

## **In the service of hope? Self-awareness of folk healers and their social reception**

Charyton MA.

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, Poland

### **ABSTRACT**

---

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research was to obtain knowledge about the activity of contemporary folk healers from Podlasie from two points of view – the healers themselves and representatives of the local communities.

**Materials and methods:** The research material had been collected over the last few years in the eastern Podlasie region, particularly in the municipalities of Bielsk Podlaski and Hajnówka (2008). A full range of qualitative methods had been used, ranging from structured interviews and casual conversations, to observations and participation in the researched practices. The subjects of the research were the healers and other persons functioning in their social environment. The group of non-healers was clearly diversified demographically as well as culturally.

**Results:** The folk medicine practiced by the folk healers in Podlasie proved to be an autonomous system of knowledge, very coherent, traditional and

symbolic (based on trust in God and non-invasive curative methods), and additionally, still quite popular among certain local communities. Though, it also must be stated, that the self-awareness of the healers contrasted with the ambivalent social reception of such folk practitioners.

**Conclusion:** The dominant religious aspect opens a wide area for discussion about the importance of the power of sacrum, hope and the placebo effect for an active patient, positively engaged in the curative process, who decides to combine therapeutic methods of both academic and folk medicine. From an ethnological point of view, the activity of Podlasian folk healers could be viewed as a challenge and an opportunity rather than a danger to health.

**Key words:** contemporary folk healers, ambivalence, hope

---

#### **Corresponding author:**

Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej  
ul. św. Marcin 78  
61-809 Poznań, Poland  
Tel/Fax: +48 61 829 4817, Fax: +48 61 829 4710  
E-mail: chary@amu.edu.pl (Małgorzata Anna Charyton)

Received: 6.06.2012

Accepted: 28.06.2012

Progress in Health Sciences

Vol. 2(1) 2012·pp 113-121.

© Medical University of Białystok, Poland

## INTRODUCTION

Although it is doubtful that folk healers shall ever stop offering their services to those who believe in their healing power, the profile of their activity is gradually changing. Even in the western world, traditional folk healers can still be found. In Podlasie (northeastern Poland) quite an interest in and high activity of folk healers can be observed. The research team recently exploring traditional superstitions of the area had noticed that as well [1]. In this paper, a current view of Podlasie folk healers is presented. The geographical and cultural scope of the researched phenomenon is part of the region spreading from the eastern Polish border to Białystok, specifically Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski municipalities (Fig. 1).



**Fig 1.** Poland (white), Podlasie voivodeship (gray) and the researched area of the activity of 'szeptuchy' folk healers (red).

Employment of the term 'folk healers' is connected with the source of the practitioners' medical knowledge, determining how they understand matters of health and illness as well as their activity rather than their detachment from contemporary reality [2]. Nowadays, as in the past, folk medicine does not exist as isolated or unchangeable – though it was perceived in such a romantic way by many generations of researchers. Acting in parallel to biomedical doctors, as well as different alternative therapy specialists, traditional folk healers function in a pluralistic medical environment (for more on the subject of 'new medical pluralism' see [3, 4]).

Considering this wider medical context, it is important to explain that the research only concentrated on the 'szeptuchy' folk healers and their patients, with no interest in any other practitioners of folk medicine leading their activity in the countryside. However, there have recently been reports in the media on the activity of herbalists using folk methods in Podlasie [5, 6].

Considering the past though, it should be assumed that there must have been other categories of traditional healers in Podlasie, as well as across Poland. Unfortunately, this can only be speculated upon, because the literature addressing these matters in Podlasie is almost non-existent. In the only accessible paper by Bernard Kielak, midwives using herbal medicines, quack doctors reciting charms and blacksmiths extracting teeth are just mentioned [7]. Without a doubt the home sphere, also essential today, was previously very important in folk medicine. The thin line separating it from what clearly is the competence of specialists has always been fuzzy, and both spheres interweave to such a degree that some practices cannot be clearly assigned to just one of them. It is worth adding, though, that in Białystok and particularly in other smaller towns in the region, the medical pluralism is much more diversified and the activity of healers who could be met there has different origins and a more commercial character [2].

