, healing practices are rooted in local beliefs and religious beliefs, and also result from specific cultural and historical conditions.

In Kashubia and Pomerania, folk medicine is practised by whisperers and herbalists who, like Podlasie whisperers, come from local folk traditions and their practices are heavily influenced by the traditions of the Catholic Church.<sup>24</sup> The similarities between Podlasie and Kashubian whisperers are considerable, both use whispered prayer and symbolic attributes in healing, including numerous religious attributes such as holy water, candles and the rosary. Unlike Kashubian folk doctors, however, whisperers in Podlasie are not involved in herbal medicine.<sup>25</sup>

Most of the classic accounts and analyses of folk medicine from the 19th and early 20th centuries concerned Galicia and the eastern regions of Poland,<sup>26</sup> which are now in modern Belarus and Ukraine. Whisperers still exist in these

<sup>23</sup> Czarnowski 1956, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Kurowska-Susdorf 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Charyton 2012, p.119.

<sup>26</sup> Penkala-Gawęcka 1995.



countries and are particularly popular there. Today, most healers in Poland also live in the eastern part of the country, and this may be due to the intermingling of eastern Slavic influences, which relate not only to folk medicine, but also to elements of culture, religion and language.

Outside northern Podlasie on Poland's eastern border, whisperers can now be found in a handful of villages along the Bug River. Historically, these areas belong to the southern Podlasie, although today they are in the Lublin Voivodship. Bożena Józefów-Czerwińska has researched the beliefs of the inhabitants of the Bug river region and her analyses indicate that the practices of whisperers in this region hardly differ from those of the whisperers in the Podlaskie Voivodship.<sup>27</sup> As with the Kashubian healers, the main difference will be the Catholic faith they follow, on which the whisperers' prayers are based.

Whisperers, healers, *Babkas*, quacks: terminology surrounding the phenomenon

Scientific terminology refers to practitioners of folk medicine as healers, folk healers or faith healers,<sup>28</sup> while in Podlasie the common names are whisperer (*szeptucha*) and *babka* (Polish: grandmother). Both expressions are used by people who seek the services of whisperers, while the media and those outside the study area most often refer to the healers as whisperers. The very people to whom the term refers often do not want to be called "whisperers". They do not want to be referred to by a separate word at all and usually speak of themselves using the verb phrases "I pray, I help".<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the word "whisperer", the terms most commonly used in the study area to describe people performing healing rituals are *babka* or *babcia* (Polish: grandmother). It seems that *babka* is a non-evaluative word with low semantic content, whereas 'whisperer' would be a secondary, external and evaluative term.

The healers are easily recognised by the local community as *szeptuchy*, *babki* or as "those who pray", "those who whisper", "those who can conjure, do or undo". In the perception of the surveyed community, a whisperer is a person who "does rituals", "prays", they are known to use verbal formulas with illocutionary power to make "something happen". The ritually spoken word and action will produce the desired effect.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Józefów-Czerwińska 2017, pp. 227–234.

<sup>28</sup> Piątkowski, Majchrowska 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> Walęciuk Dejneka 2005.

How does a community identify the appropriate individuals to seek help from in times of need? Most important in identifying a whisperer will be the ability to interact with and manipulate the sacred power. “Some *babkas*, especially those considered ‘more powerful’ and particularly skilled, are known throughout the study area and enjoy authority and respect beyond their immediate circle”.<sup>31</sup> However, many use their knowledge only to heal their immediate surroundings, mainly family members. There are also whisperers who do not include non-verbal means, such as objects or actions, in their rituals, using only text with the word as the causal element. In spite of these differences, the community I studied does not make a distinction between the mentioned persons or activities. Nor is there an ontological difference between well-known *babkas* and those unknown to anyone, or between those who use only words and those who also include activities and props in the ritual. In this article, I regard all the individuals I mentioned as whisperers.

I have chosen to use the term “whisperer” in this study due to its higher semantic value and popularity, and to use the word *babka* as a synonym for it. *Babka* refers exclusively to women, while among the community surveyed the collective term “whisperers” is also used to refer to men.<sup>32</sup> However, it should be noted that whisperer is a term perceived as pejorative by some people, and this may be influenced by several issues.

