

Origins of Witchcraft Accusations

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The paper is based on fieldwork done in eastern rural Slovenia at the beginning of the 21st century and discusses the origins and circumstances that were particularly liable to trigger tensions and conflicts that generated accusations of witchcraft.

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Misfortune

In his research on the Azande of southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard showed that witchcraft on a social level involved in interpersonal relationships inside the communities, provides people with an explanation, a 'natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready, and stereotyped means of reacting to such events' (1976: 18). 'Misfortune and witchcraft are much the same to a Zande,' he writes, 'for it is only in situations of misfortune or of anticipation of it that the notion of witchcraft is evoked. In a sense we may say that witchcraft is misfortune [...]' (1976: 45). Indeed, it has never been easy to come to terms with misfortune and people have always tended to seek reasons and logical connections for its explanation. To cope with and comprehend the unpredictable and inexplicable nature of everyday life, it was important to create some sense of order, to seek a rational answer to why and how things happened the way they did – beliefs and practices in the frame of a system of witchcraft offered a logically consistent manner of its explanation, and made sense of people's life (Macfarlane 1970: 241- 43; Davies 1999: 18; Pócs 1999: 9; Briggs 2002: 3, 56; Jenkins 2007: 205).

Even in the period of European witch-hunting, from approximately the mid-15th century to about the mid-18th century, when traditional notions about witchcraft in prosecutions became blurred with demonological ideas about witches' pact with a devil, conspiracy and the witches' Sabbath, whenever the persecution was initiated from below, i.e. from the members of the same community as the alleged witch, the initial reason for bringing charges against a person suspected of witchcraft was to punish her or him for *maleficium*, which resulted in misfortune. In general, bewitchment is the simplest and the most basic form of witchcraft (Larner 1984: 80-3), and it was the fear of bewitchment that eventually resulted in accusations – the initial reason for bringing charges against someone was the wish of their fellow members of the community to punish them for their *maleficia* (Clark 2001: 4; Levack 2006: 136). The fear of bewitchment has not ceased after the decline of a witch-hunt in Europe either. While some types of misfortunes

were no longer interpreted in terms of witchcraft, and many people stopped interpreting misfortunes in terms of it, witchcraft, according to evidence from newspapers, courts' archives and ethnological fieldwork research, has still continued to provide a meaningful explanation for many types of misfortune to many people, even at the end of the 18th, in the 19th and the 20th centuries. As Gijswijt-Hofstra writes, 'Thinking and acting in terms of witchcraft is a useful and culturally accepted strategy for the people involved to employ to combat certain problems. In particular, witchcraft forms part of the whole repertoire that is available to them in the event of misfortune' (1999: 98).

Witches

The basic hypothesis of witchcraft is that the origin of misfortune is social. Once misfortunes occurred, especially when they started to accumulate and continue, the person that allegedly caused them had to be identified. This was necessary in order to annihilate their evil powers once and for all, break off their harmful power and thus prevent further misfortunes. In the discourse of witchcraft, this person is understood to be the witch.

Ronald Hutton defines the characteristics of the witch figure throughout the world: a witch is somebody who uses apparently supernatural means to cause misfortune or injury to others; this person does harm to neighbours or kin, rather than strangers, and represents a threat to the community, and operates not for straightforward material gain but from envy or malice, and thus is either inherently evil or in the grip of inherent evil¹ (Hutton 2006: 211-12).

On a social level, witchcraft is directed against others and thus understood as a deviation from the social norms of the community, the anti-social crime *par excellence*, and the 'quintessence of immorality'. Witches were considered destructive and malicious figures and have always represented the opposite of positive values that the community held to be its own. The witch was an incarnation of the Other, the agent of evil, of the 'enemy within' (de Blécourt 1999: 151; Briggs 2002: 1- 2; Behringer 2007: 2). Narratives about witches had a function of transmitting and reinforcing social norms (Marwick 1969: 238). The children who were warned against witches from the early age learned how not to behave if they did not want to end up being treated the same as the accused witches (cf. Mair 1969: 187).

Accusations of bewitchment appear to be an almost universal phenomenon. Briggs argues that 'one must start from the assumption that any given society will possess such beliefs'.² The only exceptions are the societies with a nomadic lifestyle, whose response to social conflict was to move or split into new groupings (however, as soon as they adopted a mode of sedentary existence, accusations of witchcraft also started there, because their traditional methods of diffusing conflicts were no longer available) and the industrialised societies of the modern Western world, in which social changes related to the decline of neighbourhood and the associated rise of national and bureaucratic power structures became dominating forces and in which people resolve social conflicts similarly to nomads: they move or find new groups with which to associate (Briggs 2002: 1-2). People

¹ In addition, he lists two characteristics that are not important at this point: the appearance of such a figure is not an isolated or unique event, the witch works in a tradition, by inheritance, training, or initiation; and witch can be opposed by counter-magic, by forcing her or him to rescind a spell, or by his or her elimination.

² Behringer actually indeed finds belief in witchcraft universal (2007: 244).

living in traditional rural communities did not have such a possibility and, in the case of a conflict, could not avoid their neighbours or simply move away. As witchcraft research in the early-modern period as well as in the present day shows, accusations of witchcraft tend to arise especially in small-scale, close-knit, face-to-face agricultural communities, where people were bound to the land and where everyone knew everyone (Macfarlane 1970: 242; Pócs 1999: 11; Levack 2006: 137). Other members of the community thus represented a constant threat and one could never be quite sure that they were not the witches responsible for their misfortunes.

