

Demons, Spirits, Witches/ I

Communicating
with the Spirits



CEU PRESS

*Edited by
Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs*

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SPIRITS

Demons, Spirits, Witches

Series Editors

GÁBOR KLANICZAY and ÉVA PÓCS

Volume I

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SPIRITS

Edited by

Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs

in collaboration with Eszter Csonka-Takács



Central European University Press
Budapest • New York

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Published in 2005 by

Central European University Press

An imprint of the

Central European University Share Company

Nádor utca 11, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000

Fax: +36-1-327-3183

E-mail: ceupress@ceu.hu

Website: www.ceupress.com

400 West 59th Street, New York NY 10019, USA

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ISBN 963 7326 13 8 cloth

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Communicating with the Spirits / edited by Éva Pócs and Gábor Klaniczay.
p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Witchcraft-Europe-History-Congresses. 2. Demonology-Europe-History-Congresses. 3. Folklore-Europe-History-Congresses. I. Pócs, Éva. II. Klaniczay, Gábor. III. Title.

BF1584.E9D46 2005

133.4'094-dc22

2005006449

Printed in Hungary
Akaprint Kft., Budapest

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INTRODUCTION

GÁBOR KLANICZAY and ÉVA PÓCS

The essays collected in this volume come from a broader pool of studies. This is the first volume in a series of three, containing eleven essays of altogether forty-three articles based on the topics of the interdisciplinary conference held on “Demons, spirits, and witches” in Budapest, in 1999. Historians, ethnologists, and folklorists from four continents presented and discussed their research on this important area of universal human mental experience: the forms and the techniques of communication with representatives of other worlds, and the basic religious-ethnological concepts used for making sense from this experience.

The 1999 conference was the culmination of a series of research activities, which started in the early 1980s with the formation of a discussion group for the folkloric and historical research on the documentation of Hungarian witch-trials at the Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The original plan of our group was to prepare a computer-based analysis of the thousands of Hungarian bewitchment narratives and hundreds of witchcraft confessions to be found in these “archives of repression” where recent historiography discovered a treasure-mine of historical folk-beliefs. Our project was to approach and systematize witchcraft mythologies and bewitchment narratives on the basis of encoding and classifying information in the judicial source-material. This design, however, proved to be too ambitious. At first we had enduring debates on the structure of our very sophisticated questionnaire, and renewed attempts to experiment with various and more flexible types of database software (ending with κλειω, devel-

oped at the Max Planck Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen). We also managed to recruit a group of enthusiastic students willing to engage into this collective enterprise, and subsequently we spent much time with ordering, correcting, standardizing the vast set of encoded data. We still have not arrived, however, to a point where our databank could be put, as we had originally hoped, for collective public use (cf. Klaniczay, Pócs, Tóth G., and Wolosz, 2001). Yet, our activities did produce tangible results in three unforeseen domains: source editions, international contacts and a broadening of our research perspectives.

The systematic exploration of unedited source materials on witch-hunts in Hungarian archives and those of the neighboring countries lead to the edition of seven volumes of witch-trials (Sugár, 1987; Klaniczay, Kristóf, and Pócs, 1-2; 1989, Bessenyei, 1-2, 1997-2001; Kiss and Pál-Antal, 2002; Balogh, 2003), with three more in the pipeline, appearing very soon. An ambitious repertory of all these witchcraft prosecutions also resulted from this work (Tóth G., 2000), and numerous books and studies (Pócs, 1989, 1999, 2001; Klaniczay, 1990, 1991; Kristóf, 1998; Klaniczay and Kristóf, 2001).

A second result of our research was the successful relationship established between different international circles of witchcraft research. The exciting set of problems emerging from the comparative overview of early modern European witchcraft at the conference in Stockholm, in 1984 (Ankarloo and Henningsen, 1990) which included, for the first time, some insights into witchcraft prosecution on Europe's "peripheries," Scandinavia and East-Central Europe, prompted us in 1988 to organize a second such comparative conference in Budapest: "Witch Beliefs and Witch-Hunting in Central and Eastern Europe" (Klaniczay and Pócs 1991-1992). This meeting had the merit to bring together several innovative experts of current witchcraft research in the West with a large number of historians and folklorists from East-Central Europe, whose materials had been hitherto largely unknown and ignored by international research. The documentation of late witchcraft prosecutions in these regions, still dragging on in the eighteenth century, considerably modified the comparative picture in this field. The examination of East-Central

European and South-East European materials, shamanism, fairy-beliefs, other archaic sorcerers and folk-mythologies also furthered the discussion of a much debated problem, the origin of the concept of the witches' Sabbath.

