





# FOLK MEDICINE THEN AND NOW - CHARACTERIZATION OF THE HEALING PROCESS IN FOLK MEDICINE IN 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ON POLISH RURAL AREAS, AND ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO PRACTICES DERIVED FROM FOLK HEALING

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction and purpose:** Folk medicine is a vast subject, describing various actions drawn from herbal medicine, magic and folk beliefs, as well as conventional medicine, aimed at healing the sick.

The purpose of the study was to characterize the main principles and components of the healing process in folk medicine practiced among the rural population in 19th and 20th century Poland, based on available literature.

**Materials and review methods:** The PubMed, Google Scholar databases and available book literature were searched for studies and chapters describing the causes of diseases in 19th and 20th century folk medicine, the activities of rural healers, and the methods of treating illnesses practiced at that time.

**State of knowledge, results:** Folk medicine has been a part of the tradition of Polish rural medicine for a long time. Folk medicine included both preventive and curative procedures and interventions. Despite their significant differences and diversity, depending on the region of practice, many healing procedures were based on similar principles and had a lot in common. Even today, folk medicine remains alive and, although sometimes treated with a grain of salt, it still remains a practiced element of the medical profession.

**Conclusion:** The review of historical and current literature conducted by the authors allows us to confidently say that folk medicine was very widespread among the rural population in the 19th and 20th centuries in Poland. Despite many differences, the methods used in folk medicine drew from similar principles and rules, which granted them healing power.

Studies conducted by contemporary authors demonstrate that despite the intensive development of science and medicine, methods derived from folk medicine are still in use, although they are not as popular as in past centuries.

**Keywords:** folk medicine; non-medical therapists; disease's origins

## INTRODUCTION

According to the WHO, traditional medicine should be defined as the sum of knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences, whether explainable or not, that are used to maintain health, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illness [1].

Traditional medicine encompasses elements of herbal medicine, folk magic, and a wide range of actions and procedures whose effectiveness is not confirmed by modern research and which often rely on folk beliefs [2].

Today, in countries that have developed a scientific (evidence-based) approach to treatment, the term "traditional medicine" is understood to mean mainly irrational, tradition-based healing as opposed to classical conventional medicine. The terms "folk medicine" and "healing" have often come to be used synonymously.

However, modern medicine itself is in many respects a continuation of the development of folk medicine. The information accumulated by folk medicine is reflected in the works of the largest physicians of the ancient world - Hippocrates, Asclepiad, Galen, A. Celsus, and later - in the works of Ibn Sina. Today, evidence-based medicine continues to validate and implement successful folk medicine practices. For example, after years of research on herbal remedies from Chinese folk medicine, the malaria drug Artemisinin was created. Artemisinin is extracted from the annual wormwood (*Artemisia annua*) used in traditional Chinese medicine. (A Nobel Prize was awarded to Professor Youyou Tu in 2015 for her discovery of a new class of antimalarial drugs). [3]

Such an understood process of folk medicine is a very complex phenomenon, based on a holistic approach, in the assumptions of which the state of physical health remains inextricably linked with factors such as the surrounding nature, diet, mental state, and the inner spiritual strength of a person [4,5]. Although all this places folk medicine in opposition to conventional medicine, they often find common features, and their unifying factor is the pursuit of healing the patient.

In the following work, the term folk medicine will be used interchangeably with the term traditional medicine.

The authors of this paper did not aim to present a comprehensive state of knowledge regarding folk medicine. Due to volume constraints, this would be virtually impossible.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the main components of the healing process in folk medicine, based on a literature review, starting from the causes of diseases and descriptions of folk medicine specialists, and ending with the actual healing practices. This work aimed to highlight the fact that despite many differences in the treatment of the same disease depending on the place of practice, healing actions in folk medicine were based on similar principles and rules, which gave them their "healing power."