Neighbours

People would usually seek culprits responsible for their misfortune first and foremost in their immediate environment. Behringer claims that a basic set of beliefs about anti-social people who try to inflict harm by mystical means, mostly on their relatives or neighbours, is common to the ancient world, medieval and early modern Europe and present-day Africa, south-east Asia, Australia and Americas (2007: 12-13). Especially close neighbours with whom people were in everyday contacts represented the most threatening source of harm and the most obvious targets of witchcraft accusations almost everywhere. As Evans-Pritchard writes for the Azande, its members maintain that one can be sure to have both secret and open enemies among neighbours (1980: 45). Macfarlane argued that accusations of witchcraft in Essex trials from 1560-1599 were mostly made between people who not only came from the same village, but even from the same part of the village and knew each other intimately and that the accusations were limited to the area of intense relationships between individuals (1970: 168). In the 19th century, Finnish traditional rural communities, those who posed the greatest threat of magical harm were also neighbours (Stark 2004: 78). Also in the 19th century, in the Dutch province of Drenthe, suspicions of witchcraft mainly fell on (female) neighbours (Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999: 110). Latent and overt tensions among neighbours were also recognised as the most important factor in accusations in most ethnological fieldwork research of witchcraft in the 20th century: what people feared most, was 'the enemy near the door'; neighbours, in other words (de Pina-Cabral 1986: 177).

In 2000-2001 and 2013-2014, together with my students, I conducted fieldwork in the rural area of eastern Slovenia,³ where witchcraft beliefs were still very much a social reality.⁴ The audio-recorded comment of an informant obtained during the fieldwork research does not differ significantly from that we could have probably heard anywhere in Europe:

³ The region is mostly remote and difficult to reach, with poor traffic connections. The farms are small, the land divided into small parcels, and people are mainly involved in subsistence agriculture, particularly with fruit and wine growing, and perhaps keeping a cow or two, a few pigs and some hens. The inhabitants of the area are mostly Roman Catholic.

⁴ The research in the period of 2000-2001 was conducted together with the students from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Ljubljana. We conducted more than 150 interviews with local inhabitants, mostly with older people; they are stored in the department archives. In 2013 and 2014, I repeated the fieldwork by myself and conducted several additional interviews. 'F' in the transcriptions indicates a folklorist and 'I' the informant. Due to the nature of the topic, which many of our interlocutors still find delicate, the exact location of the region is not given, and all of the names that appear in the paper have been changed.

When misfortune happened, people would say: You know, he was bewitched or something like that. Perhaps they would suspect someone, the person that caused harm. (27)

In this paper, I shall discuss some of the aspects of witchcraft beliefs and practices in the region that directly reflected, tackled or regulated social relationships among members of the community. In the region where fieldwork was done, neighbours were the first to be considered when people who suffered misfortunes started to think about them in terms of witchcraft and looking for the perpetrator responsible for them – the witch. Such was a typical response we received times and times again during our fieldwork:

*F: But did he know who buried /a bewitching object to his territory/?
I: They suspected, they suspected.
F: Whom did they suspect?
I: Neighbours. (122)*

Witchcraft accusations can thus also be understood as an incidence of social tension in the society (cf. Marwick 1969: 239-40). People indeed often emphasised problematic relationships among neighbours in the village communities in our region and talked about them with bitterness: they would often lament how one has to be very cautious what to say to other members of the community as they gossip and talk badly about each other; that there is no confidence among neighbours; that others envy everything one has, no matter how poor one is; that they would harm you if you were not good to them, committing arson and alike. ‘You think one is your best friend but he turns out to be your worst enemy’, ‘You have to look behind you all the time’ were just some of the typical comments on the relationships among neighbours in the communities we researched.

Pre-existing conflicts

Historical and anthropological research usually assumes the existence of some tensions between neighbours before the accusation of witchcraft occurs and understands its main function as providing people with the means of expressing and channelling the tensions and providing outlets for repressed hostility, frustration and anxiety (cf. Marwick 1969: 238; Macfarlane 1970: 246-47; Evans-Pritchard 1976: 45-6). Macfarlane showed that in the Essex witchcraft trials necessary for the formation of witchcraft accusations was ‘[...] firstly, the presence of some tension or anxiety or unexplained phenomenon; secondly, the directing of this energy into certain channels’⁵ (1970: 230). Witchcraft accusations can thus be also understood as an indication of tense personal relationships (Marwick 1969: 240; Schöck 1978: 128; Mitchell 2004: 14). When misfortune occurred, the witch was first and foremost sought among those neighbours with whom victims had already been in problematic relationships before the misfortune occurred. This was often explicitly confirmed in the narratives we recorded in our region:

⁵ Macfarlane further explains these social strains by specific social and economic changes in the society at that period (for a critique see Lerner 1984: 50-2).