The word whisperer (Polish: *szeptucha*) is most likely of East Slavic origin, the term is common in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia and means “a person who whispers”. One of the oldest and most respected dictionaries of the Russian language by Vladimir Dal gives the word *шептун* as the term for a male healer or fortune-teller, while *шептуха* is supposed to mean a female healer.<sup>33</sup> The words *шептун* and *шептунья* also have other meanings in Russian, including “people who whisper”, for example, the expression *девушки шептуньи* means “girls who whisper” (to each other, in the ear), it can also mean informers and even a type of slipper.<sup>34</sup> The East Slavic languages also use the expression *бабка-шептуха*, perhaps to distinguish the phenomenon from the other meanings of the word “whisperer” given above.

In Polish, the word *szeptucha* has a pejorative overtone, probably due to the rare suffix *-ucha*, which gives the word an augmentative and strongly expressive meaning.<sup>35</sup> The word *szeptucha* sounds rather harsh, which may be the reason

<sup>31</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> In Polish language word *szeptucha* is of feminine gender. There is no separate name used for the man who practices rituals, nor are any masculine gender forms (e.g. *szeptun*, *szeptuch*).

<sup>33</sup> Даль 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Словарь 1965, p. 1352.

<sup>35</sup> Sokólska 1999, p. 40.

for the more frequent use of the words *szeptun* and *szeptunka* in both scientific and popular Polish terminology. The suffix *-ucha* is of Proto-Slavic origin and was one of the most popular suffixes building names of female persons, such as in Polish: *kostucha*, *starucha*, *dziewucha*. To this day, it remains active in the Russian vocabulary, where, as in Polish, it gives a predominantly coarsened meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Although the nomenclature of those involved in folk medicine in Eastern Slavic countries such as Ukraine, Belarus and some areas of Russia differs somewhat from the terminology used in Podlasie, the phenomenon in question has long existed in these countries in almost the same form. In the scientific literature of the East Slavic countries, whisperers are seen as a kind of healer or quack, and Soviet encyclopaedias and dictionaries also define them in this way.<sup>37</sup>

Yuri Novikov notes that in most areas of Russia “carriers of magical knowledge” are divided into three categories. The first and most widespread category is made up of people who know a few spells to protect against the most common illnesses, such as being able to stop a haemorrhage. In the past, such skills were so common that these people were not even distinguished by a separate name. In the second category Novikov includes whisperers (Russian: *шептун*), who, in addition to their family, also “serve” the inhabitants of their village. They are much more knowledgeable and their skills are not limited to helping with illnesses, as they can also protect against evil forces and neutralise spells. Some specialise in treating children’s or women’s diseases, others treat livestock. Novikov writes of this group that “although their knowledge (and especially their ritual texts) is often surrounded by a fog of mystery, nothing supernatural or inaccessible to human reason is perceived”. The third group are sorcerers (Russian: *колдуны*, *волхвы*), who are attributed with immense, almost infinite power. They can use this power at will, including transporting themselves and others over considerable distances or turning people into animals.<sup>38</sup>

Uladzimir Hanchar, describing quacks in Belarusian Polesia at the turn of the 21st century, points out the difference between quacks (Belarusian: *знахар*) and whisperers (Belarusian: *шаптун*) in this area. The power and knowledge of quacks is attributed to evil forces, while the power of whisperers is supposed to be of Christian origin. On the other hand, both of these groups, no matter from what source their skills originate, work for the benefit of others, helping to free people and animals from various ailments. At the other extreme are witches and wizards (Belarusian: *чараўнік*), also called witch doctors and witches

<sup>36</sup> Земская 1999, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Новиков 2009, p. 285.

(Belarusian: *вядзьмар*) and sorcerers (Belarusian: *чарнакніжнік*).<sup>39</sup> These are persons acting to the detriment of others, capable of harming people and animals. In Belarus, as in Podlasie, these people do not talk about themselves: “I am a whisperer”, “I am a witch doctor” or “I am a witch”. When asked, they use verb constructions like “I help people”, “they turn to me for help”, “many people come to me”.