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A review of the available literature on the causes of diseases in the 19th and 20th centuries among the rural population in Poland, folk medicine specialists, and medical practices derived from traditional medicine practiced at that time was conducted. For this purpose, the databases Google Scholar and PubMed were searched using combinations of phrases such as: folk medicine in the 19th and 20th centuries in Polish territories, folk medicine specialists, causes of diseases in folk medicine. Due to the fact that many publications describing this topic are available only in the form of printed monographs, a detailed review of the items contained in the catalogs of the Jan Kochanowski University Library in Kielce and the Library of the Medical University of Silesia in Katowice was also conducted, following the above search criteria.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

### I. CAUSES OF DISEASES IN FOLK BELIEFS.

Before discussing the individual folk medicine practices among the rural population in the 19th and 20th centuries, it is worthwhile to take a closer look, through the eyes of the villagers, at the sources of diseases. The causes of ailments were often attributed to magical methods of dealing with them. Health problems were associated with the negative influence of the cosmos, natural phenomena, and the actions of immaterial entities such as various demonic beings. [6,7,8]

The first group mainly includes diseases caused by moonlight and sunlight. Moonlight was believed to have the most harmful effects on children, causing, among other things, chronic insomnia and neurosis [6]. To

prevent this, various protective measures were introduced, such as covering or closing shutters on moonlit nights. It was also common to place pots of water under the windows, believing that the water's surface would absorb the harmful power of the moon's rays [6]. Sunlight was considered equally dangerous as it could cause blindness. It was believed that the sun had a weakening effect, hence people wore scarves or hats on their heads while working in the fields to ensure protection [6].

The second group of causes includes the elements, which were also believed to cause diseases. Wind was considered the primary cause of many health problems, including disability, joint problems, and even loss of speech [8]. Drafts were particularly dangerous as they could cause colds and inflammations in the respiratory tract. Among the rural population, there was a term - "bad air," which was supposedly the cause of migraines, chest pains, and skin diseases [6]. Another term, "plague air," was attributed to the spread of various epidemic diseases [9]. The sources of diseases were also believed to be found in water; depending on its origin, drinking water could cause various ailments, such as pneumonia or dropsy. It was believed that the liquid used to wash a deceased person was particularly dangerous. Spilling it at someone's doorstep was thought to cause health problems for the household members [6].

The third group of causes includes the activities of magical beings. Leading this group were witches, who had the ability to cause diseases and cast spells (through verbal incantations, magical objects, or even just a glance), bring misfortune to people, destroy crops, and take milk from cows [10]. They could cause hair to form into a matted tangle, which could not be cut for six months, and once cut, the tangle had to be removed beyond the village boundaries [8,11]. Very dangerous were also the poludnitsas ("południce"), who would strangle farmers in the fields during harvest and kidnap children. They could also be responsible for creating air whirlwinds; entering such a whirlwind could lead to severe bodily injuries [12,13]. No less dangerous were the "boginki," sometimes called "mamuny," who would put pregnant women to sleep to later cause illness in the unborn child in the mother's womb, often leading to miscarriages [6,14]. They could also kidnap and replace children with so-called changelings [14]. It was also common to personify or animate diseases in the form of humans, spirits, or animals, which were believed to cause these diseases [6,9,12-14]. For example, cholera was depicted as a pale, bony woman of exceptionally ugly appearance or a large white dog [9]. The above examples are just a few of the many magical creatures whose actions were believed to cause health problems. Others included vampires, water spirits or devils responsible for possessions [15].

## II. WHO PRACTICED FOLK MEDICINE?

In the Polish lands in the 19th and 20th centuries, various herbalists, whisperers, and folk healers were popular, mainly originating from rural populations and practicing among them. The Polish people before World War II were significantly apprehensive about using the services of qualified medical professionals such as doctors or pharmacists. This was associated with the belief that regardless of medical interventions taken, a person's fate was predetermined and had to be fulfilled (what was called "fatum" in rural speech). [8,16]