They had their..., how would I say ... their enemies, you know, and when a misfortune befell them, it was them they accused. (1)

While pre-existing strained relationships among neighbours that escalated into witchcraft accusations after misfortune had happened or when it had been anticipated proved to be a frequent pattern, several anthropological studies of contemporary traditional rural witchcraft showed that they were not always necessary for witchcraft accusations to occur. In the region of Drenthe, in the Netherlands, and most other Dutch provinces in the period between the 17th and 19th centuries, there were no signs of conflicts preceding witchcraft accusations. Moreover, available information even indicates a relatively good relationship between the accuser and the accused before the bewitchment (Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999: 110). In the Bocage, France, where the original conflict, according to Favret-Saada, originated in family tensions, the witch was never sought among family members but always among neighbours. For a witch to be chosen from among the neighbours, it was, on the contrary, necessary that she was *not* in an open conflict with the bewitched, even though they had to be in some relationship with the victim (1989: 54). A recent witchcraft case observed in a Hungarian village in Romania likewise proved that '[...] existing social animosity is not an inevitable component for witchcraft to work' (Hesz 2007: 20).

Several narratives from our region also show that tense relationships with the neighbours was not a necessary precondition for witchcraft accusations to take place. Moreover, these could even be exemplary.

F: Did you know who put you those eggs?

I: Yes, we knew that all right: it was the neighbour. But we had good relationships, just like with you. We had no dispute or anything. She just had this superstition.

I: And I suspected that woman. And we have had terribly good relationship.

F: You had a good relationship?

I: We did.

F: Where does that woman live?

I: She is not far [smile]. Yes, yes... she is good, and kind, and she would give you everything, but I don't know, she's got this mistake. (9)

From the manner of communication between the two women in the following interview, it becomes clear that the relationship between the accuser and her neighbour were not tense, and yet, the widespread conviction that it is the neighbours who bewitch obviously influenced the 'victim' to immediately connect the toad, in our region typically understood as an incarnation of a witch who comes to do harm, with her neighbour. The assumption of her bewitchment had been made, even though the misfortune had not (yet) occurred.

If a toad approaches the house, [they say] that somebody bewitched that. Well, there where I had the inn, there was a neighbour who was always a bit... well, she believed in witches and ... she saw a frog in the vicinity of the house and she came to ask me: Did you do this to me? I said: What? If I did what? [She said:] The frog. So I said: But what is this? A toad, no? [She said:] Yes, and it is

getting close to me [imitating her]. I said: Yes, and? [Imitating her:] Are you not afraid? I said: No, why?.... [She said:] Somebody did this to me. (14)

Nevertheless, regardless of whether pre-existing conflicts between the victim and the accuser directly influenced the search for the identity of the witch, the role of the community and the relationships among its members cannot be overlooked when talking about witchcraft. Although tensions with the supernatural also played an important part in personal experiences with witchcraft in our region (cf. Mencej 2007, 2008), the social context nevertheless proved crucial for the understanding of the role that witchcraft played in the everyday life of the inhabitants. In this paper, I shall discuss one aspect of witchcraft accusations in particular: my aim is to present the usual circumstances that indeed tended to trigger anxiety and generated conflicts, which often ended up in the assumption or accusation of witchcraft.

Origins of witchcraft accusations

Even though not necessary present, pre-existing tensions among neighbours often did play their part in witchcraft accusations. Certain origins and types of conflicts within a network of personal interrelationships seemed particularly liable to trigger witchcraft accusations. In England, disputes over tenancies, property disputes related to the act of trespass, conflicts within a family, childbirth and lying-in periods were among the most typical origins or circumstances that generated witchcraft related disputes (Davies 1999a: 201-207). Among Hungarians in the old county of Csík in Romania, the most common types of conflicts that led to witchcraft suspicions and accusations were skirmishes about land boundaries, family conflicts, litigation, perjury in inheritance debates, the breaking-off of an engagement, jilted lovers, breach of promise, the lover's or the spouse's jealousy, bad marriages, unfaithful husbands, divorces, abortion, murder (of a family member was not criminally prosecuted, perhaps due to the lack of evidence); theft (of money, corn, animals, clothes, bedclothes, food, jewels); denunciations to the authorities (e.g. about the distillation of brandy or political denunciation), conflicts with communal leaders, hostility, hatred, brawling and fights for indefinable reasons within the family or among neighbours (Pócs 2004: 176). In a nearby region, the most frequent disputes were seen regarding land ownership or inheritance, theft, fraud, marital problems, unrequited love, or attacks against one's reputation (Hesz 2007: 21). From the interviews with people that were involved in witchcraft disputes, pre-existing tensions, however, are often difficult to determine. This is to be expected, as the admission of the pre-existing conflicts with neighbours later accused of witchcraft could potentially lead to questioning the narrators' own role in the process of accusation and cast a doubt on the veracity of their own version of the story. Therefore, this had to be omitted.

Nevertheless, occasionally it remained possible to disclose a glimpse of tensions that generated the accusation of witchcraft and helped shaping the identity of the culprit. Some recurrent origins of tensions kept cropping up as typical circumstances that resulted in latent tensions or overt disruptions of relationships which ultimately led to witchcraft accusations: these are above all disputes over the land property, trespass to the neighbour's territory, sales /purchases and barter, a rejection of marriage, and tensions among (extended) family members.

Family tensions

Although conflicts within a family were only very rarely mentioned in relation to witchcraft accusations, occasionally witchcraft narratives do reflect these tensions as the origin of accusations. When several nuclear families lived together in the same household (which was usually the case in our region) at least occasional, but also constant and deep tensions among them seem almost inevitable. A household in our region was, as a rule, composed of a three-generational extended family: grandparents, (usually the eldest) son with his wife, and their children. The son's marriage and the creation of his own family did not mean, however, that the son also immediately took over the farmstead. His parents usually handed it him over to him only upon their death or when physically debilitated, which is clearly reflected in a widespread saying in the region: *I give you a key, You give me a light*, referring to the usual practice that the *pater familiae* only handed the household over to his son upon his death (whereby, according to the custom, a candle is lit for the deceased) (Sok 2003: 149-53).