In the 1990s, there was a real boom in large international gatherings discussing the historical anthropology of European witch-hunts: the conference paying a tribute to the seminal book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas (1971) in Exeter, in 1991 (Barry, Hester, and Roberts, 1996); the 1992 conference at the ENS in Fontenay-Saint-Cloud on the witches' Sabbath (Jacques-Chaquin and Préaud, 1993); the important regional overview in Lemgo in 1992 (Wilbertz, Schwerhoff, and Scheffler, 1994); the 1994 conference on witchcraft and healing in Amsterdam; the workshops organized by the German "Arbeitskreis interdisziplinäre Hexenforschung" (Lorenz and Schmidt, 1994; Lorenz and Bauer, 1995); the discussions and researches related to the origins of the Sabbath imagery by the working group around Agostino Paravicini Bagliani in Lausanne (*L'Imaginaire du Sabbat*, 1999); the 1998 conference in Swansea, Wales on the "languages of witchcraft" (Clark, 2001). The conference we organized in Budapest in 1999 was a part of this series of gatherings. Instead of playing down the important role of this conference for the formulation of the essays in our three volumes—like most collections of studies do nowadays—we should like to stress the importance of the stimulating discussions there. The conference tried to assemble a new constellation of experts around the history of witchcraft and demonology—involving, among others, significant groups of scholars from Scandinavia, the Balkans, and Israel—and providing an opportunity for many doctoral students of the Central European University to present their fresh insights into these historical problems. Our intention was to approach the problems of witchcraft, shamanism, spirit possession and demonology from a new, synthetic angle, a point of view that relied upon the broadening field of enquiries of the research group in Budapest.

This is actually the third "unintended consequence" of the enquiry we started in the 1980s: the systematic extension of discussions on the historical conflicts of witchcraft prosecution to the

broader context of the historical transformations of folk beliefs, the archaic background of fairy beliefs and shamanism (Hoppál, 1984, Pócs, 1989, 1999), on the mutual influences of “learned” ritual magic and “popular” practices—mediators of the communication with the supernatural sphere. Hungarian folklorists and historians have recently discussed these problems in a series of workshops: on “Ecstasies, visions, dreams” (Pócs, 1998), “Soul, death and the other world” (Pócs, 2001a), “Microcosmos and macrocosmos” (Pócs, 2003), “Blessing and curse, miracle and witchcraft” (Pócs, 2004). The thematic panorama of the 1999 conference on “Demons, spirits, and witches” was formulated in this vein as well.

In the formulation of our broad thematic grasp we could also rely upon recent international tendencies: the phenomena of present-day witchcraft and other mental systems (such as shamanism and possession) were examined in the 1990s with a revived interest by scholars working with the methods of anthropological enquiry based on fieldwork and participant observation. In some regions on the “periphery” of Europe, such as Portugal, South Italy, Greece, former Yugoslavia, Baltic countries and Hungary, there are still a few isolated rural communities with a continuity of folkloric traditions preserved by oral transmission. On-going research on this also allowed the discovery of new relevant data for our subject. Meanwhile the thematic field of these studies had to be extended to another direction, and include modern paganism and New Age esoteric movements as well. Traditional ethnographic and folkloric research gradually absorbed an up-to-date anthropological approach, examining folklore phenomena and mental systems in their social context and communal function. This is partly due to the internal paradigm change of individual “national” ethnologies, and partly to the inspiration coming from cultural and social anthropology, which considered European peasantry as yet another anthropological field where the “other” has to be understood. We could mention here the South-East European investigations by English and American researchers, such as the excellent study of “Demons and the Devil” on the Isle Naxos by Charles Stewart (1991) or the “internal” enquiries by Italian anthropologists concerning manifestations of spirit possession (Pizza, 1998). The com-

plex approach on culture by historical anthropologists could have been another stimulus in this field: as to the expansion of the themes and the sources of their research they are frequently a few steps ahead of folklorists nowadays. Let us refer to the work by Owen Davies on *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951* (1999) where witchcraft in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is analyzed on the basis of the printed source materials of popular culture, newspapers and journals. It was equally historians who presented a colorful panorama on traditional witchcraft accusations in twentieth century European village societies in the last volume of the series “Witchcraft and Magic in Europe” (Blécourt, 1999).

It seemed obvious, consequently, that the themes we intended to investigate have to rely upon a close cooperation of ethnographers, historians, anthropologists, and historians of religion. One of the central objectives of our 1999 conference was to provide a “meeting point” for the representatives of these disciplines. This endeavor has been present in various other recent international conferences. This is exemplified by two recently published conference volumes by Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (2004a and 2004b), where historians and folklorists jointly provide a number of case studies on how European witchcraft beliefs developed “beyond the witch trials,” from the age of the Enlightenment to the twentieth century.

