

**WITCHCRAFT IN MODERN SOCIETY:  
AN ONGOING TRADITION OR A FOLKLORIC RELIC?  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERSISTENCE OF WITCHCRAFT, FROM FOLKLORE  
STORIES TO 21ST CENTURY PRACTICES**

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### Abstract

This article explores witchcraft's ongoing relevance and function in contemporary society based on a qualitative analysis of folklore, historical, and modern practices. Despite the rise of secularism and scientific scepticism, the practice of witchcraft continues, albeit under different names and with different purposes. Through the examination of stories collected by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and partly by Milovan Glišić, as well as contemporary testimonies as a side of comparison, this study reveals that witchcraft serves as a form of spiritual but also practical support in times of personal and social crisis. Rituals like 'The Melting of Fear' and 'Coal Quenching' demonstrate the continuity of magical practices, even as their cultural and religious contexts evolve. This study argues that, while secular individuals may publicly reject the supernatural, many still seek the services of witchcraft practitioners when conventional solutions fail. The methodology of this work includes a literary analysis of the stories of the mentioned authors and qualitative interviews with four individuals. Emphasising the complex interweaving of witchcraft, folklore, and religious and pagan beliefs, this study shows that despite the changing times, magical practices remain dominant and well-known even to today's modern man.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft, Folktales, Contemporary Society, Magic, Witches

**Discipline:** pedagogy, sociology

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*Note: This study is based on ongoing research for a doctoral dissertation exploring the mythological aspects of folk tales. The interviews picked and examined for this study represent a subset of a broader collection that remains ongoing as part of the PhD dissertation research. One component of this research involves analysing folklore stories, with the final results to be presented in the completed dissertation. The second component focuses on collecting and analysing contemporary folk-inspired experiences from the perspective of modern individuals. This analysis will be compared with the previously mentioned data.*

### Absztrakt

**BOSZORKÁNYSÁG A MODERN TÁRSADALOMBAN: FOLYTONOS HAGYOMÁNY VAGY FOLKLÓRIKUS RELIKVIA? A BOSZORKÁNYSÁG FENNMARADÁSÁNAK VIZSGÁLATA A NÉPMESÉKTŐL A 21. SZÁZADI GYAKORLATOKIG**

Jelen tanulmány a boszorkányság kortárs társadalomban betöltött folyamatos jelentőségét és funkcióját tárja fel a folklór, a történeti források és a modern gyakorlatok kvalitatív elemzése alapján. A szekularizáció és a tudományos szkepticizmus térnyerése ellenére a boszorkányság gyakorlata továbbra is fennmarad, jóllehet eltérő elnevezések és célok mentén. Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, valamint részben Milovan Glišić által összegyűjtött történetek, továbbá kortárs tanúságtételek összehasonlító elemzése révén a kutatás arra mutat rá, hogy a boszorkányság a személyes és társadalmi krízishelyzetek idején spirituális, de egyúttal gyakorlati támaszként is funkcionál. Az olyan rítusok, mint a „félelem elolvasztása” vagy a „parázs eloltása” jól szemléltetik a mágikus gyakorlatok folytonosságát, még akkor is, amikor kulturális és vallási kontextusuk változásokon megy keresztül. A tanulmány érvelése szerint bár a szekuláris egyének nyilvánosan elutasíthatják a természetfelettit, sokan mégis a boszorkányság gyakorlóihoz fordulnak, ha a konvencionális megoldások kudarcot vallanak. A vizsgálat módszertana egyrészt a nevezett szerzők műveinek irodalmi elemzését, másrészt négy személlyel készített kvalitatív interjút foglal magában. A boszorkányság, a folklór, valamint a vallási és pogány hiedelmek összetett összefonódását hangsúlyozva a tanulmány bemutatja, hogy az idők változása ellenére a mágikus gyakorlatok továbbra is meghatározóak és a mai modern ember számára is jól ismertek.