I must also mention that the first part of this text (folk healers and their self-awareness) is mainly a translation of a fragment of my paper published in the Polish in 2010, in the book edited by Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka [8]. Here it contains only minor changes, extra tables and a map.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper presents the most important conclusions on the subject resulting from field work, which began in 2008. Field research included ethnographic interview, observation and participation. The last one was the most exciting method, which was mainly based on becoming the subject of charms and prayers of 'szeptuchy' (this term, the local name for folk healers, is explained in detail further in this paper). There were two ways to witness a healer at work: arrive as a patient, or be offered help by the healer him/herself during a conversation with him/her.

The purpose of this study was to obtain information on the circumstances under which one becomes a folk healer and the attributes associated with such a person. Healers were asked who they actually were and who they thought they were. Also the range of ailments which are the object of their therapeutic activities was researched – for explanation of what is their understanding of health, how they explain the causes and characteristics of specific illnesses. Finally, every aspect of the healing process was examined. People other than healers were asked if they had ever been treated by a 'szeptucha' folk healer, what kind of problem they had had and if the treatment helped. They were also asked for their general opinion about 'szeptuchy' and this kind of healers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over twenty folk healers took part in the research (estimated quantity is ca. 50-100) as well as dozens of different inhabitants of Podlasie. Full

data was collected from eighteen healers. Most of them were elderly widowed women and housewives (retired farmers), Orthodox Christians, a part of the Belarusian minority, speaking a whole variety of local Belarusian dialects [Table 1].

**Table 1.** Metrical data of ‘szeptuchy’ folk healers.

AGE	SEX	ETHNICITY	FAITH	MARITAL STATUS	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION
62	MAN	Belarusian	orthodox	single	primary	retired driver
~80	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	single	none	retired farmer
83	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	widow	primary	retired farmer
78	WOMAN	Orthodox Christian	orthodox	widow	primary	retired farmer
81	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
73	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
86	MAN	Belarusian	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
69	WOMAN	Local	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
86	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	widow	none	retired farmer
80	MAN	Belarusian	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
84	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	widow	primary	data not known
78	WOMAN	Orthodox Christian	orthodox	widow	primary	retired farmer
82	WOMAN	Polish	orthodox	widow	primary	retired farmer
78	WOMAN	Belarusian	orthodox	widow	primary	retired farmer
67	MAN	Orthodox Christian	orthodox	married	primary	retired farmer
92	WOMAN	Polish	catholic	widow	data not known	data not known
70	WOMAN	Polish	catholic	married	primary	farmer, voit
76	WOMAN	Polish	catholic	widow	primary	retired farmer

During recent years, the activity of folk healers within the region had been noted by Polish researchers during their field work, but it had never become the object of a more extensive medical study. Zuzanna Grębecka decided to use the term ‘szeptun’ (masculine). She supported her choice by a variety of sources pointing to the existence of this term in the Polish language [9- 12]. In respect to the folk healers in Podlasie, the word is also mentioned by Zbigniew Libera [13] and Włodzimierz Piątkowski [14]. In this work, not without some difficulty, the term ‘szeptucha’ (singular feminine, plural: ‘szeptuchy’ or ‘szeptuchi’) is used, because it is the most frequently heard in the local spoken language.