In the area I surveyed the word “whisperer” is perceived as foreign and sometimes it is associated with disrespect. This may be due to the aforementioned negative overtones of the term itself, but also to ambivalence about the act of whispering, speaking quietly and secretly, hiding the meaning of the words.<sup>40</sup>

A whisperer is in Polish, I think, and a *babka* is in our language (*po-naszomu*)<sup>41</sup>. They don't speak directly and out loud, they speak quietly, talking over something, whispering, that's why it's called a whisperer (Interview 1).

In my family, they didn't say whisperer, they said *babka*. It was so natural, obvious. (...) It was natural for people to go to the *babka* but there were also men. There was a lot of them, each of them had their own way of treatment. There were such people in so many villages (Interview 11).

I meet tourists and they immediately say the word whisperer. I get angry, I tell them: yes, that's what's on the TV but we don't call our *babkas* whisperers. (...) Why we don't call them whisperers, even though they whisper? We address them with great respect, very warmly, we call them Granny Ninochka, Granny Walochka (Interview 3).

Who are the whisperers?

Whisperers are people who, in the consciousness of others and their own, are able to manipulate sacred power. Through the use of ritualistic procedures they are able to cast or remove a spell, cure an illness, deal with relationship conflicts, money, property and other problems. Depending on her skills and will, a whisperer will try to be a mediator between people and the sacred in any matter they approach her with.

They are mainly older women living in rural areas but there are also men whisperers and people living in cities. In 2008, Małgorzata Anna Charyton

<sup>39</sup> Ганчар 2014, pp. 16–17.

<sup>40</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> Some informants spoke in a local East Slavic dialect, which is particularly common in villages in the study area.

conducted research in Podlasie among more than twenty whisperers and estimated their number at between fifty and one hundred. Only one of the persons she surveyed was under seventy years old, and four were men. Most of the whisperers were of the Orthodox faith (three were Catholic) and all had primary education or none at all.<sup>42</sup> The number of whisperers in Podlasie is significantly decreasing, which may be influenced by the decreasing number of villagers. However, it seems that today the number of whisperers in Podlasie can still be estimated at around fifty, including those who are only involved in practicing their rituals among family.<sup>43</sup>

The area inhabited by the largest number of whisperers is the Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski districts of the Podlaskie Voivodeship. These are mainly villages such as Orla, Rutka, Opaka Duża, Siemianówka, Dubicze Cerkiewne, Grabowiec, Malinniki, Tofiłowce, Pawły, Michałowo, Siemiatycze, Ryboły, Kojły, as well as the cities of Hajnówka, Bielsk Podlaski and Białystok. “*Babkas* in cities are usually people who have migrated from the countryside to the city and either continued their activities in the new place, or the knowledge and skills of the whisperer were passed on to them by a person living in the countryside”.<sup>44</sup> The activity of whisperers in cities is therefore still a phenomenon linked to the countryside and its traditions.

Whisperers are most often older women. Both old age and femininity are important for the safety and success of the healing ritual. In folk culture, a woman's duties included looking after the children so it was primarily women who knew how to deal with illnesses, take care of their family's mental health, and knew how to protect the home from undesirable forces of the sacred.<sup>45</sup> Older women have both the necessary life experience and the time needed for healing. Moreover, the non-menstruating woman is considered pure. In many traditional cultures a woman's menstrual cycle has been thought to carry impurity, associated with being perpetually in a state of transition between fertility and infertility or rather life and death. Unlike a menstruating woman, an older woman can come into contact with the sacred safely for herself and those around her.<sup>46</sup> The age-related disappearance of distinct gender characteristics brings the elderly closer to the state of undifferentiation inherent in the afterlife. The older age of the whisperers, further reinforced (in the case of women) by the absence of menstruation, makes it possible to cross the border between sacrum and “our world”, which is indispensable in ritual.

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<sup>42</sup> Charyton 2012, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 83.

<sup>44</sup> Sadanowicz 2018, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Libera 1995, p. 240.

<sup>46</sup> Kowalski 2007, p. 314.