Folk medicine encompassed the health of both humans and animals without making significant distinctions in this regard. [17] Therefore, shepherds, sheepherders, or mountain guides, knowledgeable about fractures of cattle and sheep limbs, also treated human fractures. A village blacksmith usually acted as a dentist or surgeon, helping animals and also offering assistance to humans, extracting diseased teeth. [16,18] Similarly, barbers, besides shaving, also dealt with tooth extraction, minor surgical procedures, bloodletting, and treatment using leeches. [19] It is worth mentioning that until the 19th century, surgery was considered a craft rather than a medical discipline, and doctors did not specialize in surgical fields. Surgeons acquired knowledge within guilds as apprentices. [20]

There was a belief that doctors were not meant to cut anything (including human bodies), as this fell within the competence of craftsmen. This belief stemmed, among other things, from the fact that since the Middle Ages, doctors were often clergy, who were not supposed to perform bloody procedures. [21] Midwives attended childbirths for both human babies and calves, protected newborns from being exchanged (the replacement of a normal, healthy child with a sickly and bad-tempered changeling), were knowledgeable about women's and children's diseases, love magic, could treat infertility, and remove unwanted pregnancies. [17] Every carpenter was also considered a witch or healer, upon whom the habitability of a house depended. A poorly treated carpenter could bring misfortune upon a house: fire, diseases, death, or become inhabited by demons, worms. At the end of the row of rural experts stood the so-called "exorciser," who was a "specialist in all diseases, and even in detecting thieves," and had "remedies for all ailments in the form of words and certain movements." [18,19]

## III. PREVENTIVE PROTECTIVE ACTIONS IN FOLK MEDICINE.

The well-known fact is that prevention is better than cure. This principle was also practiced by the inhabitants of Polish villages in the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, various "magic-medical" treatments aimed at preventing disease were very popular. A collective protective measure of the village residents was

to demarcate its boundaries. This was most often done by plowing the village borders, which was believed to protect the inhabitants from contagion [6,9]. However, individual preventive actions, especially those concerning the protection of children, were even more popular. For example, to protect a child from smallpox, it was advised to avoid drying diapers in the wind and only dry them indoors [6]. To prevent rashes in children, it was necessary to pour out the water from their bath in a place inaccessible to others [6]. A series of prohibitions related to the cradle were also believed to prevent diseases; it was not allowed to rock the cradle when it was empty, and one could not sit on it [22].

The rural population believed that casting a spell was an exceptionally dangerous act. Spells were thought to bring misfortune and induce illness [6,17,23]. To prevent the casting of a spell and protect against its consequences, a series of preventive actions were taken. Among them was wiping a child with a shirt taken off after a bath, then throwing it into the yard and leaving it there overnight [17]. Another method to protect against spells was turning clothes inside out, believed to reflect the curse [9,17,23]. A very popular protective measure against the harmful effects of spells used for children was attaching various objects to their clothes or placing them next to the cradle. Among such peculiar talismans were pieces of salt, crumbs of bread, and sacred objects such as rosaries or medals with images of saints [17,23].

Especially vulnerable to various dangers and diseases were pregnant women and the children within their wombs. Pregnant women had to adhere to specific superstitions and perform particular magical rituals to ward off misfortunes. Among these was avoiding flames and fire, as it could cause a "fiery mark" on the fetus. It was also important for pregnant women not to have their teeth extracted, as it could result in a serious speech defect in the baby [24].

Another set of protective rituals were those associated with religious holidays. An example was consuming apples consecrated on the day of St. Blaise, which, when eaten, provided protection against throat diseases [25]. To prevent leg pain in the upcoming year, one had to sit at the Christmas Eve supper wearing shoes, and during the dinner itself, it was forbidden to lean on the table with hands as it could result in hand and back pain in the near future [6]. During Christmas, one should also avoid carrots as they could cause jaundice in the coming year [18]. Similar superstitions were associated with Easter, for instance, on Holy Saturday, drinking Holy Water was believed to protect against diseases throughout the year [7]. Decorating the floor with tansy during Pentecost was believed to protect against contagion [26]. These actions indicate a clear connection between the Catholic religion and belief in the magical power of objects and actions, which, although doctrinally different, often intertwined in folk medicine.

