

## Summary

### **The curse. On folk magic of the word**

The book is an ethno-linguistic description of the curse. The author analyzes the structure, semantics and functions of the curse in both situational contexts and within the framework of a broadly understood cultural context constituted by folk mythology, religion, values and social norms.

The first part of the book comprises a critical reflection on the notion of *magic* and an overview of selected linguistic and anthropological approaches to verbal magic. It provides an inspiring point of reference for the ensuing description of magical utterances found in folk culture. The second part of the book contains a pragmatic and semantic analysis of the curse proper, as distinguished from other, related notions.

The description and analysis of the curse are based on data covering both the structure and functions of the investigated rituals and their status as perceived by the research participants. The book includes therefore extended quotations from the research participants' utterances. They serve to present their subjective viewpoints. Bearing in mind that the culture under investigation is different from that of the researcher's, the author takes care not to impose her "external" concepts, analytical categories, stereotypes or value judgments on the analyzed phenomena.

The empirical material, which constitutes the basis for the description, derives from 79 guided interviews carried out during field studies organized in 1980-1998 in Poland and Belarus within the broadly understood Polish – East Slavic cultural borderland (Belarusian and Ukrainian). The printed sources, mainly *Lud (The Folk)* collected and edited in the nineteenth century by Oskar Kolberg, as well as some other, older ethnographic records are treated as supplementary data in the analysis. The book utilizes a synchronic approach, attempting to understand the "internal system" of the verbal folk rituals – using the curse as a case in point.

In the folk culture the common notion of "magic" corresponds to the semantic field of "bewitching" – "enchanting" and "disenchanted". A closer look at the field leads to the conclusion that from the point of view typical of the culture representatives the category defined by external observers as *magic*, does not exist. Most folk terms denoting bewitching, which refer to special techniques (such as for instance *making – unmaking, spoiling – repairing*), are etymologically associated with the semantic fields of "doing/making" and "knowledge/wisdom". It is an external observer, whose knowledge is different from that of a doer (a folk culture representative), that categorizes all those phenomena as "magic". *Magic* is thus a descriptive, reporting category, belonging to the language of observers and not to that of the doers.

The definition of *magic* must not lack the idea of "something different", since a very

significant aspect of the process called *magic* by an observer resides in the fact that "the effect of one's actions is **different** from what might be expected on the basis of the observer's knowledge of the effects of such activities". The definition of *magic* has to take into account both of these perspectives and reflect on their mutual distances and contrasts. The semantic structure of the word *magic* is complex: those, who use this word, confront their knowledge of the world with what they see and while reporting on it they impart their own points of view.

The most relevant for the presented approach to the folk ritual of the curse is an anthropological understanding of magic as a specific attitude to the world (*Weltanschauung*) governed by so called rules of magical (mythological) thinking which is embodied in ritualized behavior. Magical culture is syncretic. Those who practice it do not distinguish between different statuses of particular modes of action – practical, communicative, ideological. The folk culture has retained much of this syncretism. The dualistic image of the cosmic order characteristic of it – *folk mythology* strongly influenced by Christianity and yet not identical with the canonic version of Christianity – constitutes the cultural context of the folk ritual of the curse.

The ritual is understood as *myth in action*. The rituals, symbolically repeating the act of creation, link the "here and now" with the mythical beginning of the world and the world order. It is an archaic mechanism of experiencing the world that serves to "tame the chaos", ordering and integrating of what is experienced.

The folk ritual of the curse is analyzed in the context of magical speaking – understood as speaking which is simultaneous with doing. This magical speaking-doing involves a basic mechanism of metaphorical-metonymical transformations within which symbols are treated as signs and the other way round. The linguistic signs are perceived as opaque (not transparent): the form of a sign (the *significant*) is treated as a physical being which exists in and for itself – it does not only direct attention to what it denotes and means.

The "magical" linguistic sign is a three polar entity: symbolic-iconic-indexal. It simultaneously refers to an object by means of conventional semantic rules, represents it according to the principle of similitude, and maintains with it some real existential affinity. The magical sign evokes the thing by the power of a semiotic convention. Its reference – the designate – becomes its effect simultaneously. Who speaks magic, produces effects – their words are performative.

The magical speaking serves here not so much to describe the world or reflect on it, as to continuously reproduce the ritual of the world's creation, of its affirmation and ordering. It interferes in the world and transforms it. The curse should be perceived in this perspective.