**Kulcsszavak:** boszorkányság, népmesék, kortárs társadalom, mágia, boszorkányok

**Diszciplínák:** pedagógia, szociológia

### The roots of witchcraft

The central focus of this study is a specialised spiritually-based craft, known as “witchcraft”, referred to as “vračanje” in Serbian (as a verb) and “vradžbine” when considered as a noun. Witchcraft is deeply rooted in Slavic cultures and is integral to their folklore and former spiritual-medical practices. Historically, the early steps toward scientific inquiry and a methodical approach to understanding various problems, aspirations, and questions often began with practices such as fortune-telling and divination. According to

Višekruna (2008), individuals' initial efforts to comprehend the complex aspects of their calling, as well as the mechanisms underlying various processes in human life and nature, involved engaging in witchcraft and magical rituals. Višekruna further argues that the origins of these witchcraft processes, intended for controlling matter and the spirit of other beings, phenomena, and objects, can be traced back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras. Over time, these practices have survived through eras of paganism, and polytheism, and into the more recent periods of monotheism and atheism.

Rather than disappearing, they have been assimilated into these belief systems, often blending with Christianity, Islam, and modern life in general:

The spirit, soul, and will of the person who performs them (witch doctors, fortune tellers, sorcerers) “rule” the matter and spirit of the “targeted” objects, beings, and phenomena. In doing so, these “mediators” (mediums) also use certain material and spiritual means (objects, words) and thus enter into contact with the ruling forces, beings from the “other side” beyond the visible world accessible to everyone (spirits, souls of the deceased, gods) (Višekruna, 2008, 128.)

There are several reasons why witchcraft or sorcery, that is, the magical services of a sorcerer-witch, were used earlier in the past. In the pre-Christian, pagan era, strict preservation of old traditions and ancient knowledge was striven to ensure the general (as well as individual) well-being of the community. Various magical and often secret seasonal rituals were performed as part of the folk-agricultural calendar to achieve these purposes. This calendar was organised into a system of ritual cycles that included various forms, such as walking tours, ritual feasts, veneration, masking, magical protection, singing, drumming, and scaring performances. The structure of these rituals represented a cycle and was divided into several key units, such as Christmas, Lent, and the autumn period, which is the weakest in terms of ritual expression. This cycle continued into the winter period, featuring notable days such as St. Nicholas’ Day and St. Andrew’s Day, among others (Tolstoj & Radenković, 2001).

As witchcraft and accompanying witchcraft practices moved away from the orientation towards nature and pagan deities, and were combined with newly arrived Christian practices, new interpretations of witchcraft were created. With that, the appearance of a new function and character

changed from general-natural, neutral and positive to dark, sinister and demonic. People who engage in these rituals are often called by various names, most often ‘witches’ or ‘witch doctors’. According to Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1867), witches practice magic and harm others through their powerful rituals, inheriting their abilities by birth. In contrast, some are called ‘mađionici’(magicians) or sorcerers as individuals who do not possess this innate power; instead, they learn the knowledge and skills of sorcery, enchantment, and magic.

### Objectives of this article

This article aims to compare the use, frequency, methods, and reasons for witchcraft and associated magical rituals from the past, exemplified through Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, with similar practices in the modern age, particularly over the last 100 years. In addition to providing basic data on the existence (or non-existence) of these practices today and comparing them with the past, three key questions will be addressed and answered. 1. Do people still practice witchcraft and seek the services of witches and witchcraft diviners today? 2. What are the reasons people visit witches and witchcraft diviners? 3. Is witchcraft still relevant compared to the past? Is it used more or less?

### Methodology

This study applies comparative and qualitative research design aimed at analysing modern and historical practices in witchcraft. The approach combines literary analysis with data collection through interviews. Literary analysis will be conducted on the representative folk tales of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić to understand how witchcraft and magical rituals were portrayed and practised in the past. These tales, gathered from various regions across the Balkans, including Montenegro, provide valuable insight into the cultural and magical practices of the time. Although the cultures within the Balkans exhibit significant variation, both at the

regional and local levels, many mythological and witchcraft practices demonstrate remarkable similarities. This can be used as comparative material because folk tales from this period often reflected the mentality, reality, and everyday life of the people mentioned, not just the creative mind. An extensive collection from 1897, *Serbian Folk Tales, Riddles, and Proverbs*, was chosen for these purposes.