#### **IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED HEALING METHODS PRACTICED IN POLISH VILLAGES IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES.**

Folk medicine treatments took on various forms depending on the region of the country in which they were practiced. Nevertheless, despite certain differences, the processes of treating specific ailments often had much in common. An indispensable element of the healing process was the magical component, which largely relied on performing specific actions, movements, or gestures. [6,8]. Such actions included fumigation, anointing, washing, baths, touching, wrapping parts of the body, burying, and even cauterizing [6,8,17]. Verbal formulas, which often accompanied the performed healing actions, were also very important. Such formulas included invocations, such as asking the elder tree for the healing of limbs or other parts of the body. [17]. Most often, however, these were incantations; they involved reciting secret texts directed specifically at the illness, with the intention of making it leave the patient's body. This element of the ritual was most commonly practiced by experienced folk specialists such as whisperers. They knew the secret formulas that were inaccessible to ordinary people. [27]. In healing practices, various objects were also often used, which were believed to have magical powers to ward off spells or 'extract' the illness from the patient [17, 27]. The magical element was thus often a multifaceted process that combined actions, words, and objects. [8]. The therapeutic procedure was also based on several principles that influenced its healing power. The repetition of movements, ritualistic actions, or uttered secret formulas was crucial in the therapeutic process. Many components of a specific therapeutic procedure had to be repeated, most often 3 times, less frequently 7 or 9 times. [28]. This had significant importance because, according to the beliefs of rural populations, odd numbers symbolized a change in the patient's life (in this case, transitioning from illness to health). On the other hand, even numbers symbolized stagnation, lack of change [6,28-29]. The timing of the ritual held significance as diseases were typically treated at sunrise and sunset, during the early morning or evening hours. This practice was closely linked to the belief in the magical power of liminal times. [6,30]. It's also worth noting that many healing practices were based on the principle of analogy. Examples of therapy utilizing the principle of similarities included the treatment of mild forms of jaundice, where patients were instructed to consume honey (which is yellow in color) [30]. The second equally common principle involved the use of opposites. An example of this principle was seen in the treatment of baldness, where the hair was rinsed with a decoction of hop cones to encourage it to grow as lush as hops. [30,31]. A very significant rule utilized during therapeutic procedures was the principle of transfer. It involved 'transferring' the disease from the patient to animals or objects. In this way, it was believed to leave the patient's body and enter another entity [32].

Below, using the example of treating thrush, formerly called "żabka" in rural areas, the diversity of treatment methods for one ailment depending on the region of the country is presented. And so, in the Beskid Sądecki region, "żabka," called "plugawka" there, was treated in the following way - for 3 days at sunrise and sunset, the tongue of the sick person was rubbed with a piece of red cloth, and then three times the sickle was moved from the sick person to oneself, while uttering a special magical formula [6]. In Krościenko, also in the area of the Beskid Sądecki, the disease was treated differently - one had to dig a hole under an oak tree, spit into it three times, walk around the tree the same number of times, and walk away without looking back [33]. In the Beskid Żywiecki region, the procedure was as follows - the mouth of a child suffering from thrush was rubbed with a red cloth, and then the sick child's mother would throw the cloth behind her into the stream, so that the water would carry away the disease along with the piece of material. [6,31]. Another method was used in the area of the Beskid Wysoki, where thrush deposits were rubbed with a diaper moistened by the child, while in the Beskid Śląski area, menstrual blood was used for this purpose. [6]. A different method was popular in Olkusz, where thrush was removed by applying a live grass frog to the affected mucous membrane. [33]. Thus, as seen above, there were many ways to deal with a single illness, and they varied depending on the area where the treatment was administered. Furthermore, sometimes in different localities within one region, specific ailments were treated using different methods. However, it's worth noting certain similarities between rituals, as well as the aforementioned triple repetition of actions, and the element of transferring the disease, in this case to a common grass frog.

