

Magdalena Gajewska

Ryszard Kozłowski

Witches: The half Demons in Contemporary Kaschuba Culture

„Since the invention of print there were only two books that had substantial but at the same time terrible influence on the European history. Those books are: „ *The hammer of witchcraft* ” and „*Mein Kampf*” (Hitlera)”.

A quote from T. E. d'Ambrois

Introduction

„The hammer of witchcraft” (*Mallens maleficarum*), a famous Dominican handbook for witch hunters written by H. Instytora i J. Spenglera was published in 1486. The matter of this book clearly pointed out that witchcraft is practiced mostly by women. This kind of reasoning was supported by a common view that women’s faith in God was less eager. There were many examples of witchcraft and of people being possessed by evil which caused a strong belief that things as witchcraft, witches, satan and demons really exist. The authors of „The hammer of witchcraft” believe not only in evil itself but also in its embodiment. The existence of evil is rather its constant presence than just a single event or an apparition. In consequence of this ontological reasoning and according to a saying that „there is no heaven without hell and no God without devil”, a witch became a living symbol of evil. This idea is a starting point for our reasoning. We want to look at a witch as at personified evil and as its symbol in various contexts. We would like to begin from a stage when the evil appears, when witches are its symbol for their pursuers. Another aspect of our debate is the moment when witches actually became a symbol of all harm that was done to women by men and by the community. We will analyze all evil acts which ultimately reveal the mechanism of so-called scapegoat. When we contrast these two symbols, which are stuck in the paradoxical logic of those times, we will see a metamorphosis of good and evil as a witch hunters’ act which was supposed to be just is still unjustified. The demonic personality is hidden beneath kindness. According to Rene Girard the dialectics of a scapegoat ultimately leads straight to finding the victims not guilty and condemning their pursuers.

1. It is not a fairy tale!

Northern Poland, ethnical Kaszuby region, is the place where we decided to canvass contemporary opinions and state of knowledge concerning witches. In our research we use quality methods by conducting detailed and standardized surveys. People from Kaszuby region are an ethnical group that counts about 5 hundred thousand individuals who cultivated their cultural identity despite their dramatic history. This includes their own dialect as well as folk culture. These people, who are commonly called Kaszubi, value tradition and catholic faith. For a very long time they were an unapproachable community as they stated their identity in opposition to both Polish and German people. Nowadays, as a result of the unification of Poland after the Second World War, we can see a growing influence of Polish as well as mass culture which displaces the ethnical aspects.

We have decided to see whether the believes that the 1960s ethnographers wrote about are still present. It was even more interesting for us as there were neither in-depth research available nor such that would deal with issues of faith and its role, a kind of research an evil of the demon study. According to Ryszard Kukier, “Despite of the huge changes that were made in the culture of Kaszubi during the twenty years after the Second World War, they are still very superstitious about the existence of witches. Commonly there are from one to three witches in every village. As the local people say, the witches are the devil's servants and they fulfill his wishes.” As we can see, the ethnographer is not objective. He sees folk believes as superstitions which may be a cause of his lack of interest in philosophic and religious problems that emerge from the whole issue.

In fact, the existence of a witch is for elderly people from Kaszuby as obvious as the existence of the devil. They say that witchcraft is nothing more than being possessed by the devil himself. So, who are those who put a spell on people? As we found out, both men and women can do witchcraft nevertheless there are more information about witches than about wizards or warlocks. Witches cannot be characterized just by their appearance. They are not deformed in any way and they are not disabled. The feature that makes them monstrous are their spiritual side. Ryszard Kukier says that women who became witches were mostly the ones that were raped in the name of a so-called first night law. However our sources are not able to find a reason why the evil appeared as it was not a consequence of the harm that was done to them. A witch accepts the evil out of her free will and that is what makes her a real