This collection includes 120 folk stories, which brings together almost all the important stories collected by Karadžić and will be used for analysis and comparison. Additionally, interviews will be held with individuals who may have direct experience or knowledge regarding the use and application of witchcraft.

These participants will provide valuable insights into how witchcraft is perceived and practised in contemporary society. The individuals who were interviewed are: Milos Janković (45), Budo Madžgalj (71), Pejka Bataković (86), and Tatjana Medojević (64). All participants, except for Milos Janković, who is from Serbia, come from Montenegro. However, all of them identified their ethnicity as Serbian.

The participants provide a variety of perspectives based on their local traditions and experiences.

### **Witchcraft in Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's folk tales**

Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, born on November 6, 1787, in Tršić (Serbia) was a prominent Serbian linguist, philologist, anthropologist, writer, translator, and academic. Regarded as the most influential Serbian linguist of the 19th century, Karadžić was a key reformer of the Serbian language, a dedicated collector of folk tales, and the author of the first Serbian language dictionary. Karadžić's ethnographic work, which involved overcoming language and technical challenges, preserved the shared cultural heritage of the Balkans, particularly Serbia and Montenegro. This talented ethnographer ap-

proached the collection of folk tales with an ethnographic, hands-on method, travelling across the Balkans to areas like Serbia, Montenegro, Dalmatia, and Bosnia. He believed folk tales should not be recorded directly from the storyteller's mouth, as it did not suit his methodical approach. Instead, he listened to the complete story several times before writing it down himself (Panić Surep, 2009).

In 1815, Jacob Grimm founded the Scientific Society for the Collection of Folklore Material and sent a Circular on Collecting Folk Poetry to Vuk Karadžić via Jernej Kopitar (Kropej, 2013). Kopitar's advice was pivotal, encouraging Karadžić to begin collecting and publishing folk tales, which he believed would provide valuable insight into the worldview and history of the Slavic people (Stojanović, 1924, p. 101). Vuk once stated that writing-recording folk tales was incredibly challenging, requiring immense effort and understanding of the Serbian language to appeal to educated and less educated audiences. This process demands a lifetime of work, balancing tradition and creativity, while also saving the folk spirit and culture (Stefanović Karadžić, 1821). His dedication uncovered a treasure trove of cultural insights about witchcraft, which will play a vital role in this study.

The mentions of witchcraft practices and their following elements will be compared with those shared by the interview participants. Before we delve into the examples of witchcraft, it is important to clarify that the individuals involved in it are often referred to as 'witches', 'witch doctors', 'clairvoyants', or sometimes simply 'some old woman' or 'some man' who possesses specific knowledge about herbs and understands how to perform magical rituals. Some individuals are believed to possess this knowledge from birth, while others acquire or learn it later in life. In this study, both categories will be collectively referred to as – 'Witchcraft Diviners' (Note: The author coined the term 'Witchcraft Diviner' for an ongoing doctoral thesis. A 'Witch' can be classified as a mythological

being if it possesses powers inherited by birth. However, 'Witchcraft Diviner' is a specific type of Witch, representing a person with supernatural abilities, inherited or acquired throughout life. As fieldwork data will show, Witchcraft Diviners, who can be either male or female, are often trained in witchcraft rather than being born with supernatural powers) reflecting the variety of terms used by characters in folk tales. To compare certain witchcraft practices in the stories and interviews more concisely, the most intriguing elements related to the topic will be extracted from Karadžić's works.