Below, selected methods of folk medicine used in treating the most common diseases affecting the rural population of Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries will be presented. Diseases and consequently therapeutic actions have been grouped into systems of the human body they concern. They will be discussed in this order. It is important to note that the following methods will come from different parts of the country, emphasizing that regardless of the region of Poland, folk medicine methods were commonly used in treating various ailments.

Respiratory system-related illnesses often included throat inflammation, tonsillitis, croup, or diphtheria. The first three were treated similarly - by fumigating the patient with lovage herb or, less commonly, by wrapping the neck with consecrated flax. [17].

Diphtheria was a common disease affecting children in villages located along the Upper Prosná River, in today's Opole Voivodeship. In its treatment, the throat was brushed with feathers. However, before this was done, the feathers were soaked in oil, as it was believed to have the ability to 'draw out' bacteria. [24].

Common diseases causing gastrointestinal discomfort included parasitic infections - conditions caused by the presence of tapeworms or roundworms in the digestive system. In villages near Kraków, the treatment for worms involved soaking garlic cloves in glasses of vodka for 9 days. After this time, the garlic was to be eaten. [34]. In the same areas, the treatment of parasitic diseases, especially in children, involved bathing them in water with ivy, which had to be previously boiled in a new pot. During the bath, children were also given ivy water to drink. After finishing the bath, the water was to be poured far away from the house [35]. When discussing gastrointestinal disorders, a moment of attention is also deserved for the treatment of jaundice, which is a common symptom of liver or bile duct diseases, with the belief that it could be cured by eating lice. According to the residents of Kujawy, the most effective way to combat the yellowing of the skin was by consuming human lice, which were wrapped in bread balls before consumption [36].

Among the methods of treating diseases of the nervous system, it is worth mentioning epilepsy therapy. A method used for its treatment in villages near Łącko (Małopolskie Voivodeship) involved digging a deep pit in the ground. When a patient with epilepsy had a seizure, they were to be placed in this pit for 24 hours [6]. Another neurological disorder caused by compression of peripheral neurons, for example due to discopathy and resulting in lower back pain called lumbago, was treated in an even more unconventional way. Lumbago, as it was also known, was supposed to be treated with pig manure. The patient was to be rubbed with it, especially in the lumbar area where the pain occurred [24].

Among the skin diseases treated using folk medicine methods was erysipelas, an acute infectious disease of streptococcal etiology, which was treated in Podlasie by cauterizing flax in the area where the disease appeared on the body. A piece of cloth was placed on the affected area, with flax balls rolled on it. Then they were ignited; if the flax loops went upwards, it meant that the disease was receding, if not - the ritual had to be repeated. [27]. Another equally common skin disease was scabies. In the areas of the Beskid Wysoki, special properties in combating this disease were attributed to the action of fire. Therefore, the patient was often placed in a heated bread oven, where they were kept as long as they could endure [6]. Also noteworthy is the treatment process for superficial skin lesions such as abscesses, boils, or ulcers. For this purpose, butter was made on the feast day of St. Bartholomew, and then it was blessed in the church. It was believed that such prepared butter had the ability to heal skin ailments. The butter could only cure boils and abscesses if they were smeared with it at sunrise and sunset; otherwise, the entire procedure did not bring any therapeutic benefits [6,24]. In the treatment of other common skin lesions such as warts, more "sophisticated" methods were used. Horse saliva, collected beforehand, was rubbed into the area



where the wart appeared, with the belief that it would cause the skin lesion to disappear [24].