The analysis of the curse in the folk culture starts with a sketch of the notional field of "cursing" determined by the lexems "to curse" and "the curse", their verbal and nominal derivatives and synonyms. The analysis of the collected lexical material and a general classification of the

relations of polysemy and synonymy occurring within the notional field result in the division of the field of "cursing" into six semantic spheres: 1. TO CURSE, 2. TO EXCOMMUNICATE (ANATHEMIZE), 3. TO CAST A SPELL, 4. TO SWEAR AT SOMEBODY (TO ABUSE), 5. TO BESEECH, 6. TO SWEAR.

The sphere distinguished as 1. THE CURSE becomes then subject of further interest and detailed analysis – in the analyzed folk culture it is manifest in the form of the ritual of damnation (cursing). Through this ritual a person casts a curse "by spelling certain words referring to power (sacrum) and calling upon it to make something wrong happen to somebody (something) because they have done something wrong.

A "justified parental curse" might be seen as a model version of the ritual. It takes place in circumstances best labeled as "no-way-out", i. e. when a disobedient child persists in sin, showing no will to reconcile with the given community and its social-cultural values. There is no other solution to the situation but using the curse. The disobedient child, having sided with the Devil against God, must be punished according to the sentence conferred on it by God.

The curse must be spelt and it is spelt indeed. Ultimately it happens even irrespective of the will, intentions or consciousness of the participants in the ritual. At the very moment that the words of the curse are spelt, the process of their coming true begins.

The collected data made it possible to distinguish between four variants of the parental curse. In reference to the intention of the speaker (the "curser") one might speak about an intentional or unintentional curse, while in reference to the grounds justifying the ritual – about a justified or unjust curse. The consequences of an unintentional curse are the same as those of an intentional one, since the intention of the speaker does not play an important role, which is no surprise in the world of the magical speaking-acting. The other distinction is more significant, namely the grounds justifying the ritual. The unjust curse, directed against an innocent man is an abuse. It proves to be an auto-reverse act which immediately turns against "the curser" who then becomes an object of their own curse.

In the ritual of the curse there are visible reflections of the Slavic cosmogonist myth that depicts a struggle between the gods of the heaven and the chthonic gods (gods of the underworld) blocking life-giving waters. According to the version absorbed by Christianity, the Devil defeated by God for the whole year is trying to break the chain which holds him fixed to a pillar in the midst of the underworld. When he has almost freed himself, the first spring thunder forges the chain together again. Performative words of the curse – similarly to the thunder forging the Devil's chain – strike the world endangered by chaos, to bring back balance within it.

As much as the mother or father are in the framework of the curse ritual God's co-workers or tools, the disobedient child is the tool of the Devil who is God's opponent. God and the Devil, good

and evil, the cosmos and the chaos clash and fight against each other making use of their "mediators". In the model version of the ritual these are the mother who has suffered a wrong and her disobedient child. In a more general sense – all people in whose hearts and deeds there clash good and evil.

An analysis of the different types of the curse ultimately leads the author to distinguish four actors of the ritual. They are: the ritual object (or the cursed person), the ritual initiator (or the punishing judge), an executor of the curse (or the one who executes the punishment) and the ritual performer (or the person who curses someone – the speaker of the CURSE).

A disobedient child, a person abusing the curse (in the case of the unjust curse), the wrongdoer of the cursing person – generally a sinner breaking social norms established by the higher order may become the object of the ritual of the curse. The ritual object is then the one who is surrendered to the Devil's temptation. By this act such a person becomes the Devil's ally in the fight against God and his order.

Sacrum personified in the folk culture by the holy Lord is the ritual initiator. The Lord "hears" the words of the curse (from the formal point of view he is the addressee of the message which may sound for example: *May the Lord punish you!*) in the result of which he "decides" whether the cursing act comes into being or not – passes a sentence and finally sends the punishment down on the sinner.

Yet, the initiator of the curse remains in the state of constant struggle for the curse object – the man – with his opponent (the Devil) who, when temporarily wins, becomes the executor of the curse by the God's order. The Devil may take many different guises in this respect. Deserted by the ritual initiator (God) and awaiting the execution of the punishment, the cursed person falls prey to the Devil's power.

The mother mainly, but also the father or other persons who have suffered a wrong from the Devil's allies, are the ritual performers. Being performers of a just (justified) curse, inspired by God, they are "mediators", i.e. God's helpers. A particular case of the ritual performer occurs when the role is performed by an initiated person: a sorcerer (witch) or a healer – the one who is able to make sacrum and its power act according to their will (i.e. the one who can 3. CAST a SPELL).

On the basis of the analysis, the folk ritual of cursing is taken to mean the following:

Firstly, it is understood as a process whose succeeding stages consist of: the cause (or the sin); a consequence of the sin (or the act of spelling the words of the curse which is the culminating point of the ritual); the inevitable effect of the curse (or the curse having become true).