### **Witchcraft Diviners – The Role and Function in Folk Tales**

Whether the characters in Vuk Karadžić's stories are truly supernatural beings with innate powers remains unanswered. These tales are primarily folk stories, often inspired by real-life experiences. The focus here is on the ordinary individuals within these narratives, as these common figures are typically the ones people turn to for help. Characters like 'some old woman' or 'some man' are often encountered by the hero in various settings - whether in a village, a forest, at a crossroads, or on a dwelling stone as exemplified in the story 'Three Eels' (Serb.title: 'Tri jegulje'): "When he came to the mountain, he noticed a woman sitting on a dwelling stone, holding a stick in one hand and some herbs in the other" (Stefanović Karadžić, p. 122). According to various tales, supernatural beings often intercept heroes using their 'otherworldly knowledge' or by offering their 'services' to assist or repay favours.

These forms of assistance typically manifest as spells, charms, medicinal herbs, or 'magical' and 'enchanted objects' possessing unique powers to bring about either good or evil. Sometimes, the source of this power is not an object but rather the individual who wields it, suggesting that the power is inherent to the person. In the story "The

Emperor's Daughter the Lamb" (Serb.title: Careva kći ovca) a witch employs her magic to cast a spell on an emperor's daughter, leading to her own tragic demise. To fulfil her malevolent ambitions, the witch, casted spells and performed dark witchcraft. According to the "Serbian Mythology Dictionary" (1970), witchcraft aided the sick and provided protection for the healthy against malevolent spells and demonic forces. However, witchcraft carried the potential to inflict harm and misfortune upon those who did not have any fault and could be used for selfish purposes. This led to the Church's persecution and cursing of witches, causing them to refrain from attending church, receiving communion, or participating in confession (Kulišić et.al, 1970).

Witches, like the one in the story, and their professional counterparts Witchcraft Diviners, often possess the ability known as the 'evil eyes'. This capability allows them to exert magical influence without needing traditional magical aids like herbs, inscriptions, or incantations. Essentially, their own being can serve as conduits for magical spells. In the story "Mute Animal Language" a shepherd encounters a magical snake whose life he spares. In gratitude, the snake bestows upon him the gift of "Mute Animal Language" (Serb.title: Nemušti jezik). This unique language enables the shepherd to speak with and understand the thoughts of not only snakes but all animals. According to the "Encyclopedic Dictionary of Slavic Mythology", the Mute Animal Language is the term for the language spoken by plants and animals, and it is also referred to as 'snake language'. In Montenegro, there is a belief that animals and humans once spoke the same language. However, after the flood, God gave animals a different language. Although humans could initially understand this new language, they ultimately lost the ability due to their sins (Tolstoj&Radenković, 2001).

In the folk tale, "Fish-The Godfather" (Serb.title: Kum Riba) a couple tragically keep tragically losing

children immediately after birth. In her despair, the woman seeks guidance from a prophetess, who advises her to wear specific spells and charms around her neck to increase her chances of giving birth to a living and healthy child. The woman disregards this ritual and instead gives birth to a child in a 'bloody lining' known as 'Vjedogonja'. As noted by Kulišić et.al (1970) and Tolstoj and Radenković (2001), Vjedogonja (also referred to by synonyms such as Zduhač and Jedogonja) are said to be born in a 'bloody' or 'red lining' at birth. Preserving this placenta is critical, as it is believed to safeguard the creature's power, which can manifest both positively and negatively. According to the cited authors, Vjedogonjas are believed to protect their communities from demonic influences and adverse weather conditions. Conversely, in the cultures of Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is a common belief that individuals born with a bloody placenta are destined to develop abilities such as witchcraft, psychic powers, or herbalism, often used for harming others. This so-called 'gift for witchcraft' is typically associated with situations where individuals seek answers to pressing life questions, problems, and challenges.