witch. So how are we able to recognize a witch? It can be done by analyzing a relation between a negative event, something evil, a disease for instance, and a recent contact with a person who has got bad intentions, though those intentions are only our suspicion. Due to the fact that a witch makes a pact with the devil freely, she is neither a demon nor a possessed person. Half-demonic side of a witch justifies making her responsible and punishing her. A person who is thought to be a witch embodies evil which does not only appear but is constantly present. A witch is responsible for all bad luck as long as you can point out any sign of her presence or a recent contact with her. This kind of stigma considers not only a witch but also her family, so a witch was often a scapegoat. According to Kaszubi and the authors of „ The hammer of witchcraft ” a witch was responsible for people's and animals' diseases and for mysterious and odd events . People looked closely at their unusual, supernatural abilities. Just as it was written in the Dominican handbook, Kaszubi believe that witches spread evil by physical contact like for example a touch, a hug or stroking. This is a way to seek a cause of every evil event which is similar to how authors of „ The hammer of witchcraft ” describe it. The truth is that you look for a person who would like the evil to happen and such person would gain a kind of joy out of that.

Kaszubi distinguish between a spell and witchcraft. In opposition to witchcraft, a spell is doing harm unconsciously. There is no conflict between a witch and community. Despite the relation with the devil, witches go to church, take part in the holy mass including holy sacraments and they can be kind to other people. But as our informer says, witches only pretend to have good intentions. It is worth to mention about an interesting case of a teacher who was accused of being a witch. The woman gave her pupils a snack during a Religion lesson but their parents forbade them to take anything from her. The children were scared and called her a witch. When the woman sought for the priest's help he told her that there obviously must be a reason why people say such things about her. Our informer does not find anything wrong in the children's behavior. She thinks that evil is dangerous and we should fight it. Once she even personally checked whether one woman is a witch. She sat behind her in the church and crossed herself at the same time thinking of her. The woman turned around with an unexplainable expression of anger on her face. It was a sufficient evidence for our observer that the woman is in fact a witch. People who were found to be witches were discriminated and could not take part in the community life. People avoided any contact with them and crossed themselves whenever they saw them.

This discrimination did not influence the fact that evil and a witch who embodied it were a vital element of Kaszubi's life. There are no information about acts of violence against

witches . Kaszubi feared that witches can suit them and the communist court would most definitely defend them as, according to the communist authorities, „evil is only a fairy tale” .

2. Witches are only a fairy tale.

The last lynch in Kaszuby took place in 1836. The victim was a 50 year old woman who was suspected to cause a fisher men's disease. Witnesses confessed in details that the woman who was a poor widow, caused great miseries to the villagers. A man who claimed to be healer took an advantage of this situation. When his treatment failed he accused Katarzyna Cejnowa as the one guilty of all his medical failures. He persuaded the villagers that they should punish her. That lead them to drowning her. What is the moral of this story? Ethnographers and lawyers point out that the positive effect of this event was punishment to people guilty of this crime. What was more, a school was build in Cejnowy which would educate the community so that superstitions would not cause such dramatical events or evil never again. But when we talked with our elderly informers it was hard to resist an impression that, just like the 19th century Kaszubi, they do not see anything bad in the harm that they have done to the women who they accused of doing witchcraft. In the documents from the trial of Katarzyna Cejnowa's murderers we found something that shocks present people. After committing the murder, the farmers went to their landlord to receive a praise for getting rid of the witch. When our informers think of the time when the communists ruled they can see a link between the fact that its was banned to talk about witchcraft, avoiding all superstitions and an ideological war between the Church and the ruling party. Our informer recalls that: „When the communists ruled we could not talk about evil, ghosts and demons. They forbade it. There was no hell. And when there is no hell there is no God. One priest that done exorcism was later restrained by SB.”