Rickets was a common bone disease in children. To cure it, baths were used, during which pine needles or hazel twigs were added to the water, with the belief that children would grow straight like the mentioned plants [30]. Ailments affecting the inhabitants of 19th-century Polish villages frequently included various dental, gum, and periodontal diseases. They clinically manifested under a common symptom - toothache. In the Kielce region, treating such pain involved walking to the nearest oak tree and reciting the formula, "Tell me, my dear oak tree, how to heal the teeth in my mouth." [7,37]. Another method practiced in tooth treatment, mainly in Podhale, was fumigating them with smoke from burning horse teeth [30]. It's also worth briefly mentioning psychogenic disorders. Among them was fear, referred to as "zlyniek" in the Beskid Żywiecki region or "przełęknięcie" in the Beskid Śląski region [6]. This condition involved night terrors that would wake the child from sleep. To cure this ailment, it was necessary to determine its source. For this purpose, a ritual of pouring wax over the sleeping child was performed. One person held a bowl of water while another poured wax into it using a "wedding ring." The resulting wax figure was interpreted to reveal the source of fear. If it was an animal, an effort was made to obtain some of its fur; if a human, a few hairs (3 or 9) were sought. These were then burned, and the smoke was fumigated over the child to bring relief [6]. Nervous conditions were healed by burning flax over the head of the afflicted person, accompanied by the recitation of a magical formula: „Usie strachi, uroki, pereloki, (...), liszaje, nerwy, otwory (...) wrzody, narosli z raby bożej Wierki (imię chorej) – na dym, na lon, na swieczku.” [27]. On the other hand, individuals suffering from severe mental illnesses were often attempted to be treated through regular beatings with sticks. [28].

## V. ARE SUPERSTITIONS, BELIEFS, AND MAGICAL PRACTICES STILL ALIVE TODAY?

Although it might seem that the discussed customs are merely relics of the past and are currently treated with a certain degree of skepticism, they remain a practiced element of the healing process in many rural communities (and also in cities). Often, they are accepted uncritically and without much reflection on their validity and effectiveness. It could even be said that in the 21st century, broadly understood unconventional medicine is experiencing a renaissance, particularly in the face of incurable, chronic, and troublesome diseases, and the number of quacks, healers, and charlatans appears to be growing. [38]

Based on several studies conducted at the beginning of the past decade, it can be argued that superstitions, folklore, and medical rituals are still in use. Małgorzata Lesińska-Sawicka and Monika Waskow conducted a survey in 2012 among 100 people aged 18-87 from the western part of the Pomeranian Voivodeship (from both urban and rural areas). [39] The survey focused on knowledge about folk medicine methods and their application. The study found that in the age group over 50, respondents use folk medicine in 79% of cases, while in the age group under 30, it is used in 22% of cases. These methods are most popular for treating hiccups, styes, angular cheilitis, warts, and rheumatism. [39]

Conventional treatment for a stye (inflammation of the glands of Zeis) includes warm compresses and massage, supplemented with topical antibiotics, and possibly surgical intervention. [39] Respondents who practice folk medicine for treating styes use the following methods: rubbing the affected area with a gold ring, tying a black thread around the fingers on the affected side, or applying egg white compresses. They also use incantations such as: "I did not sow, I did not plow, and I will not harvest," repeated three times with appropriate hand gestures. [39] Interestingly, rubbing with a gold ring does have a therapeutic effect—massaging can unblock the clogged gland openings, aiding the healing process. [41] However, this has nothing to do with the properties of gold itself, a fact of which the respondents are unaware. [39]

Hiccup is an involuntary, synchronous contraction of the intercostal muscles and diaphragm caused by a sudden inhalation, followed by closure of the glottis with a characteristic sound. Conventional treatment mainly involves a wait-and-see approach, pharmacological treatment, or phrenic nerve block. [42] Respondents used the following methods to eliminate hiccups: drinking upside down or drinking from the outer edge of a glass, drawing circles with a finger on the forehead, or placing and sucking on at least one teaspoon of sugar under the tongue. [39] Warts (verrucae) are contagious skin growths caused by various types of human papillomavirus (HPV). Conventional treatment involves surgical or laser removal, cryotherapy, or the use of pharmaceutical preparations. [43] Folk medicine methods used by the respondents to eliminate these skin lesions included rubbing the growths with a string or bone from a grave, tying them with thread and cutting them off, and throwing potato pieces over the shoulder onto a marked spot—if the potato piece rotted, the condition was believed to disappear. [39] Among other unconventional methods used by the respondents, we can also distinguish compresses with alcohol and ants to alleviate rheumatism (the pain-relieving effect is likely due to the warming action of alcohol rather than the ants themselves), and wearing chestnuts on the painful areas to "draw out" disease from the joints. [39] They also use poultices made from fat of hooved animals, such as horses. Participants in the interviews treat warts by applying their urine (also used by them for conjunctivitis), using butter or hot milk compresses overnight, and using the shirt collar's rim. A few respondents also recommended drinking a decoction made from yellow primrose or yellow peony flowers for jaundice or consuming raw eggs for hoarseness. [39]