The first problem with the term ‘szeptucha’ is that the masculine form of the word people. In an attempt to answer to the question who can be considered a ‘szeptucha’, one must find out how such practitioners of folk medicine see themselves. Out of eighteen healers who were

does not exist in Polish. Though several male healers were registered, the masculine word, ‘szeptuch’, was never used in respect to them, and there was strong opposition despite my suggestions to use it. This and other nouns (‘szeptacz’, ‘szeptarz’, ‘szeptun’, ‘szeptuszka’), which are derivatives of the verb ‘szeptać’ (to whisper), can be found in the Polish Dictionary by Samuel Linde. All the old meanings of these words meant ‘znachor’, ‘zamawiacz’, ‘zażegnawacz’, which simply means a quack doctor [15]. No masculine equivalent of ‘szeptucha’ has ever been heard during field work. It is worth mentioning that people in Podlasie use the word in its plural form to mean healers of both genders.

The second problem is that the term ‘szeptucha’ is understood differently by different interviewed, only half described themselves as ‘szeptucha’. Moreover, only a few of them had done so of their own accord and others only in response to a direct question containing the word

‘szeptucha’. One of the women described herself as ‘babka’ (wise woman, granny) [16], and one man, with a similar practice to others, but called himself

‘maścier’ (Rus. ‘ма́стер’ [17], Eng. master) and clearly distinguished himself from ‘szeptucha’:

**Table 2.** Folk illnesses which have become the domain of ‘szeptuchy’ folk healers.

AGE	SEX	FOLK ILLNESS							
		RANY	BÓL	KOŁTUN	ŁĘK	RÓŻA	UROK	NERW	WIATR
		WOUNDS	PAIN	PLICA	FEAR	ROSE	EVIL EYE	NERVE	WIND
62	MAN			●		●	●	●	
~80	WOMAN			●				●	
83	WOMAN	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
78	WOMAN			●				●	
81	WOMAN		●			●	●		●
73	WOMAN			●	●	●	●	●	●
86	MAN			●		●	●	●	●
69	WOMAN			●	●	●	●	●	●
86	WOMAN				●		●	●	●
80	MAN	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
84	WOMAN	●			●	●	●	●	●
78	WOMAN		●		●	●	●		●
82	WOMAN			●	●	●		●	●
78	WOMAN							●	
67	MAN		●		●		●	●	●
92	WOMAN				●		●		●
70	WOMAN					●	●		●
76	WOMAN	●				●			
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>

Legend

●	healer tries to cope with this illness
●	healer is an expert in dealing with this illness

*Maścier is my name. [How? – MACH] The name for it is maścier in Russian. I only heal: from the wind, rose... and remove spells. [...] Szseptuchy, they could be good or bad, and I have no right [...], when I know how to undo [an illness – MACH],*

*I also know how its origin. Maścier must know in order to save people [man, 80 years old].*

Some inhabitants of Podlasie are convinced that ‘szseptuchy’ do not have good intentions and that the source of their powers is the devil, constantly ordering them to do evil. In his Anthropological Study of Deviation, Andrzej Perzanowski, among many deviations from socially accepted norms, has described a mental condition, in which the subject not only claims ‘possession

that gives the power of healing, but also clairvoyance, the ability to find lost objects and cure people possessed by the devil’ [18]. Some of

the folk healers, who were the subjects of my research, assured they possess all these abilities. They also stated they received help from an angel or directly from God. Ludwik Stomma wrote in his work:

*Ambivalence, by which the people dealing with unconventional medicine can be characterized, and which is clearly visible at the level of the nomenclature, is a distinctive feature for all mediators maintaining contacts with another world, intermediaries between people and God or ghosts [19].*

This ambivalence has been demonstrated most fully by Zbigniew Libera [13], though not without accentuation of negative opinions pertaining the so-called ‘peoples’ doctors’. Among practitioners, negative connotations have been rather seldom, nevertheless half of them did not want to be named doctor, healer or addressed by any other term. They were more inclined to use their name or pseudonym, or simply described what they were doing, saying they ‘withhold illnesses’ (Pol. ‘od chorób odmawiają’), save people (Pol. ‘ludzi ratują’). However, they often described their activity as treatment. Those practitioners often emphasized that they are not doctors, because they had not obtained any formal medical education. They explained they know nothing about the diseases that doctors treat, but attend only in such instances in which doctors do not recognize or do not consider to be diseases (Table 2).