After the second World War all Kaszubi's superstitions and traditions that could stress their ethnic independency were eliminated by the government. The attempt of unifying the country meant creating unified system of education in which issues of faith and catholic outlook were discriminated .The PRL authorities were against the priests who supported people accusing women and their families of doing witchcraft. A witch became not only a symbol of evil but also took part in the conflict between those who wanted to state what was evil. She was used by politicians to achieve their goals. The story of a woman that gave their pupils sweets after a Religion lesson was a vital example. None of the adults had courage to call her a witch as they knew that her family worked in court. They feared a trial so the news

of her being a witch spread only among the villagers and no further. That was more a gossip than an accusation. The informer tries to make her story reliable by saying: „We often talked about this in our home. I was very emotional about the whole case and I remember what each person said.” The story is in opposition to the beliefs that Kaszubi presented for generations. Their belief in witches was something that concerned their lives more than just a story that was told for many years. It had its reason in similar and common life attitude. The life of Kaszubi was full of demons, there was constant fight between good and evil. Giving justice to the victims of a state of mind that caused discrimination leads straight to restating the values that Kaszubi presented. This process results in building a new world order. Things that were once evil and dangerous now became hilarious and ugly. The pursuers now experience what their victims once had.

For this new world order a witch was nothing more than just a fairy tale character. The most common characteristic of a witch is: “an old, ugly, evil, dangerous woman with unkempt hair and a beak-like nose.” Young members of the Kaszubi's society whom we interviewed do not believe that witches exist, just like most of them do not believe in such things as demons. There were also not many among them who found it wrong to seek for witch's help or to do witchcraft just for fun. Young people who live both in villages and in cities have no knowledge of local stories about witches. They are familiar only with their trials and their suffering. They all share the view that if a person does harm to other people he or she must be punished. They use the term „witch” to talk about someone who is mean, unfriendly, hostile or stupid, someone who stands out, has a strange appearance or behavior. This collocation is a result of Kaszubi's past beliefs. How do they picture a witch from the present times? The descriptions that they give are no longer evident. They are a mixture of positive and negative features. Such a witch could be evil, dangerous and at the same time kind, friendly and could heal people. A vast number of the people that we interviewed thought that modern witches could be therapists but their main activity would be witchcraft, studying and calling up spirits.

3. There is something wrong about this fairy tale.

Did the belief in magic, witchcraft, demons, evil, monsters and witches die when an era of education and rational thinking began? That was the conclusion of the conducted survey. But before we considered these findings as certain we decided to look closely into the nature of particular events. First of them are annual covens that take place in Kaszuby, the second one is growing popularity of TV series and films about witches among young people,

and finally the third one- the existence of women who call themselves witches. The covents are elements of carnival life style that is now fashionable. During such covents the natural world order is diversified: rational thinking, morality and aesthetics are rejected. Their participants wear a disguise, change their identity, are disfigured and they do witchcraft. It turns out that they are extremely popular among our respondents and it is not because they show the cruelty of witches, like for instance "Blair Witch Project", but rather thanks to the possibility of changing the reality in a positive way like in "Sabrina", "Witch", "Buffy" or "Roswell". In those films witches are showed as strong, talented and usually beautiful women who play the part of contemporary heroines. They not only fight with evil protecting ordinary people but also struggle with their true identity that they have to hide. Why is that so? It is due to their extraordinary abilities which can become a stigma and cause a potential danger. This is how a witch is forced by the scriptwriters to stay a typical woman who does not reveal her potential. Despite of their positive features they have to live a secret life, just like other modern heroes as for instance Batman. We put aside a feminist or psychological interpretation of these characters. We look into their popularity among young people to find out where does both positive and negative image of witches come from. As children, they heard that witches are bad but later on, thanks to the media and pop culture they saw also their good side. This probably cause young Kaszubi to distinguish between a witch, a wicked witch and a fairy. Such distinction was unfamiliar for their ancestors. As W. Kopaliński writes in his "Dictionary of Myths and Symbols", those terms are not equal in meaning but at the same time their meanings intertwine. Nevertheless, young Kaszubi distinguish between fairies, who are certainly positive characters and wicked witches and witches who have a rather negative image. A group of people who can tell them apart a witch from a wicked witch is comprised of grown-ups with college education, mostly women. They stress the etymologic origin of the word "wicked witch" that in Polish comes from the verb "to know". Wicked witches are women who know and who are assessed in a positive way. We have traced groups of present wicked witches who meet to analyse old tales and stories together in a so-called "circle". Their analysis that should lead to discovering the truth about archetype is based on the method of Jung's psychoanalysis. Regardless whether we believe in magic or not, one thing stays the same: the word "witch" is still pejorative. It seems that its negative meaning can be temporary abandoned during various types of festivals but we should remember that it is only a time of having fun, which is separate from real life. In a world which is parallel to this one but at the same time magical and thrilling, having different values and meanings beyond our comprehension, we met Her.