The various disciplines represented in our three volumes were convened on the basis of these premises. Besides traditional folklore studies and historical anthropology, we involved researchers of the history of religion, ethno-psychiatry, art history, literary studies and other disciplines on the relationship, coexistence and conflicts of popular belief systems, Judeo-Christian mythology and demonology in medieval, modern, and contemporary Europe. We examined local differences in the structures of various European popular mythologies, in the degree of influence of Jewish and Christian demonology, paying a special attention to the divergence between Western and Eastern evolution, and consequently to the different relationship of learned demonology to popular belief systems in

the two parts of Europe. The studies published here are engaged in a phenomenological and theoretical inquiry for characterizing typical concepts, actors and situations related to this problem: witchcraft, sorcery, trance, vision, and possession; the conflict of saints, healers, seers, and shamans with the representatives of evil; the special function of escorting, protecting, possessing, harming and healing spirits; the role of pre-Christian, Jewish and Christian spirit-worlds, the haunting dead, the appearing ghosts or the antagonism of the devil and the saint. In the framework of these topics, attention is paid to the relationship between rites and beliefs, folklore and literature; the examination of temporal changes; the legacy of various pre-Christian mythologies; the study of syncretistic forms of ancient, medieval and modern belief- and rite-systems. A few "pure" examples from religious-ethnological research outside Europe are also used for elucidating European problems.

Within this broader set of problems the present volume focuses on the problem of communication with the other world. The authors discuss the phenomenon of spirit possession and its changing historical interpretations, the imaginary schemes elaborated for giving accounts of the journeys to the other world in order to communicate with the dead. Finally, the historical archetypes of this type of religious manifestation—trance prophecy, divination, and shamanism—are analyzed in a comparative framework.

The five studies dealing with possession, the recognition of demons, and the interpretation of diabolic visions and apparitions examine this communication with the supernatural from different points of view: focusing alternatively on their role in the life of an individual or a local community, or more broadly, in ecclesiastic or 'popular' culture. These investigations also complement each other from the point of view of their chronological field. Their common central problem is broadened by each author into a different direction: some of them elaborate the connection of spirit possession with other mental systems, such as witchcraft and shamanism, others situate the historical source materials into the context of contemporary medical discourse, or examine the role of these manifestations in broader religious and political debates of their age.

Nancy Caciola dedicates her attention to a recently much discussed problem of late medieval feminine piety, the discernment of spirits. She approaches her theme from the 'outside' (i.e. from the point of view of the signs of the changing relation of body and soul perceivable by the external observers), and from 'above' (i.e. from the angle of the theologians trying to find clear criteria for their judgment on the internal spiritual identity of the concerned persons). In her vivid description we can observe the exciting historical evolution of how some representatives of late medieval clerical elite attempted to naturalize the process of discernment, how they elaborated a physiological theory for distinguishing divine and diabolic possession, and finally, how this theory proved to be useless in the end.

While Caciola analyzes the general lines of evolution, *Renata Mikolajczyk* examines the interesting personal views and theories on the nature of the demons by Witelo, a thirteenth-century Silesian scholar. Witelo claimed that, instead of immortality, demons could only have a fair amount longevity, and that these intelligent beings could not be made responsible for seducing men to sin. The visions and apparitions were explained by him with natural causes, theories originating from contemporary 'humoral medicine', and thus providing an interesting example of the rationalistic attitude of medieval natural science.

Moshe Sluhovsky provides an important complement to the reasoning of Caciola concerning the theologians' attempts of elaborating a theory of the discernment of spirits. Investigating the famous early modern possession cases in France, Sluhovsky concentrates upon the precedents of the clerical/medical treatment: the 'self-transformation' of the possessed persons, experienced first by themselves and their immediate surroundings. Through his analysis he comes to the important conclusion that the discernment of spirits should be viewed not only as a theological concern but also as a process of negotiation, involving men and women, the laity and the clergy.

Sophie Houdard deals with the early seventeenth-century reinterpretation of the theories on the discernment of spirits. She deals with more and more generalized doubts concerning the reality

behind any mystical and visionary experience, and thus the ambiguity of the signs upon which the discernment of spirits could be based. The emerging new approach of an evolving rationalism becomes the guiding line for the analysis of the biographies of these mystics, and the different concepts on how God and the demons could allegedly appropriate a physical place in the bodies of the possessed. While she observes the marginalization of the 'good' and 'bad' angels as traditionally spectacular signs of the supernatural, she demonstrates, on the other hand, that the possession cases acquire a new function in this age and become important tools in the political life of the French monarchy.

The study of *Éva Pócs* examines the possession systems in the context of exchanges between clerical and popular culture, starting with the Christian forms of divine and diabolic possession, and continuing with the archaic beliefs related to possession by the spirits of the dead and different varieties of mediumship. She also examines other belief-systems, such as witchcraft and *mara/mare/mora* beliefs, which, though not identical with possession, allow such readings as well. She comes to the conclusion that the various systems of spirit possession are much more abundant in European cultures on the peripheries of religious life than what we have presumed so far. They probably had a greater role here in the communication with the supernatural than the so-called shamanistic belief-systems.