Only occasionally did the young couple manage to assure, with their marriage, that the farmstead was handed over to them after a certain amount of time, but not before several years had elapsed. The handing over of the farmstead immediately after the wedding was indeed more an exception than a rule. Even when the parents finally handed over the property to the son, they assured themselves of legally agreed right to means of subsistence: a room (or, among poor families, a corner of a room), a joint use of a kitchen, food from a common dish,⁶ as well as part of the food and drink produced on the farm, a certain quantity of firewood, healthcare, heating, and similar; sometimes they also demanded a field or livestock for themselves. The young couple was bound to deliver what was requested to the old couple, which was especially difficult to assure when harvest was not good or when they were facing financial problems; occasionally they even had to buy food they were obliged to deliver to parents according to the contract (Sok 2003: 150-7). Cohabitation of the two generations under the same roof thus often triggered tensions not only due to potential personal differences, but also due to practical, economic reasons.

Nevertheless, regarding to the necessity of cohabitation, such tensions rarely escalated in overt hostile relationships and direct accusations of witchcraft. An additional factor that inhibited and prevented open conflicts of the two generations was education: from the very early age children were brought up in obedience, submissiveness and obligingness to their parents (Sok 2003: 83). These were the personality traits that were not only cherished, but also absolutely expected from the younger generation, and also actively supported by the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, the young couple was, until they were given the farmstead, absolutely economically dependent on the (son's) parents, who decided about every purchase, even on buying clothes for family members. At the same time, the old couple must have been aware that they too – if not before, then after the handing over of the farmstead, or in case of illness before that – were economically and socially depend on the younger couple so the avoidance of overt conflicts was also to their benefit.

Such mutual dependency, to a certain extent, had probably at least aided in preventing overt engagements and conflicts among members of the same extended family, because in the event of overt animosity, reaching its peak in witchcraft accusations, the

⁶ To eat from a common bowl used to be a usual way of eating in the countryside in the past.

cohabitation would be ultimately destroyed and would certainly have wide-ranging consequences; therefore, this had to be avoided at all costs.

Perhaps the reason for family members being so seldom identified as witches is in the redirection of the conflicts and subsequent witchcraft accusation from the family to the network of neighbours. As Jeanne Favret-Sadaa showed, among the Bocage, while the true tensions originated in family history, members of nuclear as well as enlarged family of the bewitched are always excluded from the list of suspects, and accusations of witchcraft redirected to neighbours (1989: 54). As Favret-Saada argues, 'The utterance relative to witchcraft ("here, neighbors bewitch neighbors") is not accompanied by any comment on the particularly problematic aspects of neighborhood relationship. Out of the context of witchcraft, statements relative to social dysfunctioning do not speak of this relationship as problematic. Indeed, they concentrate exclusively on "family hatreds" [...]' (1989: 54-5). Even though the reasons for such diversion in our region might be different from those recognised by Favret-Saada, family members also seem to be essentially omitted from witchcraft accusations in our region.

Choosing one's marital partner

A situation that seems to have particularly often triggered fear of witchcraft was related to the choosing of a future spouse. Until the second part of the 20th century, arrangements for marriages were in the hands of parents, in this region. These chose the future partners of their children, above all, with regard to the economic status of their family, the adequate area of land in their possession, the possibility of unification of their land properties and the reputation of the family; in case of the daughter-in-law, the amount of her dowry, her diligence and moral purity also mattered. A revolt against arranged marriages only began after World War II., mostly from the end of the 1960s onward, when there were new possibilities for economic independence, and young people had an opportunity to find employment elsewhere; until the 1970s, the sons of the families that owned a land, however, were still obliged to stay at the farmstead (Sok 2003: 122-8). This means that most of the elderly people we were talking to were actually in arranged marriages. The following narrative recorded by an ethnologist working in the region presents such marriage trading very clearly.

Oh, oh, my father was so strict. I ought to have taken one Francek, who was very wealthy, but ugly, God help him. He had oxen in breeding at our cowshed and the fair was approaching. An evening before the fair was going to take place, he came to our house and said to my father: You, Lojz, you know what, and he punched the table with a fist, let's make a deal. I would leave you the oxen if you gave me the young heifer. [My father said:] How could I give you the heifer – you have seen in the cowshed that I did not have one? There are only oxen and a cow. So he said: You can give me the one that is sitting right there. I left immediately, I went to the kitchen, and my mother came after me: You shall go, right? I said: Mother, do you plan to exchange me for the ox, do you plan to trade me? [She said:] We will have no livestock otherwise! I cried so much and so loudly that I didn't want him! Then I wrote to my aunt to M. and I packed my things and left home. (Sok 2003: 128)

Despite prevalent patriarchal relations in the region, it was mothers who were crucial in making a decision about the future bride. Due to their own experience of cohabitation with their own mothers-in-law, they were very much aware of the importance of the good relationship with the bride so they sometimes simply could not make themselves accept any new member to the family.