4. *She.*

At the periphery of the village there is a wooden house with green window shutters and a red roof. We are greeted by an old couple. The woman is very slim, she has got short, grey, ruffled hair, a beak-like nose, big blue eyes and her set of teeth is not complete. She is 72. The man is corpulent, he is almost bald, his remaining hair are grey, he has got dark brown eyes which have a kind expression. He is rather tight-lipped. We sit in huge armchairs in which you can easily fall asleep. On an enormous table there is a cake and coffee prepared by the hosts, in the corner there is a TV with a tree of happiness on it. There are pictures of saints hanging on the walls. You can see a perfect garden when you look outside. We are welcomed into her world while she is smiling and encouraging us to have something to eat. When she was a little girl she witnessed the Second World War. Her parents have lost everything during it. When she grew up she wanted to be a nun but her illness made it impossible for her. She had a lung cancer and so she spent seven years in hospital. She made a promise to God that if she recovers from this illness she will help other people. And she did. God cured her, as she says. She has prayed a lot all her life. She can make a diagnosis and she can heal. People from all over the country visit her looking for her help. Even medical doctors. She does not know where her knowledge comes from but as she says-it must be a God's gift because she helps people. She also had visions. There is no end to her stories of people whom she helped. She does not say anything about her bad experiences. She only says that she remembers one woman who called her a witch. She smiles. She does not really care about it. She does not take gossips personal, even though there are quite a few of them. When our meeting comes to an end we let her examine us. Partly out of curiosity, partly for fun and partly because we really start to believe her. In a funny but silent atmosphere we hear such words as tumours, cancer. Her smile no longer seems so sincere and her voice becomes sharp: she is starting to be more slouched and uglier... We leave her house with our mind full of thoughts and fear: maybe the old Kaszubi were right? They say that there is evil covered by this kindness. Who did we meet with-a healer, a fairy, a witch a just a woman? Only one thing is certain after this meeting- evil appears among people.

Conclusion

How did the meeting with Her influence our perception of the world? In the end we stopped being only researchers and became simply people who felt this uncertainty and threat. We were lucky to experience something that was beyond our research schedule and what made it possible for us to see a way how witches can be present among us. Even though one of us thinks that evil is constantly present and the other one thinks that it only temporary appears, both of us, a philosopher and a sociologist, believe that the factor that enables the evil to exist are people who paradoxically want only good on the contrary to evil, as Józef Tischner wrote in "The philosophy of drama". You cannot see the intentions judging by its outcomes. We were left with a dilemma and an afterthought- a Witch appears when there is no She-a woman, a person, a human being, when fear forces us to make her inhuman.

Bibliography:

1. Bossowski J.J., *Sądy Boże na Pomorzu, Szkic etnograficzno-prawny*, Księgarnia Uniwersytecka, Poznań 1937.
2. Girard R., *Kozioł Ofiarny*, przeł. M. Goszczyńska, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1982.
3. Koronyi K., *Studium z wierzeń ludowych w Polsce w XVII i XVIII w.*, Towarzystwo Ludowe, Lwów 1929.
4. Kukier R., *Kaszubi Bytowski. Zarys monografii etnograficznej*, WM, Gdynia 1968.
5. Tischner J., *Filozofia dramatu*, Znak, Kraków 2006.