An intriguing addition to this part of the study, as a brief exploration of other collectors, is the narrative of Milovan Glišić, often referred to as the 'Serbian Gogol'. He was renowned for his surrealist and grotesque tales and is credited with establishing the genre of rural and realistic short stories in Serbia (Mišić, 2005; Skerlić, 1974). In his story "A Rare Beast" (Serb. title: Redak zver) we encounter witchcraft practitioners, much like those found in Karadžić's works, represented as ordinary village old women possessing the knowledge to cast spells and perform rituals to assist unfortunate individuals (Note: The story belongs to the collection "Priopovetke" from 1963). Among them is a figure named Baba Višnja who was said to have

been born in a bloody lining - a motif reminiscent of the tale "Fish-The Godfather" by Vuk Karadžić. Following her birth, Baba Anđa gained clairvoyant and healing abilities.

Baba Višnja is also characterised as a 'herbalist' and a 'fortune teller'. This witchcraft diviner is adept in the magical ritual known as melting lead or 'The Melting of Fear' (Note: The author created this term of the ritual for the ongoing doctoral thesis, which forms the basis of this study) a method through which fate is foretold or answers are sought for various questions or dilemmas. "Various methods are mentioned in West Slavic documents on witchcraft processes in the 16th and 17th centuries: throwing dice, beans, pouring melted wax or lead, etc. on the internal organs of animals, on the shadow, on the Psalter, etc" (Tolstoj & Radenković, 2001, 110). Here's what is mentioned about it in the story itself:

„Anđa got up and brought some wrappings from the house. She took out two or three flying bullets from one. She blew air into them, whispered something, then put them on the fire shovel and pushed them into the fire. Then she took a green bowl full of water, and when the lead melted in the fire, she took a fire shovel and dropped it into the water. The hot lead sizzled in the water and pieces of all kinds of shapes were made of it: some like flowers, some like needles, and one big piece came out looking a lot like a child: it was beautifully poured like a head and some little paws here and there (...)” (Glišić, 1963, p.150).

Additionally, the elderly woman Anđa was knowledgeable about 'the coal quenching' (Note: The author created the term 'Coal Quenching' for the ongoing doctoral thesis, of which this study is a part) ritual. This practice is often used to help victims of certain illnesses or disorders, particularly children who may be afraid of something or someone. In the tale, she gives instructions for the unfortunate victim:

“I’ll put out some coal for him here, so you take this home. When the sun is about to set, take him out to the woodpile, and wash him with this water over his forehead, chest, arms, and legs, but crosswise. Give him a little bit of water to drink from the fire poker. And what’s left, take it to the crossroads and spill it over there (...)” (Glišić, 1963, p.152).

Original quote in Serbian: “(...)ja ću mu zagasiti ovde i malo uglevlja, pa ti ovo ponesi kući. Kad bude sunce na smirivanju, izvedi ga na drvljanik, pa ga malo umij ovom vodom po čelu, po prsima, po rukama i po nogama, ali unakrst. Podaj mu preko

vatralja nek se napije malo. A što ostane, iznesi gde na raskršće te prospi (...)”

According to Tolstoj and Radenković (2001), a similar ritual is performed to determine whether someone is ‘under a spell’ or not. In this ritual, an odd number of red-hot coals are lowered into ‘untouched water’, symbolising the boundary between ‘this world and the other world’. If one of the coals sinks beneath the water, it indicates that the person being tested is afflicted with witchcraft and needs help.

*Picture 1. The ritual involves pouring lead into water. The person needing help is positioned beneath the pot and protected by a cloth from the hot water and lead. Source: Printscreen/Youtube/Pohi*



*Picture 2. The conclusion and crucial part of the ritual—the shape of the lead—helps the witchcraft diviner determine the source of the problem. Source: Printscreen/Youtube/Pohi*



## Witchcraft in Modern Times: Stories from Interlocutors

### *The coal quenching, The Melting of Deprivation*

In Tatjana Medojević’s story, Witchcraft Diviner, also known as ‘viještac’ or ‘vračar’ in Serbian, Kosta is the man whom the interlocutor credits with healing her younger brother when she was 14 years old. Her brother had stopped eating, and despite

their best efforts, nothing seemed to help. Kosta was skilled in a ritual called ‘coal quenching’ so he came to their house and began the same process described in the above-mentioned stories:

We had a wood-burning stove. He told my mother to open the stove door and turn up the heat so that only the embers remained, and for

mother to bring a bucket of cold water. And he opened the door, he took the fire poker (...) He took the fire poker and, one piece at a time, he put several pieces of those red-hot embers into the water. It was going out, the water was foaming and smoking. Mostly, that ember was turned into coal. And he was saying something, as far as I could hear, quietly, I have no idea what he was doing...(Unpublished data set).