There were many boys who never got married because of their mothers. Their mothers simply wouldn't like any woman enough [to let her become part of the family] so they were saying: That one is not good enough for our house, or: That one is not for us, or: What will that one do in our house? And their sons listened to them, they were very much attached to their mothers, and they would leave their girlfriends and could not decide to choose another bride ever again. (Sok 2003: 125)

However, unlike case of a man from England who, not having been allowed to marry the girl he wanted to, fell in depression and was consequently believed to have been bewitched (Davies 1999: 134-35), and unlike several cases recorded in the era of witch hunts, when children and their spouses occasionally used witchcraft accusations against their mothers(-in-law) who disapproved of their marriage (Levack 2006: 157), several narratives show that in our region forbidden marriages mostly triggered fear in mothers who prevented them of falling victim of a bewitchment by the rejected woman. This fear, when consciously manipulated, might have also presented a strong weapon in the hands of young couples who wished to marry but were facing their parents' interdiction due to economic or other reasons.

She was married for the second time, the old lady who is dead now. They called her Laura. And she had the second husband. And she, that widow, that Laura, was angry at my mother because she didn't allow my brother to marry her; you know – well, he left for France then, he also died there. She was angry at her. So she did⁷ so that she got someone from Z., he beat her, my poor mother. Yes, and he broke her arm with dung-fork, with dung-fork. He hit my mother's arm so hard that she broke her finger. They had problems all the time. (66)

If the son had listened to his mother and married the person she chose for him, and thus rejected the one he might had been in love with or was in a relationship with, the mother-in-law typically feared the revenge of the person she rejected. If, however, he married the person he preferred, acting against his mother's will, this likewise produce tensions. The following narrative suggests that it was the son or the woman he married who trembled at the possibility of the revenge of his mother in.

I: [...] we were at my grandmother's, making sausages, and my cousin went home and he was already almost at home [...] when he turned back here⁸...and sud-

⁷ 'To do (something)' is a typical expression referring to the performance of magical action in the frame of the witchcraft discourse.

⁸ This alludes to the experience of 'losing one's way' that happened in a forest at night and was typically ascribed to night witches. They often showed in a shape of a light – as is evident from the continuation.

denly we heard something like dogs' barking ... and he was being thrown up and down and such things were made with him...! And they said that it was a witch that was making this with him [...] and we saw in the hill that it was a light up there... there was a hill and a light was following him all up to the forest ... this must have been done by someone ... But that, my brother's wife, she said that this was his mother...that she had said long ago that she would do something to him because she did not marry her sister, that this was certainly her, that she knew⁹ to do this. He was being led...it was like everything was done by itself, and he never before and never afterwards...it was like he had an epileptic seizure.

F: Did many people witness this?

I: Indeed, all the neighbours were there.

Several narratives express tensions triggered by fear of a revenge by the rejected woman that was either unhappily in love with a man, or of her parents who wanted him to marry her but he did not, or else of a woman that he left after having been in relationship with her and married somebody else. However, they do not so much transmit man's fear of being a target of the refused woman's bewitchment and the consequences they suffered, as they do the fear of the women they married, which probably also express some competitiveness among women as regards marriages (cf. Eilola 2006: 42). When misfortune occurred, the rejected girl was the first association when trying to find out the identity of the perpetrator.

My grandmother told me about a woman who married someone who was very much loved by another woman. But he didn't like that woman, he married another one. And that [the rejected] woman said to the bride: I shall do something so that you won't be able to walk! And when there was a wedding, they approached a bridge and when the bride stepped on that bridge, her leg suddenly swelled up so that she was not able to move any more. And they said that that woman, who threatened her, could have indeed done this. What happened afterwards, I don't know. (96)

Well, here, we have a relative, well, she is still lives, born in the same year as I am; she married a guy from P. And one neighbour liked that guy very much, but the guy didn't care about her. He preferred another and married her. And the other one allegedly threatened him, she said: You shall never be happy. Then he spent four years in that house, the house is still there when a terrible storm happened [...] There was a storm and they had a brand new corn-rack and that wife of him, and two kids, boys, the grandmother, and the husband of that relative of ours was also there. And it started to thunder, and there was a terrible wind, and my husband said to that woman: let's run under the corn-rack. But he [her husband] didn't allow others to go under the corn-rack – so they all ran to the house, while he himself ran under the corn-rack. And suddenly the woman heard - they had a kitchen from which there was a view up there – she heard that there was a terrible noise, as all the shelves in a kitchen fell down. So she looked

⁹ 'To know' is a typical expression referring to the knowledge of witchcraft.

through the window and saw that the whole corn-rack fell on him, the whole corn-rack broke down on him. He was about 35 years old at the time, when he died. She ran to him and crept into the ruins, he was still communicating, she was screaming and ran to the school in Š. and plenty of people came sawing and they were sawing and sawing but it pressed him more and more and he was becoming more and more blue and when they pulled him out he had already died. (96)

If the threats described in these narratives were not only ascribed, but indeed uttered, one might perhaps assume that threats were the last means in the hands of a woman to prevent the marriage of her beloved with another woman. This was a risky strategy – if she was not successful, the moment a misfortune befell the man they cursed, she was identified as a witch, and her reputation was ruined.