## Folk illnesses and transmitting the healing powers

According to the folk beliefs, the aetiology of illnesses is linked to the interference of something foreign and external to the human or animal organism. This interference can involve demonic forces, a deity, as well as another human being. The sick person may contract the disease in dangerous places, such as at a crossroads, at a dangerous time, such as midnight. Folk culture sees the increased activity of demonic forces at such border places and times. Illness can also be caused by another person, for example a person who wants to harm another may turn to witchcraft practitioners, known as witches. It is a common belief among the community I surveyed that if a *babka* can cure a disease then she can also bring illness. The type of activity a whisperer performs is up to their discretion. According to the respondents, some whisperers exclusively cure and act “for the good”, but there are also those who carry out all the requests and wishes of their “patients”, even if such a wish is to bring illness or death.

Regardless of the causes of illness, whisperers distinguish a few basic diseases and these are: “charm” (*urok*), “rose” (*róża*), “Polish plait” (*kottun*) and the “chills” (*przewianie*). Charm in the Slavic folk culture occurs both as a cause of illness and as an illness itself. The occurrence of a charm is attributed to a person who has consciously or unconsciously charmed someone. Usually it is children who are most exposed as they are the most vulnerable and susceptible to the influence of evil powers but charms have also been feared in animals. The charm manifests itself in pains and, in children, crying and anxiety and sometimes it is combined with fright (local dialect: *perelek*, Polish: *przestrach*).<sup>47</sup>

“Rose” can be various types of skin diseases, the aetiology is usually derived from “chills” (Polish: *przewianie*) and cold. “Chills” is an illness locally known as *skwoźniak* (Russian: *сквозняк* – draught).<sup>48</sup>

The “Polish plait” is an extremely complex ailment, recognised both as a separate disease entity, a symptom or effect of another disease, primarily gout, and as a treatment for certain diseases. It is defined as a clump of hair formed by spontaneous or intentional tangling of the hair. Nowadays, in the Podlasie region, the plait is usually identified with nervousness and stress, as well as with cancer. This so-called “nerve” manifests itself in pain and paralysis of a variable nature and location, while the actual *kottun* in the form of clumped hair rarely appears anymore. If the “nerve” comes in contact with something it does not tolerate, it may begin to “move inside the body”. The “nerve” sufferer should

<sup>47</sup> Charyton 2010, p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> Sadanowicz 2024.

not be sent to a medical doctor, as the “nerve” does not like injections, surgery and especially “taking a tumour sample for laboratory analysis”.<sup>49</sup>

Whisperers specialise in curing different ailments, some are more successful in treating particular diseases or have chosen a particular way of treating an illness. For example, one *babka* heals the “rose”, another helps from the “chills”.

I am someone who grew up in the countryside, (...) there was an important element, this so-called treatment. Of course, it wasn't about fractures or specific visible ailments but if you had a headache, a cold, nervousness, anxiety or fear, you went to see the *babka*. There were also men who healed, each with their own ways. Even such an affliction as a swollen leg, you had to burn flax fibre over it, *róża* is the word for it. This is still the same today. My brother was sick with *róża* and his doctor said that there was no way to treat it, he should try going to a whisperer (Interview 11).

Treatment usually takes place in a domestic setting, although sometimes the ritual has to be performed outside, for example at a crossroads or on a doorstep. In folk tradition a house is, on the one hand, considered a feminine space, while, on the other hand, a microcosm, the centre of the known world and a small, family temple. The fact that acts of healing take place within this sanctioned space is of momentous importance, as any activity within the home has its consequences outside of it, in the space associated with it, and therefore also affects the human being.<sup>50</sup>

The living conditions of whisperers do not differ from other inhabitants of Podlasie villages. *Babka* usually lives in a small cottage with a dark hallway, which sometimes is adapted as a waiting room where “patients” can sit on a bench while waiting for an appointment. A whisperer takes her “patients” to a separate room, most often the kitchen, which in many Podlasie country houses is spacious and has several windows. These windows are sometimes covered, so that the room is semi-dark. In the kitchen, there is a wood-burning stove, used primarily for preparing food, but which is also used by the whisperers to perform rituals: wax melts in a pot, and ash rises from its depths. The “patient” sits on a chair at a table, which is usually located by a window. On the table there is usually a cross or an icon, a candle and, depending on the need, other items used in the ritual: prayer books, a piece of cloth, a glass.<sup>51</sup>

The healing ritual usually begins with a conversation with the “patient”. The *babka* asks why the person has come to her and, from this interview, she deduces what illness or need the “patient” is coming with and selects the appropriate remedies. Moreover, some whisperers are believed to have clairvoyant abilities

<sup>49</sup> Charyton 2010, p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> Benedyktowicz, Benedyktowicz 1992, pp. 65–69.