Same as in the story “The Rare Beast” the witchcraft diviner Kosta instructed Tatjana’s mother Leposava to pour coal water at a crossroads and to include some coal in the boy’s food. Following this ritual, the boy began to eat normally and experienced no further issues.

Tatjana also references a ritual called ‘The Melting of Deprivation’ which she learned about from her neighbours Cmilja and Jela. According to Tatjana, when her mother faced difficulties, she would call the two women and lie down on the floor forming a cross. The neighbours then wrapped red knitting thread around her body three times: from her toes to her head, and from her right hand to her left. The purpose of this ritual was to eliminate a specific problem that Tatjana’s mother was experiencing.

#### *Witches – coffee and she-butterfly witchcraft*

Pejka Bataković spoke about the enduring presence of witches throughout history. She recounted how even those closest to her, including her mother-in-law, could engage in great evil. Pejka described an incident where her mother-in-law, whom she believed was a witch, ‘poured something into her coffee’ which caused Pejka to lose her sanity. The substance added to the coffee was a type of witchcraft prepared by her mother-in-law with the intent to harm Pejka. Pejka explained that her mother-in-law had a magical ability known as the ‘evil eye’ which allowed her to make animals drop dead simply by looking at them. For example,

there was an incident when her mother-in-law cast her gaze on a cow by the side of the road, and the animal collapsed instantly. Despite this, it was from her mother-in-law that Pejka learned the art of ‘beans fortune telling’. For this form of divination, she explained, 41 beans are needed. These beans are scattered on the table, from which one can predict a person’s fate.

She recounts an intriguing incident involving a local witch who allegedly sent witchcraft in the form of an animal. According to Bataković’s account, a she-butterfly(moth) unexpectedly entered a house, inciting widespread panic among the residents, who frantically attempted to capture and eliminate it. They yelled “witch, witch!” in fervour to rid themselves of the perceived threat. Ultimately, they succeeded in catching the moth and threw it into the fire, hoping to thwart the evil the witch had dispatched to their home. This episode reflects a deep-rooted belief among the people that the she-butterfly symbolises the animal incarnation of the witch, who had come to inflict harm upon them. Many South Slavic peoples held the belief that the souls of demonic entities inhabited certain ‘shadowy’ creatures, including dogs, cats, birds, snakes, and even insects. In Montenegro and neighbouring regions, it was thought that the soul of a witch or vampire could be found within a butterfly emerging from their mouth. Depending on the gravity of the situation, killing a female butterfly could sometimes signify the death of the very being whose soul was contained within it (Máchal, 1891). Čajkanović (1994) supports this notion through etymological connections, noting that in Montenegro and Bosnia, the term ‘lampir’, synonymous with ‘vampire’, is linguistically linked to the word for ‘butterfly’ (Gruppe, 1908).

#### *Corpse water, red thread, and three chairs*

Milos Janković shares stories about his grandfather and an old woman from the village known for her skills in witchcraft and divination. Accord-



ding to him, she dealt with ‘strange things’. On one occasion, his grandfather, Živan, visited the old woman’s house, where she lived with her orphaned granddaughters. The old woman welcomed Živan inside and instructed him to sit in the centre of three chairs tied together with a red thread. She offered him water as a refreshing drink. However, it later turned out that it was ‘corpse water’ which caused Miloš’s grandfather, Živan, to lose his sanity. Živan had claimed that he had lost his mind to such an extent that he considered taking his own life. Everyone concluded that the old woman had ‘bewitched him’ and it was necessary to remove this curse. Therefore, Živan visited another witchcraft diviner who used magic to lift the previous enchantment.