And this too, when we already speak of witchcraft, my sister-in-law, her husband, he had – well he didn't date that woman, but they [their parents] wanted him to marry her, she had a child, but he didn't like her, he took my husband's sister. [...] And they married. And she went to the meadow in a summer and found a thread there, a thick thread, laid over the meadow from their house [the house of the father of the woman her husband did not want to marry] until here, about 300 metres long. And she started to wind up the thread. This woman got such pain in her arms that she carried them like this [she shows how she could not extend them at all]. She went to see all possible doctors and nothing helped, nothing at all. And her husband said: nothing else but this had caused this! And they felt exactly who caused that. The father of that woman who he was supposed to marry. [...] He said: I know I should have married that one, but... (53)

Although the man referred to in the narrative denied having had any relationship with the rejected woman, the illegitimate child and the pressure of her family on him to marry their daughter most probably indicate that the child was his and that this was the reason why her family insisted on marriage. His immediate and firm conviction that it was her father who caused harm to his wife seems to reflect his latent bad conscience for not having done what was considered to be his duty, i.e. to marry the woman and recognise the child as his, and fears of retribution by the rejected woman and her family.

Tensions within the family

The moving in of a new member to a household was an occasion that could upset relationships within the extended family. The new member was sometimes considered with mistrust and suspicion at the beginning, as is reflected in the following narrative, which happened only recently.

For example, a boy from the village, almost the same age as my son, got married down there [...] He married down to K. and that girl [...], her grandmother feared what kind of a bridegroom she would bring to the house. And she was making him problems as much as she could and she – that I, too, heard for the first time – she placed beans around their bed, you know. Well, that woman

finally realised that they understand each other and that she won't be able to separate them with any magic since they loved each other [...] so she went to see a woman [...] that you call a witch [...] So that you won't think that witches only lived earlier, right? This is no witchcraft. This is simply something which someone believes into. And if you believe, it works. Just like medicines. My father also said that when something hurt him, he took some alcohol and anointed the spot that hurt him, because he believed that it helped. And that woman also told me that she kept finding the beans and she took it and threw to the manure each time, and I don't know how many times she had to do that. And that is the truth. She was trying that boy, she wanted to check him out, since he came from another village and she didn't know him and didn't know whether he was alright or not. The beans were supposed to bring misfortune. This was like some sort of witchcraft. But it is no witchcraft! (91)

The relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law were often especially tense, even if they did not live in the common household, as numerous proverbs about the evilness of mothers-in-law testify.

Well, so [when] the child didn't want to sleep while it had slept before and when there was a mother-in-law, a suspicious person that came to the house, they would immediately say: She bewitched it! (111)

Having in mind that arranged marriages, mostly based on the economic basis, were prevalent at least up until the 1960s, it is no wonder that disagreements between marital partners were not rare. They could not be resolved by divorce as this was not a practical possibility in the rural environment, and counselling, as nowadays available to partners in crisis, was not known. Channelling interpersonal tensions into an accusation of another person, recognised as a witch, for causing conflicts between them, was one possible way of resolving the pair's conflicting relationship: the joint accusation bound them together against a threat from an enemy from the outside that was trying to separate them (cf. Argyrou 1993: 264) and thus helped resolving their problems.

They fought with her husband at home, she threw him from a bed, and she said: The moment I threw him out of bed, a witch in a shape of a toad jumped out from the bed [...] She said: You won't [succeed]! And I stabbed her, she said to it: I destroyed her, I trampled her! She said: Kaja K. lost her leg at just the same time!, you know [laugh] And they quarrelled with her about that ever since.

Sales, purchases and barter

Transactions such as a purchase or barter, especially of domestic animals, seem to be an especially vulnerable field of human interaction. Domestic animals, as such were the most recurrent target of bewitchment; they were expensive and played a crucial role in the survival of a family, so their health or successful breeding were of crucial importance. The purchase of new livestock was thus always a risky transaction; if anything went wrong, the previous owners were likely to be accused of witchcraft. Although the narrative below

refers to the barter between relatives, the vulnerability of this type of transaction was by no means limited to relatives.

I had an old aunt who spun very beautifully. You know what this is? [...] So, surely, during the winter she was spinning for us and also for others. And she brought yarn to her aunt. The aunt said: What could I give you? – No need to give anything. – Okay, I shall give you a pig, the aunt said. A pig of about 15, 20 kilos. I can't say, I was not yet born then. And then that pig, they fed it with everything, and it wouldn't grow, it was always the same. And they left it out, to the yard and so. And one day the aunt of my grandaunt came by on the road. And she stops and says: What kind of a housewife is that, what kind of a pig she has? But that grandaunt of mine was outside and said: Well, auntie, as you wished it, so it is. The woman then said: "For shame! Fie!" at the pig and spat three times around herself and from then on the pig started growing and growing and at the end we had plenty sausages. I heard this thousand times at home from my aunt. Okay, that's one case. From my home. (92)

Disputes over land

The behaviour that most often triggered suspicions of witchcraft, however, was a dispute related to the transgression of the boundaries of another person's territory. Several narrators clearly connected their disputes about land with subsequent witchcraft accusation. In the narrative below, a woman who was in conflict with her neighbours regarding a piece of land related her experience of being accused of witchcraft. When neighbours saw a toad on the piece of land that was an object of dispute regarding the ownership, they obviously recognised the narrator with whom they were in a conflict about this particular piece of land as the toad, i.e. the witch. In the witchcraft discourse, the appearance of a toad meant that it came there to bewitch, and the usual procedure was to burn them or stab them with a knife. This is one of the rare narratives in which the accused witch related her own experience of being accused, even if not directly admitting it.

I: Some believed that the toads ... you know toads? Those big green frogs. [They said] that this was a witch, you know.

F: That the witch turned to a toad?