<sup>51</sup> Sadanowicz 2020; Sadanowicz 2018.



and know in advance why the “patient” has come to them. The informants believe that the *babkas* know their family secrets, that they can give names of people they cannot know, and have knowledge of events in which they have not participated.<sup>52</sup>

I was going to Orla to visit a whisperer, I put a couple of eggs in the basket to give her but I had to take some out because there were too many of them and I couldn't carry the basket. Then when I gave her the basket, Wala says: you know, you take away your eggs. If it was so hard for you to put five more, then take away the rest as well. How do they know such things... (Interview 2).

When she started whispering, she had the windows covered in black, you couldn't see anything there, and she says to me: oh these little brats are bothering me (...). I thought to myself: what brats, what children, there's nobody here. I say: I can't hear anything, and she says: they're running around and picking my flowers. I thought to myself: what kids? (...) I walked outside and there are children plucking flowers. How she knew those children were there, I don't know, because you couldn't hear any children there, you couldn't see them at all. I just don't get it (Interview 10).

It is not only whisperers who are perceived as extraordinary, mystery also surrounds the way they pass on their healing skills. The core and meaning of the whisperers' activities, and often their prayers, are taboo. The most important part of a whisperer's activity is only revealed when she passes on her skills to the next person.

It's such a secret knowledge, it's not like everyone can openly talk about it. The prayers are not Orthodox, they are their own, the text was so natural. My grandmother was a whisperer and one day she said, I'll pass it on to you, but I was too young, and she said it should be done by a mature person. You need to have experience, to have lived through something in your life, to have depth, reflection, silence, you know, life experience (Interview 11).

The handover enables one to step into the role of a whisperer and obtain the relevant skills. In the study area, it is most common to speak of “passing on” (*przekazywanie*) without naming the object being passed on, for example, saying “passing on something” or “she passed it on”. This way of speaking may be related to the fact that the knowledge of whisperers is tabooed and the respondents do not know what exactly is being “passed on”.

The one in Koszele passed on to her daughter-in-law. And the daughter passed it on to some man (Interview 2).

Her grandmother passed on something to her before she died (Interview 1).

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<sup>52</sup> Sadanowicz 2024.



The *babkas* who enjoy the greatest popularity and are considered the “strongest” in Podlasie can boast of belonging to families with a multi-generational tradition of healing. The recently deceased Walentyna from Orla (also known as Wala and Walochka) gained her knowledge from her mother, who was surrounded by the fame of the “strongest” whisperer. Orla is also home to Wala’s nephew, who claims that in his family “everything started” with his grandmother (Wala’s mother), who was a servant in the house of Jews of Orla, doing housework on Shabbat. Before the Second World War, she met a Jewish woman there who “told her secrets and gave her prayers” (Interview 6) and in 1941 Wala’s mother began to treat people in Orla. She passed on her knowledge to her youngest daughter, who was considered the best, “strongest” whisperer in Podlasie.

Some informers believe that the ability to perform healing rituals arrived in Podlasie together with the *bieżeńcy*, i.e. refugees returning to their homeland from wartime resettlements to Russia (and then Soviet Union) between 1918 and 1922.

I had a grandmother, she was born in 1926, she had this ability to heal. It was a skill that was passed down from my grandfather, who was in the *bieżeństwo*, and my grandmother said that probably her husband learned it there, in the *bieżeństwo*, in Russia, and she learned it from him. He would tell her what to do (Interview 11).

Here is a statement of the Orla priest who was concerned about the number of the whisperers in his village.

The largest number of whisperers appeared during the time of the *bieżeństwo*. In 1915, people were wandering around Russia, (...). People saw poverty after the revolution, and the revolution was, after all, a fight against God and religion. Magic books started to be published, Orthodox churches and monasteries were destroyed, people of the Orthodox Church were murdered, people were left without a priest. Icons were hidden (...). When people came back from the *bieżeństwo*, they bought magic books and that’s how it happened, many healers appeared. When they returned, there was poverty here: villages burnt down. People came back and lived in dug-outs (...). There were no Orthodox churches, there was no way to get to the other churches, and people couldn’t afford buses. So there were various superstitions, people believed in them. Not only then, they still believe to this day (Interview 4).