Miloš recounts the confession of his neighbour, Milena, who assisted village women during childbirth. In one case, a woman gave birth to a child with a ‘bloody placenta’ which led to the belief that the child would be a ‘viještac’ (commonly known as Vjedogonja or Zduhač) and would possess the magical syndrome of ‘evil eyes’. To prevent the negative effects associated with this, it was customary to burn the placenta. However, Milena did not perform this ritual correctly. She later stated that her curiosity drove her to see if anything would actually happen. As a result of this incomplete ritual, the boy exhibited supernatural abilities: cattle would flee from him and would drop dead upon making eye contact, a manifestation of the evil eye’s influence. Eventually, Milena experienced a crisis of conscience and decided to burn the placenta long after the birth. Unfortunately, because the ritual was performed incorrectly and belatedly, the boy died suddenly, according to the villagers.

*The melting of fear and the ritual of bewitching the cow*

Budo Madžgalj discusses the ritual ‘The Melting of Fear’, mentioned in the story “A Rare Beast.” He claims that many people have used this ritual to

eliminate various problems, ranging from headaches to major life issues.

They come and bewitch you, your head hurts... Women pour the lead... they pour out the lead, coal, to put out your fear. She pours lead into the water to drive away fear (...) Devils are invoked when doing this, God forbid... but when she bewitches, that creature helps, drives away evil forces (...) (Unpublished dataset)

The frequent issue surrounding certain rituals is that individuals like Budo often characterise them as negative because they supposedly summon ‘demons’ which are seen as malevolent, incorporeal, and otherworldly beings. Conversely, these same individuals frequently seek help from witches/witchcraft diviners who engage in similar magical practices to address their specific challenges and ward off evil. The question of whether evil can be dispelled by evil is a spiritual and philosophical one that this study does not explore. However, when such questions are posed, the respondents often evade answering or seem uncertain about what to say.

Budo Madžgalj describes a ritual used exclusively by witchcraft diviners for malevolent purposes, specifically aimed at harming someone. Women performing the ritual would focus their efforts on the livestock of their intended victims. In the past, many people relied on cattle breeding for their livelihood, so even the loss of a single cow was significant, as it provided milk and various dairy products. Housewives would often hang a ‘strainer’- a cloth used for straining milk, on the fence to dry. However, this is precisely what the witchcraft diviners were waiting for; when no one was around, they would ‘cast spells’ on the drying cloth. The purpose of this magical ritual was to make the cow stop producing milk, thus leaving the family without a vital food source.

### Analysis

It would be assertive to claim anything with certainty about a taboo subject like witchcraft. However, over several centuries, certain patterns can still be observed in this area. It should also be acknowledged that obtaining quantitative data is challenging; for instance, asking someone in a survey whether they practice witchcraft will make it unlikely for them to provide a meaningful or honest answer. Consequently, the outcome of a qualitative analysis offers the closest insight we can gain when exploring contemporary witchcraft practices. After analysing the practice of witchcraft from the stories collected by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, along with those briefly mentioned by Milovan Glišić, and repeating the same process with the stories shared by the interlocutors, we reached the following conclusions:

Witchcraft is still practised today, although it goes by different names, is understood in various ways, and is performed for different reasons. People are reluctant to admit that they either practice witchcraft themselves or seek the services of those who do. In the past, folklore suggested that witchcraft served as a form of 'medicine' against certain issues, and there was a general understanding that frequent involvement with such practices might draw the attention of 'higher' forces. Both in the past as well as in the present, traditions mingled with monotheistic beliefs, and people held onto various beliefs. However, today's society often reflects an additional sense of absolute disbelief, or at least a public scepticism, regarding anything supernatural. Many secular individuals refuse to accept that there might be forces beyond rational explanation that can influence their lives. Yet, paradoxically, during difficult times, these individuals also seek out that 'something' - a higher power - when earthly solutions fall short.