Secondly, considering the ritual of the curse at the social-cultural level, the curse is to be seen as a sanction applied by a group in reference to an individual who breaks the group's norms. It is a way of excluding such an individual from the community. The community "has to" apply this

sanction in defense of its internal cohesion and stability of its cultural order. The community makes use of a performer-mediator who "has to" spell the curse. Yet, it is not the performer who decides about it but the rules of the social order prevailing in the group they belong to.

And thirdly, in the context of the mythical sense, the ritual of the curse evidences a contemporary defeat of God in his struggle with the Devil for Man's soul. The person who has exchanged their role of the God's ally for that of the Devil's is thrown by the Lord into the zone of the Devil's power – in this way the punishment assigned to the sinner by God is executed. The execution of the punishment requires time after which the sinner – having suffered the punishment – can take God's side again, giving him a chance to defeat the Devil in their eternal struggle.

The ritual of the curse is part of an archaic mythical structure. "The myth of the curse" constitutes an integral element of a broad context delimited by the myth of the human condition – the condition determined by the fall and liberation (salvation).

An analysis of the semantic structure of the formula of the curse leads to the formulation of the semantic explication of the expression "to curse". It falls within the tradition of the reduction semantics, referring to the language of description, basing on the units of the natural language.

Therefore, Y "has cursed":

(1) In the situation when X did something wrong,

(2) Y, who knows that such wrongs cannot pass unpunished and knows that in such a situation s/he can appeal to the power of sacrum, invoking it to make something wrong happen to X,

(3) said: "Power, make something wrong happen to X" knowing that her/his words would cause it happen.

Basing on about 200 examples, the analysis also covers the contents of the category "something wrong which happens to X" – i.e. the sphere of the effects of the curse (*perlocution*). The formula of the curse can be filled in with a variety of lexical items, which means that different wishes can be formulated in reference to the fate of the cursed person. The lexical composition of the curse is not strictly imposed then and the speaker can be inventive in this respect. However, they should follow the "rule of the mirror" which says that the punishment the sinner encounters is the mirror reflection of the sin s/he has committed.

Moreover, the "something wrong", as much as it might vary, can be neither unjustified nor irrational – it constitutes an element of the system which functions according to a system of clear rules and the main rule of the system is the principle of justice. Evil that is experienced by the cursed person (taking form of different diseases, death, misfortune etc.), put in the context of the universal sense seems thus justified and has its meaning.

The attempt to understand the phenomenon of the folk curse, presented in this book, ends

with a question concerning possible ways to withhold and reverse the curse – whether and how it is possible to free someone from the curse and its consequences.

In the conclusion, the author poses some further research questions indicating the areas the investigation of which might lead to a better understanding of the folk magic of the word.

An annex to the book contains a study entitled „Providing goods by means of the word, or on the ritual of blessing in folk culture”. It presents a ritual which formally and semantically constitutes a mirror reflection of the curse ritual, being its positive variant. The study comprises an analysis of the blessing ritual performed by members of the analyzed traditional communities on the occasion of the three key passage events: the birth, the wedding and the death. The author comes to the conclusion that in an analogy to the curse, the formula of the blessing – irrespective of with what specific lexical contents it is filled in by the ritual performer – produces specific effects even if unintended by the speaker provided that it has been uttered in a proper ritual context.

Although the blessing formulas are based on different syntactic and lexical schemes, their deep semantic structures are the same. The person who utters the formula of the blessing, invokes the power of sacrum asking it to provide goods for the blessed (the formula contains a sentence that says “Power, make something good happen to X”). The person uttering the words of the blessing – just as the words of the curse – performs the role of a mediator.

We therefore deal with a verbal ritual through which God blesses Man „using” the mouth of a given mediator.

This is a ritual in which three actors play their roles: the ritual object (or the blessed person), the ritual performer (or the person who utters the verbal formula of the blessing), and the actual initiator-executor – sacrum making the blessing come true. The folk culture cannot imagine a living devoid of blessing. Blessing means to invoke and enchant a prosperous future which is compatible with folk visions of an ideal living that picture life lived long in health and riches, filled with good fate and finished with an easy (good) death, leading the soul to the state of happiness in the other world.

The mythical precedence to the two opposing rituals, this of the blessing and that of the curse – which is rooted in the Slavic cosmogonist myth – entails the joint work on the creation of the world by the two antagonists: God (who is the Lord of the blessing) and the Devil (who is the Lord of the curse). Man’s life is lived in between the two poles but ultimately s/he is expected to be found on the side of the blessing.