Imparting the knowledge and skills necessary to step into the role of a whisperer can be done in several ways. Most commonly, it is passed on to a family member, usually the youngest or eldest daughter. If the person has no children or they are not interested in taking over the skills, she or he chooses other family members and, as a last resort, strangers. Above all, the “candidate” for the next whisperer must be willing and ready to take on this role, as the *babka* can only

pass on her skills to someone who agrees to accept them. Healing skills can also result from the specific nature of human beings, most often a certain hybridity, belonging to two worlds, “our” world and the beyond. For example, a baby born to an unmarried woman acquires the properties of “the other world”, has innate mediating abilities. The reason for is the unauthorised violation of the rules of myth and according to these rules, a woman, in order to give birth to a child, first had to be married.<sup>53</sup>

It is said that such talents, qualities can be received from somewhere beyond, it can be received by a child born of an unmarried girl. My grandmother Fienia is said to have been such a child. A woman gets pregnant, but her boyfriend dumps her, she is a maiden with a child. She gives birth to a child and this person is born from an unhappy relationship. Actually there was no relationship, because there was no marriage. Such a person may have those abilities. They are born not from a marriage contracted in an Orthodox church or a church. A maiden gave birth to a child. Maybe for these wrongs such a child is exalted, that is the reward (Interview 3).

The act of transmission may involve handing over prayers or incantations or learning them by heart by the person who is interested in becoming a whisperer. “It can also be a direct transfer of power through touch, the transferee touches the whisperer’s hand and the power is considered to pass from one person to another”.<sup>54</sup> The most common way of transmission in the study area seems to be the oral transmission of this knowledge.

I went to my grandmother. She gave me her prayers and I wrote them down in my notebook. Grandma said, why are you wasting your time coming to me or other *babkas*, you are the oldest and youngest, because you are an only child. Later, when I needed to, I didn’t go to my grandmother, I prayed by myself (Interview 2).

This is oral knowledge. They do not write it down on paper, they learn and pass it on orally. My grandmother didn’t pass it on, but my mother knew the prayers, she knew how to do it, she soaked it up when she was a child (Interview 3).

There is a belief among the surveyed community that a whisperer must pass on their knowledge before their death, otherwise, they will not be able to die.

There were cases when it was difficult for the whisperers to die, some people even had to tear out the ceilings to make it easier for them to die. All this is the work of an evil force. Holiness cannot be given to another person, you have to earn it (Interview 4).

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<sup>53</sup> Sadanowicz 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Sadanowicz 2024, p. 87.

Those who do wrong must pass on to someone before they die and only then do they die. It doesn't matter if it's black magic or white magic, it has to be passed on. It happened to an Orla *babka*, it was the 1960s, she was dying for three days. Some people came in, they removed parts of the ceiling so the soul could leave. Only then the soul came out (Interview 2).

Among eastern Slavs it was believed that the soul of an ordinary person goes out of the window, while the soul of a witch is carried away by evil spirits through a hole in the roof.<sup>55</sup> These beliefs point to the profound isomorphism of man and home. In traditional consciousness, the human body was a microcosm and a reflection of the home.<sup>56</sup> For this reason, in order to make death easier, efforts were made to open holes in the house through which the soul could leave. These holes were usually doors and windows but, as can be seen in the case of witches, could also be openings in the roof.

## Conclusion

There are still many people living in the study area today who are capable of performing simple rituals, for example they may be able to ward off charms, cure certain diseases or protect against magical threats.<sup>57</sup> Whisperers are not the only people who are familiar with the principles of folk medicine and are able to use them. However, they are recognised as people who specialise in healing, their knowledge of the subject is more extensive than that of amateurs and they are believed to possess innate or acquired skills that are inaccessible to everyone.