*Here is what could be encountered in both the 19th and 21st centuries in almost identical forms:*

Witchcraft, in general, involves seeking help from individuals, often referred to as 'some old woman' or 'some man' who are believed to have the ability to cast spells. These practitioners of witchcraft possess the knowledge to cast spells on both animate and inanimate objects, whether intentionally or unintentionally, with the purpose of either aiding or harming others.

A person who practices witchcraft and offers such services is commonly referred to as a witch, sorcerer, herbalist, seer, or fortune teller. In some cases, these individuals also serve as local hodja, or Islamic religious teachers (Note: Protective charms such as talismans and amulets, or any inscriptions that are not derived from the Qur'an or authentic prayers, are considered forbidden. If these items are believed to possess inherent power to bring benefits or ward off evil, they are viewed as a form of 'shirk.' (Ljakić, 2020).

Generally, people recognise that practitioners of these rituals are not considered 'clean', yet they still seek their help believing these individuals can assist. Regardless of their faith - whether artisans or clients - many people overlook the implications of seeking help from practitioners of other religions. For instance, when a Christian or Muslim consults someone of a different religion, it raises concerns about polytheism; similarly, engaging with these practices often entails elements of paganism intertwined with polytheism. Notably, both the practitioners and their clients, regardless of their belief systems, including atheists, are aware of these contradictions. Despite this awareness, they often choose to participate in such magical practices.

In addition to general practices like casting witchcraft and using evil eyes, two specific magical rituals stand out: 'The Melting of Fear' and 'The Coal Quenching' ritual. Both rituals share the same purpose - people seek them for similar reasons - and their steps are almost identical, with only minor differences. In 'The Melting of Fear' the magical items used are consistent: lead, a vessel for

melting the lead, and a container of water where the molten lead is poured. The process involves melting the lead over a fire, and then pouring it into cold water. Once the lead hardens, the resulting shape helps identify the problem of the individual who participated in the ritual. On the other hand, 'The Coal Quenching' ritual focuses less on identifying the problem and more on alleviating pain, without inquiring about its nature. The procedure is straightforward and remains unchanged: an ember is taken and lowered into cold water using metal tongs. The resulting cooled coal and coal water are then utilised to complete the ritual of problem removal, which may involve drinking the mixture, incorporating it into food, or scattering it at a crossroads, among other methods.

### Answers to the study questions

1. Do people still practice witchcraft and seek the services of witches and witchcraft diviners today? – *Yes, absolutely.*
2. What are the reasons people visit witches and witchcraft diviners? – *Life presents problems and doubts that lack solutions in scientifically based fields. Moreover, personal dissatisfaction, feelings of vengeance, and the desire to harm others for personal reasons can arise.*
3. Is witchcraft still relevant compared to the past? Is it used more or less? – *Without detailed quantitative analyses, it is impossible to provide a clear answer. However, based on the information from this specific study, people are still utilising witchcraft. Additionally, the service providers are not failing; in fact, they are evolving into new forms, such as tarot card readers and astrological specialists.*

### Limitations of the study

While the overall sample is larger, only a portion of the data has been analysed for this study, as it forms part of a broader PhD dissertation. This limitation affects the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on historical fol-

klore and self-reported experiences may introduce subjective biases. Future research will aim to address these issues by expanding the analysed dataset, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, and conducting ethnographic fieldwork to enhance the depth and scope of the study.

### Conclusion

Witchcraft is a practice that remains a relevant aspect of contemporary society, which in some small parts evolves from those forms that are presented in folklore stories. The greater part, however, remains unchanged. Despite the growing scepticism and secularism of modern life, a large number of individuals continue to seek witchcraft practitioners because of the challenges they face in life. Such is the case, especially, with problems that cannot find a solution and relief in science. This study has shown that witchcraft practices are deeply connected to folklore, religious beliefs, as well as local traditions that cross the boundaries of religion and include both spiritual and practical motivations. While the names of the rituals may change, rituals like 'The Melting of Fear' and 'The Coal Quenching' hold significant importance and their function remains resistant to adaptation and change.

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#### Photos

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