In another study conducted by researchers from Białystok, Łomża, and the hospital in Wysokie Mazowieckie, 100 adults and 126 adolescents (aged 16-19) were surveyed to investigate differences in attitudes towards preventive medical measures and the use of folk healers between these groups. [44] The obtained data were as follows: 36% of adults and 10.3% of adolescents believed in objects that bring luck and health. Among the respondents, 9% of adults and 6% of adolescents sought help from "healers/grandmothers". Preventive medical measures stemming from folk medicine were rarely followed by the respondents (compared to other superstitions, such as those related to daily life or luck), but as many as 16% of adults admitted to following the superstition that "a pregnant woman should not look at the moon, because the baby will be bald" and "a pregnant woman should not eat pickles, because [breast] milk will sour". Additionally, 18% of surveyed adults adhered to the belief that "a pregnant woman should not fry anything, because wherever the fat drips, the baby will have a birthmark," and 20% believed that "a pregnant woman should not wear coral necklaces, because the baby will be tangled in the umbilical cord". [44] In the adolescent group, none of the respondents adhered to the above preventive procedures, most likely due to being raised and growing up in an era dominated by modern, conventional medicine. [44]

In 2008, Kinga Filipek and Marek Marcyniak from the Medical University of Warsaw conducted a survey on magic and superstitions in sexual life. [45] Through a survey, Kinga Filipek and Marek Marcyniak from the Medical University of Warsaw obtained responses from 278 adult participants, yielding the following data: nearly 13% of those surveyed believe that it is possible to help people through magic, while 40% believe that it is possible to harm others through magic. Interestingly, a considerable number of respondents confirmed their belief in various magical practices, including many who had previously stated a complete disbelief in magic. [45] Nearly 46% of the respondents admitted to practicing practices related to sexual life that could be considered magical, and over 28% of them rated these practices as fully effective. The most common magical actions affecting sexual life included: amulets and talismans (over 37%), magic involving offered flowers (34.5%), magic using the light of candles and the sound of music (6%), carrying a likeness of a loved one or their hair (almost 5%), magic involving bodily secretions such as menstrual blood or semen (close to 3%), and pheromone magic (using personal underwear, a handkerchief, or holding a piece of apple under the armpit for a certain time - 1%). [45] One of the conclusions drawn from the research was that widespread disbelief and disregard for magic do not necessarily align with the practice of rituals labeled as superstitions or magical beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

The review of historical and recent literature allows us to confidently state that folk medicine was significantly widespread among the rural population in 19th and 20th-century Poland. This was reflected in both preventive and therapeutic actions. The above considerations illustrate the considerable complexity of folk medicine, which utilized elements of herbal medicine, folk magic, and numerous practices, the effectiveness of which remains unconfirmed by scientific research. Often, preventive and therapeutic actions intertwined with religious elements, indicating a direct connection with the still-living remnants of ancient Slavic beliefs among rural residents. Despite the multitude of treatment methods in folk medicine, which often varied depending on the place of practice, they frequently drew from similar principles and rules, giving them healing power. These included principles such as analogy, opposites, or transfer, as well as a belief in the repeatability of actions and the magical power of numbers, times of day and night.

The analysis conducted at the end of the studies by contemporary researchers demonstrates that many practices originating from folk medicine in Poland are still in use, although they are not as popular as they once were.

Finally, it is worth noting that the above work is the first description in English of the customs of folk medicine in the territories of former Slavic lands, using Poland as an example. As such, it constitutes a significant compendium of knowledge that can serve as material for many other studies.

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