So they mainly deal with the problems which from a medical point of view are not considered diseases, so-called medically unexplained symptoms [20]. In medical anthropology, they are described as folk illnesses and said to be kind of ‘syndromes from which members of a particular group claim to suffer and for which their culture provides an aetiology, a diagnosis, preventive measures and regimes of healing’ [21]. Basic statements on the subject were made by anthropologists Arthur Kleinman [22] and Allan Young [23]. Characteristics of the Podlasian problems are rather complex and link very traditional concepts with some new trends [24, 25]. A similar attitude was observed in Podole (Ukraine) by Joanna Musiatewicz [26].

The Podlasian folk healers are convinced their ability to cure others is a gift from God, and that seems to play a key factor of their self-awareness. The result of their acceptance of that gift is their frank desire to help others. This desire is what determines the scope of ‘szepuchy’ activity, as well as the means and methods used. According to

Zuzanna Grębecka’s explanation of the folk legend which says that when Jesus had preached in the temple, he had passed secrets of curative knowledge and text of magic formulas to his listeners [27]. There are two components

mentioned in the legend, which only when combined together allow efficient treatment – they are the text of magic formulas and the secret ability to cure. The secret may be interpreted as a gift from God that is passed to healers every single time, so they could make correct use of the received tool. Stories of that sort were registered in conversations with the Podlasian healers on several occasions. Some of them, despite not using the exact argumentation described above, in many aspects seemed to have based their activity on the same grounds. The particular importance of understanding this gift in such a way, in the consciousness of contemporary inhabitants of the eastern trans-border region, was also proved by other researchers [26, 28, 29].

In return for the gift received from God, ‘szepuchy’ serve others. They organize their daily activities to fulfill this prerogative (to the degree depending upon their reputation in the community and the resulting number of patients). They believe they must help whenever somebody asks for it, because in a sense they are irreplaceable. In the healers’ minds, the importance of their prayer cannot be equated with prayer of a man who asks God for health, or even with the prayer of a priest. They claim that as appointed by God for this purpose, their supplications are best heard by him and hence responded to. The folk healers stress that their intentions must be pure, free from regret or anger towards people, to be able to help even their greatest enemy. A gift that is improperly used may be taken away.

Additionally, according to the long-lived tradition, the folk healer should pass on her/his knowledge. ‘Because of their miraculous powers, the words of God are to be passed to other peoples’, wrote Magdalena Zowczak [30]. It is sometimes said that ‘szepucha’ suffers greatly, unable to die, as long as she does not pass her secrets to somebody. Some of my interlocutors claim, though, that a long and painful death is the ultimate proof that the person took her/his powers from devil.

In another paper, Zowczak explained:

*Wizards cannot have a typical death, seeing devils trying to claim their soul in their long-lasting agony; surely, another person willing to take over the evil powers and extend a helping hand would help [28].*

Confirmation of the existence of similar superstitions is also found in contemporary materials from the Vilnius region [29]. Podlasian folk healers willingly boast about longevity and a peaceful death of the relatives who passed the gift to them.

*My mother died in 1979, 93 she was. Said she was going to die, did not fall ill [man, 86 years].*

The accepted by the folk healers forms of compensation for their help is also a matter of faith. 'Szeptucha' usually does not demand anything from the patient, because having received gift of healing from God, she should repay him by serving others. There is no charge for the service. Getting wealthy on the words of God is considered immoral. Some of them believe that for breaking this principle they may be punished by losing their gift of healing. They categorically refuse to take anything from people who are considered poor by the local community standards (also from students). Others only accept a symbolic payment for their charms and prayers, as much as one can afford (Pol. 'co łaska'). Most often they accept sweets, without money being involved. In some other villages, though, there is a custom of leaving a one, two or five PLN coin on the table, after the treatment. The healers usually do not oppose such minor gratifications, and spend the received money on candles in the local Christian Orthodox church. One old woman, being quite unnerved, responded in the local dialect:

*Prayer only, and moreover money I do not want. For money I do not pray, and may God help – and some people leave chocolate, after all, you won't throw it away, and I take [woman, 78 years old].*

Another woman explained:

*I take money, but not much, and quickly to the Orthodox church, and in front of the holy icons [light – MACH] candles [woman, 82 years old].*

Gift from God is the first condition of healing, the second is the character of the candidate for a healer, the personal traits that determine his/her relations with others. 'Szeptuchy' are usually people who are calm, patient, empathetic, easily forgive, and love other people. Other traits of a potential healer are determined by the level of public trust and acceptance of certain behaviors. Such a person's piety is treated as a must, because a person who satisfies God with her/his deeds is better suited to ask for his mercy for others. That is why 'szeptuchy' often emphasize that they are God's servants through fasting, regularly attending masses, cleaning the chapel, singing in the church choir. As virtuous Christians, they also avoid addictions [8].

### **Social reception**

In casual conversations with inhabitants of Podlasie, a variety of words were used to describe the healers: 'szeptucha', 'szeptunka' or 'babka' mentioned above, but also 'wróżka' (fairy) and 'czarownica' (witch). The variety of terms is a reflection of the aforementioned ambivalence,

which is also characteristic of the social reception of the healers.

Reception of the folk healers by many inhabitants of Podlasie is enthusiastic. They often either know somebody who had used their help, or admit to being a patient at least once. Hence, they can pinpoint where such folk healers live and know their names. The people often share the superstitions functioning in the healers' self-awareness pertaining to the gift from God, piety and humility. Deliberating on the effectiveness of the healers' practices, the power of healing, they often say 'There is something to it!' (Pol. 'Coś jest!'). As so called anecdotal evidence, they mention instances of positive healings. If confronted with doubts from others, they often prevent further conversation by a very popular answer in this context 'It will not harm, and may help...' (Pol. 'Nie poszkodzi, a może i pomoże...'). People presenting such an attitude more often than not either live in or come from rural communities and also identify with the Christian teachings.

Opponents seldom are able to pinpoint specific folk practitioners. They may have never met persons using their services, though living in Podlasie they have often heard about folk healers. These people more willingly retell stories overheard on the media, or from friends, pertaining various practitioners, where the result was not positive for the patient. Quite often, they also mention one in which the media linked the activity of the 'szeptuchy' healers to a tragic car accident of an Orthodox priest from Hajnówka [31]. In opposition to the enthusiasts, they usually do not distinguish between traditional folk healers and other contemporary ones – using foreign healing traditions and New Age type trends [2]. Religious people belonging to this group point to the official position of both the Orthodox or Catholic Churches in this matter [32], according to which healing is a sin due to its contact with the devil and use of black magic. Because of that such persons avoid contacts with folk healers considering it dangerous in the spiritual sense.

The third group of people does not treat the folk healers seriously. They are indifferent about the possible powers the healers may have received from God or the devil. These persons seldom display strong emotional reactions to the healers and are more reserved towards them. They do not view the activity of these practitioners either as serious danger or an opportunity, considering them an element of local folklore.

The above categorization of attitudes has its drawbacks. Firstly, it is a generalization of the continuum observed on the attitude axis. Secondly, it should be considered that the expressed opinions about the healers (especially the skeptics) may differ from real-life practice. The ambivalent image

of the healers results in a reluctance of some of their patients to admit to using their services.

It is also worth mentioning that those inhabitants in Podlasie who belong to the clergy, or medical personnel, do not express clearly negative opinions about the folk healers, seeing some positive aspects of their activity. From the medical point of view, the question about the significance of the healer's practice possibly pertains to the threats and/or benefits for the patient's health. The most frequently displayed dilemmas can be reduced to two, rather general issues: interference with the patient's body and influence on the patient's way of thinking through suggestion.