A second group of studies in the present volume deals with an important group of syncretistic (pagan/Christian) practices of communicating with the supernatural: the different forms of contact with the spirits of the dead. They examine new, hitherto unknown aspects of these phenomena on the basis of recently discovered documents and new folklore data.

The study by *Wolfgang Behringer* shows how the Waldensians came to be regarded as witches in the fifteenth century, and his investigations provide interesting insights into several questions regarding the beginning of witchcraft prosecutions, among them the origin of the demonological concept of the witches' Sabbath. With a careful analysis of the judicial sources, the theological

treatises and the iconography of the images related to the geographic zone where late medieval Waldensians lived (Switzerland, Savoy, Piedmont), at the roots of the demonological accusations of 'nightly flying' and the attendance of the witches' Sabbath, he discovers all kinds of beliefs and rites in these rural Waldensian communities which were related to the communication with the dead. He supports with data from early modern folklore the supposition that some spiritual leaders of rural communities maintained a quasi-shamanistic relationship with the "good people" (i.e. benevolent dead, fairies) (cf. Behringer, 1994). Besides this decisive influence, the emergence of witchcraft accusations against the Waldensians might also have been prompted by the real nightly gatherings of the members of the heretical sect, and their non-Catholic rites, as well, but all this only in the quality of *tertium comparationis*.

Tok Thompson writes about the connection of fairies in Irish folklore with the domain of the dead. His examples are taken from legends mostly alive to this day—on the basis of which he attempts to build a holistic model which can also make use of the results of historical, archaeological and linguistic researches.

The Slovenian folklorist *Roberto Dapit* made his fieldwork on a Slovenian territory in Italy, in the valley of Resia. He analyzes the vision-motifs in the corpus of folk legends of his own collection from the point of view of the experiences of his informants. In the course of this he makes valuable observations concerning the communal role played in our days by the communication with the ghosts of the deceased.

In the field of ecstatic and visionary experiences, the last three studies concentrate upon various aspects of trance and shamanism. The first article, by *Christa Agnes Tuczay*, deals with medieval European material. Instead of discussing 'European shamanism' as such, she focuses on medieval sorcerers and diviners whom she defines as 'shaman-like figures' on the basis of their divinatory techniques based on trance. With sources originating from Germanic documentation, she presents a varied series of diviners and their techniques (hydromancy, crystal gazing, dream divination), stressing their antique cultural roots and their relationship with Christian mystical currents.

Peter Buchholz offers an overview of one of the purest forms of European shamanism known to us, the vestiges of Nordic shamanism recorded on the settlements in Iceland and Greenland. The sources he had already presented in his earlier works are complemented here with the testimony of recent archaeological finds, enriching our scarce knowledge of the *útiseta* rite. He also proposes some new interpretations concerning the world-view, the cosmogony and the rites of Germanic shamanism (related to the 'earthly otherworld' and the 'shaman-tree').

Finally, *Rune Hagen* analyzes a sixteenth-century source related to the other 'pure' variant of European shamanism, that of the Lapp (Sami) people in Northern Norway and Northern Russia. He enriches our images on the interference between shamanism and witchcraft beliefs with the fascinating story of the transformation of a 'shaman cat' into a 'witch cat'. The document he analyzes is the chronicle of the naval journey of Christian IV, King of Denmark and Norway in 1599 to the northern territories. On his trajectory the king came across some Lapponian sorcerers, who told him about their shamanistic techniques. King Christian took away their cat, and subsequently, on their way home the Danish fleet was struck by a devastating storm. The cat of the Sami shamans was made responsible for this. Two years later witch-hunting began in Finland...

The contents of the second and the third volumes are appended to this preface. The essays in the second volume juxtapose Christian demonology with popular mythology. The demonologies they study come from learned and popular culture, medieval, early modern and contemporary periods, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish context, the studies concentrating on Scandinavia, East-Central Europe and the Balkans, and are seasoned with a few more remote examples: Ireland and Mongolia. The third volume focuses on the new insights this broader perspective can provide to the understanding of witchcraft mythologies and persecutions. The recently elaborated new vision on the emergence of the concept of the witches' Sabbath, with special attention paid to the influential and debated propositions by Carlo Ginzburg (1989), is one of the central issues of the common agenda discussed by the studies.

Other series of questions are related to legal mechanisms, social contexts and folkloric legends shaping witchcraft beliefs throughout history.

At the end of this brief introduction let us express our special thanks to Eszter Csonka-Takács, who assisted us in the care of the texts. And we should like to express our gratitude to the organizations which supported the conference and the resulting publication: the Hungarian Soros Foundation, OTKA (Hungarian Scientific Research Fund) providing two grants (T30691 and T46472) and Collegium Budapest – Institute for Advanced Study.

December 2004

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