I: Yes, yes, yes. I had some disputes over a land property with that neighbour, here, behind this forest, by the plum tree. In the end, he got that few metres of land. So, we came once, our [other] neighbour came first and she wanted to take the stick that was stuck to the tree out when she noticed that it was a toad stuck to it. Twice stuck. Alas, she just ran away! Then my grandson, no, my granddaughter's husband, and me went there to mow the grass up there. So he says: What is this, what is here? And there was a toad stuck to the pole twice and that pole stuck to the plum tree, it was already dried up. And I don't know how people can...

I: Why did they stick it, that toad?

F: I don't know. They probably thought that that toad, that person, is going to die. (79)

I: We have such a neighbour here. Yes.

F: Is she still alive?

I: Yes, she is. Her husband knew, and his mother knew.

F: Really?

I: Yes, he knew. And, you know, he bewitched my husband. This is a devil's power, not the God's one, it is the devil's power. He was evil and he learned. Once he came down here and he wanted to talk about this and that [...] he stood up and sat again [...] My husband said he became sick. And I didn't immediately understand why he got sick. Later on he was diagnosed with sclerosis and he knew nothing any more [...] And then seven years later. He wasn't able to pee or move his bowels; his stomach was as hard as a stone. This is terminal. [...] He got a fever and he was sent to a psychiatric hospital. There they found out that they couldn't help him and they sent him home. They could not find out where his problems came from. But I was very sad, I am deeply religious, deeply religious, you know. And I went there to the psychiatric hospital [...] And there was a Way of the Cross there and by the first station I prayed rosary to Mary, please, Mary, let my husband get better. And he did. He got better [...]. But he can do it [be bewitched] for seven years...

F: But why would he do that?

I: He would do it so that his illness would last for seven years and he would die afterwards.

F: But why would he bewitch him at all? Were they on bad terms with each other?

I: My husband wasn't. But he was so evil. You saw – that land, behind the spring, that's theirs. They have trees growing up there. The branches [of our trees] grew and stuck with the branches of their trees. When he drove home the ladder got stuck to the branches, and the fire truck could not come close, so he was reprimanded by the Commission, and he got angry. And he stopped talking, he didn't want to talk. Until [after seven years] when my husband started feeling better.

F: After seven years?

I: After seven years. My husband told me that he came down here, I was not there, I was working in a vineyard, but he was ill and couldn't walk properly and he went to lie down. In the afternoon. And he [that neighbour] was trying to persuade him to talk a bit longer, to chat, but behind his heel he had a death-scarf bound – the one that cadavers are bound with. And he let him know that it [the illness] will last for seven years. (29)

Trespassing on a neighbour's property

The conflict in the previous narrative could also be understood in terms of a spatial relationship. Space, as de Blécourt argues, is 'never a neutral entity or an ideological vacuum. In a sense, it does not exist outside the way it is perceived. It is culturally produced and historically constructed, continuously provided with meanings [...]' (2013: 363). The witchcraft discourse exemplified these rules by distinguishing between permitted and harmful closeness (de Blécourt 2013: 377). Every trespassing of a boundary and disputes about the boundaries of the property's boundaries could trigger anxiety that could potentially lead to accusations of witchcraft (cf. Purkiss 1996: 91-178; Davies 1999a: 207-12; de Blécourt

2004: 98-100; 2013; Eilola 2006: 39-40, 46; cf. also Sebald 1984: 139). Violating the rules of proximity¹⁰ in our region usually referred to a physical trespassing of a neighbour or his or her domestic animals.¹¹ As Andre Julliard's research shows, the zones of proximity vary according to the structure of community and environment in which people live. Thus, Julliard recognised that in a flat landscape with hedged fields and dispersed settlement pattern of enclosed farmsteads that fostered individualistic social behaviour the farm buildings and their immediate surroundings were considered private. In contrast, in an area of nucleated settlements surrounded by parcels of open fields, which was characterised by a fair degree of communal agricultural activity, one was even allowed to even enter a stranger's house without knocking, the only private space being the first floor with bedrooms (after Davies 1999a: 209). In our area, with mostly scattered houses and fields surrounding the farm buildings in the hills, and some serried hamlets in the valleys, one was allowed to come to the farmstead, but not to enter the house without making oneself known and being invited in.

When the arrival of the newcomer to one's property was not anticipated or announced by directly approaching and greeting the owner, especially when they tried to hide their presence, by coming in the dark or even hiding, their trespassing of the boundaries was received very suspiciously. Their whereabouts were vigilantly observed and, after their departure, the place where they were staying immediately checked out for any buried object, because burying objects on the neighbour's property was the most common magic practice in our region performed in order to do harm. While pre-existing antagonisms probably played their part in such cases (cf. Davies 1999a: 203), it was not only the trespass of those with who people were in a tense relationship was considered suspicious, but anybody's trespass was carefully observed.