#### **Effect on the body: means and healing methods**

The means and healing methods characteristic of the Podlasian folk healers are a quite simple and unified set, therefore, their effect on the functioning of the patient's body can be easily assessed. The essence of their use is rather symbolic. An unchangeable basis for the therapy is Christian prayers, sometimes also apocryphal or other texts. The treatment occurs as follows: the patient is seated while the healer is standing beside her/him and recites texts with her/his arms drawn towards the patient, makes the sign of the cross in the air several times, optionally the healer may move her/his hands alongside the patient's body, or use circular movements. In many instances, a prayer (e.g. Hail Mary...) accompanied by making the sign of the cross are the only means of healing, and no contact with the patient's body ever occurs [33].

Some other healers, though, also use a variety of different symbolic methods. Such methods are usually spectacular and amusing to observe. From the medical point of view, they have no effect on the patient's body. One such method is circling the patient's body with a glass filled with wood ash and wrapped in a cotton cloth. Another is burning small balls made of oakum above a cloth covering the patient's head or another body part, or pouring, also above the patient's head, liquid wax into a container filled with cold water [33].

It should be stressed that the healers do not apply any of the body-contact methods typically used by chiropractors or masseurs. They are also by no means herbalists, so they do not grow, pick or prepare herbs or administer them. Quite commonly, they use a specific group of healing means. They prepare them personally or help their patients prepare those brought by them for the healing purpose. This group includes water, sugar and bread (also other pastries). Their effect on the patient's health may be compared to that of holy water and in fact it's the same concept. Just like priests consecrate water or foods, the healers bespeak them by means of the earlier mentioned prayers and texts. They prescribe gradual

consumption, in small doses per day or per week in combination with saying the simplest daily prayers. The prescribed means are not used to cause physiologic changes within the patient's body, but are a symbol, a vessel of God's will and power [33].

The methods that have been described heretofore are typical of the practices of Podlasian folk healers ('szeptuchy', 'babki'), local specialists of folk medicine. They do not include means and methods known to many of those persons that belong to the sphere of self-treatment, hence accessible to all people possessing knowledge about them, regardless of their social status.

#### **Influence on well-being: suggestion**

It is much more difficult to grasp and precisely describe suggestion – the process of priming to which a patient is exposed while visiting a folk healer. Its character could be of dual nature – it could be either positive persuasion (to something), or negative persuasion (against something). The folk healers do not persuade their patients against seeing a doctor, on the contrary, they often remind their patients to consult a doctor, or even that seeing a doctor is the only solution in certain instances. They also do not interfere with a doctor's recommendations pertaining therapy. That is because of the significant difference that exists in the folk healer's mind between the doctor's and their own activity. It may also be caused by 'the high social status of the physician and the lowly position of the patient as a care evaluator'. Among eight reasons for avoiding expressing negative opinions, Ludmiła Marcinowicz and co-authors indicate four which refer to 'szeptuchy': 'avoiding offending healthcare providers' and 'prestige of the medical profession', but also 'fear of giving a hasty evaluation based on their own inexpert medical knowledge' and 'the unpleasant emotions induced by giving a negative evaluation' [34]. 'Szeptuchy' often /advise protection from the wind, cold droughts and cold in general (also advise not to take showers or baths for up to three days) when they diagnose the problem as 'wind' (overexposure to wind) [33].

Opinions on health and illnesses, similarly to self-treatment, are a common heritage of the healers and their patients, an element of the local culture. In the context of contemporary Russian healing, Galina Lindquist wrote:

*People undertake their quest for health with more conviction if the medical system they resort to are meaningful for them, if the conceptualizations of health, disease and cure correlate with their more general cosmology, and fit within broader patterns of personal and collective identity construction [35].*

Particularly old persons from rural communities come to a folk healer for help with a readymade diagnosis, definition, as well as the term describing the particular folk illness. A certain number of such patients expect a diagnosis from a healer. It is rather then that they can absorb the specific terms accompanied by a moderately developed concept of the existing problem.