The study of Podlasie whisperers requires consideration of local contexts and the theoretical background of ethnology. The results of the study contribute to a better understanding of folk medicine and folk religiosity in the conditions of the Podlasie Orthodoxy. Podlasie whisperers operate both within a mythical worldview common to all Slavs and within Christian beliefs, which are inextricably linked in the area. The whisperer uses objects from the Orthodox Church, such as candles, holy water and icons, they use the same religious gestures, such as the sign of the cross and also usually the same prayers. Furthermore, the role of the whisperer in local communities is similar to that of the priest, who also, within Orthodoxy, performs healing procedures and rituals. For both the priest and the whisperer, all activities are performed within a mytho-religious worldview, which divides reality into "our own" and "other" sacred world and

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<sup>55</sup> Fischer 1921, p. 82.

<sup>56</sup> Matus 2017; Moszyński 1967.

<sup>57</sup> Siegień-Matyjewicz 2009, p. 350; Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2001, p. 104.

which enables the priest and the whisperer to mediate between these realities. It is mediation that ritually enables the passage from one phase of the ritual to another,<sup>58</sup> that is, from illness towards health. The similarity of religious rituals in Orthodoxy and the abundant drawing on Orthodox practices by whisperers also points to the unreasonableness of separating religiosity and folk medicine in the case of whisperers.

Both *babkas* and some of their “patients” demonstrate a worldview based on mythical-religious thinking and the whisperers’ activities should be considered within the framework of this worldview. The practical aim of visiting a healer is to be cured of an illness and to remove an ailment, and often “patients” go to them as a “last resort” when conventional medicine fails. The surveyed “patients” share with the whisperers a view of the folk aetiology of illnesses, which can come from the “evil eye”, charms or stress so it becomes necessary to visit a whisperer who can reverse the effects of harmful activities or evil forces.

However, belief in the effectiveness of healing by whisperers among the younger generation varies. On the one hand, young people are less ready to use the services of whisperers than older people, but on the other hand, there is a large group of young people who believe in the effectiveness of whispering rituals. These are particularly those living in rural areas and those with strong family connections to local beliefs, for example people whose grandmother was a whisperer. In addition, exposure to alternative medicine and a growing interest in holistic approaches to health may contribute to maintaining this belief.

Also, particularly religious people, who regularly attend Orthodox churches and actively follow the teachings of the Orthodox Church, are far less inclined to use the services of a whisperer. They have a negative attitude towards them, fearing that a visit to a whisperer may badly affect their mental, but also physical health. This perception seems to be primarily influenced by the clergy, who actively discourage the Orthodox from contacting a whisperer, explaining the actions of whisperers as a sin.

Moreover, a significant group of whisperers’ “patients” are people from outside Podlasie, who search for information about them on the Internet and through conversations with friends. Whisperers are perceived to be the “last resort”, so they are often approached by people who have not been helped by conventional medicine. People from other regions also use the services of whisperers out of curiosity, also seeing them as a way to improve mental health. This shows the flexibility and accessibility of folk medicine, which, like complementary medicine, can expand its activities if a social need arises.

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<sup>58</sup> Gennep van 2006.

In Podlasie, as in most regions of Poland, folk culture has survived only in a relict state, but many of the people surveyed still conform to these norms. They believe that illness and death can be caused by the devil or an evil eye. It is also believed that illness can be cured by a whisperer, who is endowed with sacred power and has skills and knowledge of diseases and their treatment methods.

From time to time, there is renewed media and public interest in whisperers, with films, documentary programmes, books and magazine articles being produced. There is also a developing “healing tourism” in Podlasie as visitors from different parts of Poland come to seek help. The interest in the services of whisperers is not waning, but due to the depopulation of villages in the study area, the ageing population and urbanisation, customs associated with folk culture, including folk healing, may be on the decline.

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## Appendix

Interview numbering:

1. Female, 66 years old, resident of Hajnówka
2. female, 60 years old, resident of Hajnówka
3. female, 41 years old, resident of Narewka
4. male, 75 years old, resident of Orla
5. male, 78 years old, resident of Supraśl
6. male, age 68, resident of Orla

7. female, 28 years old, resident of Hajnówka
8. female, 66 years old, resident of Hajnówka
9. female, 30 years old, resident of Hajnówka
10. female, 36 years old, resident of Bielsk Podlaski
11. woman, 55 years old, resident of Pawły
12. woman, 80 years old, resident of Opaka Duża