I was out accidentally, up there, when I saw four girls walking around, as if they were picking dandelions. One had a bag, knit of vine leaves, and those other three girls disappeared [...] When they went home, I went there to look, to see what was there [...](50)

One evening, my husband was washing himself, and I was ... it was hot, and I took some sour milk and went outside to eat. And suddenly, I noticed two people passing by. A father and his daughter. My husband called me – they just passed and I was sitting behind the house – to went inside and wash his back, but I was quite, I waited, and then I came inside and said: They went somewhere but soon came back. The next evening I was awake and waited to see if they come again. There came the daughter only. When she was passing by, the dog was afraid. She was back in no time. And a motorbike just passed by and she jumped to the bush in order not to be seen. And that woman I suspected. (9)

¹⁰ For more on proximity, see Hall 1963, 1968. Hall defines the proxemics as 'the study of man's perception and use of space' which primarily deals with 'out-of-awareness distance-setting' (Hall 1968: 83-84). Behaviour in relation to the (un)allowed interpersonal distance, i.e. a constellation of sensory inputs, is coded in a particular, culturally specific way: '[...] there is no fixed distance-sensing mechanism (or mechanisms) in man that is universal for all cultures. [...] not only are people unable to describe how they set distances, but each ethnic group sets distances in its own way' (Hall 1968: 94)

¹¹ It also refers to looking and touching, but the transgression of these rules in the narratives usually featured already as direct *manners* of bewitchments.

Not only people, but domestic animals were also not allowed to trespass the boundaries of the neighbour's homestead. As domestic animals belonged to the master of the household and were, as Favret-Saada argues, considered a part of the owner's extended body (1989: 48), the unallowed trespassing of the domestic animals was likewise perceived as the trespassing of the neighbour himself. Thus, if they trespassed the neighbour's territory, their owners risked being suspected of trying to bewitch their neighbours. They also feared becoming the target of their neighbour's bewitchment performed as revenge to theirs.

And there is another case, but I shall not tell you who it is about. We used to have turkey hens. And these turkey hens, they like going to the meadows, they eat grasshoppers. So they were walking on the meadow, and a man there became very angry, he said: Damned turkey hens, all they do is damage! But how could I have the hens barred, they go out, and they did. Other livestock don't go, but the turkey hens like to go to the meadow. So they grazed there, and he did something. And that really happened then. He put a turkey hen's egg to the molehill and when hens were hatching eggs, everything died. They just started to hatch and it all died. From that time on we haven't set turkey hens anymore, there was no luck. I knew exactly who put that and where; and I went to look immediately after he had left, and I saw a hole in the molehill and a turkey hen's egg in it. I took it out and threw it to their land [laugh]. (50)

There was a neighbour there... she was an old lady, and [she had] grease everywhere, wherever you looked, everywhere those cups and pots and everything. When our pig once went to their land down there, she said: You shall see, girl, what shall happen to the pig since you don't take care of it. It came to my field! Then we thought – what could happen to it? I will drive it back home and it is going to be all right. It will stay home and I will take a better care of it so that it won't escape again. I drove it back home and there was a fence there. And – mind you – the pig threw itself against a fence and hung there! She said: You shall see what would happen to the pig at home, you shall see – and lo! – it hanged itself! That woman was a real witch! I know that very well. (60)

In the context of the farmstead, boundaries that neighbours were allowed to cross under any circumstance were the entrances to the cowsheds, byres and pigsties, which emphasises both the propensity of domestic animals to bewitchment and their economic importance.

We had five cows... And a neighbour, a woman came by ... it was Sunday morning, and my mother – I was still slipping – says: Hey, girls, wake up, Nana came by ... My sister complained, she said: The whole week we were waking up at three, to hoe and everything, at least on Sundays you could let us sleep, to rest [angrily]. Well, she is there. My sister and I woke up and looked through the window – she was nowhere to be seen. My mother then: I saw her, she was right here. She was looking around... Then my mother hurried up down, she unlocked the door and hurried up down to the stall. Nana entered through the back door, there where the dung was being thrown out of the cowshed, and she stood behind the cow... My mother then said to her: you know very well that they were on

the pasture and everything! Why did you come to the cowshed? You could have come to the house, not go to the cowshed. My mother said thank God that she didn't know what was going to happen afterwards, 'cause if she did, she would have thrown her to the ground and trampled down! Then my mother went to the church...and I went to milk the cow... it was my task to milk, I have been milking cows since I was eight. When I went to the stall, all cows together gave but a half a litre of milk. I milked and milked... there was no milk. No milk. Then my mother came home, my mother and father came home to make breakfast ...we girls...prepared breakfast... And she sees that there is no milk in the pot. She says: Where is the milk? I said: There is nothing, this is all the milk I could get... (16)

Here we have always had plenty of pigs... and when my mother-in-law had a sow, she didn't let her aunt enter the pigsty. And when she nevertheless managed to enter it – pigs that had been all healthy and well beforehand, suddenly just remained lying on the ground (92)

However, not every occasion and circumstance that typically triggered tensions and conflicts did so; even when the tensions indeed occurred, not every tense relationship necessarily ended up in accusation of bewitchment. Nevertheless, disputes over the land property, trespass to the neighbour's territory, sales/purchases and trades, unrequited partners, and tensions within the family continually appeared in the narratives as those circumstances that functioned as a potential focus of conflicts that, when misfortune occurred and/or when it was merely anticipated easily led to accusations of witchcraft.

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Izvor čarovniških obtožb

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Članek temelji na terenski raziskavi, narejeni na podeželju vzhodne Slovenije na začetku 21. stoletja. V članku avtorica raziskuje različne tipe okoliščin, ki so med ljudmi generirale napetosti, tesnobo oziroma strah, kar je nadalje sprožilo sume ali obtožbe čarovništva. Te okoliščine so bile predvsem prepiri zaradi zemljiške lastnine, prihod na ozemlje drugega, prodaja in menjava, zavrnitev poroke ter napetosti med člani (razširjene) družine.