Galina Lindquist wrote much about the Russian healer's strategies to help people deal with life problems. There, magic symbols are seen as an important mechanism supporting hope [35]. Taking into account prayers, charms and other methods used by 'szeptuchy', it seems that the most significant role 'szeptuchy' fulfill nowadays is connected with the magic they use, but not only. Many visits to folk healers are similar to the effect after a conversation with psychologist, because of their empathetic disposition. One may assume that the folk healers are actually folk psychotherapists.

### **Derogations from the rules**

From this short description, quite a coherent picture of the folk healers emerges. Though it is worth mentioning that exemptions from all the principles introduced heretofore exist. Extreme forms, such as administering pharmaceuticals, may produce a direct threat to the patient's health. Considering the problem, it should be said that on one side, in an atmosphere of bilateral trust and understanding, the traditional methods used by the healers contributing to the well-being of a patient should be respected. On the second, a lot of attention should be put into the adequate promotion of health and health education, which could help protect a patient from such extreme forms of healing practices.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The research has shown, that from an ethnological point of view, the dominant religious aspect opens a wide area for discussion about the importance of the power of sacrum, hope and the placebo effect for an active patient, positively engaged in the curative process, who decides to combine therapeutic methods of both academic and folk medicine. It also suggests that from a medical perspective, the activity of Podlasiian folk healers could be viewed as a challenge and an opportunity rather than a danger. The most important arguments in support of the presented assessment are a clear division of the competence and limits for the activities of folk healers and medical personnel, use of non-invasive but magical healing methods, and also serving as a kind of folk psychotherapists.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The study was financed from private and Adam Mickiewicz University funds.

### **Conflicts of interest**

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Krajewska-Kułał E, Kułał W, Radziejewski P, Rozwadowska E, Lankau A, Kowalewska B, Kondzior D, Szyszko-Perłowska A, Krajewska-Ferishah K, Ortman E, Moczydłowska A. Current view of the traditional superstitions in general population of Podlaskie province. Preliminary study. *Prog Health Sci*. 2011 Dec; 2(1): 76-83.
2. Helman CG. *Culture, Health and Illness*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London, UK: Hodder Arnold, an Hachette UK Company; 2007. Chapter 4, Caring and curing: the sectors of health care; p. 81-120.
3. Cant S, Sharma U. A new medical Pluralism? *Alternative Medicine, Doctors, Patients and the State*. London, UK: UCL Press; 1999. Chapter 1, A new medical pluralism?; p. 1-20.
4. Penkala-Gawęcka D. Pluralizm medyczny w perspektywie antropologicznej. In: Penkala-Gawęcka D, editor. *Nie czas chorować? Zdrowie, choroba i leczenie w perspektywie antropologii medycznej*; Poznań, Poland: Biblioteka Telgte; 2010. p. 21-36, sum. p. 198. (Polish)
5. Kowalska K. Panienci apteczne. *Kraina Bugu*. 2011 Autumn; 1(1): 10-21. (Polish)
6. Werpachowska J. Ojciec Gabriel od spraw nieprawdopodobnych, *Kurier Poranny*. 2012 Mar; 7157(57): 14-5. (Polish)
7. Kielak B. Lecznictwo ludowe na terenie południowo-wschodniego Mazowsza w XIX w. *Kultura Ludowa Mazowsza i Podlasia*. 1999; 3: 126. (Polish)
8. Charyton MA. Szeptuchy – tradycja żywa. Współcześni uzdrowiciele ludowi na Podlasiu. In: Penkala-Gawęcka D, editor. *Nie czas chorować? Zdrowie, choroba i leczenie w perspektywie antropologii medycznej*; Poznań, Poland: Biblioteka Telgte; 2010. p. 119-40. (Polish)
9. Grębecka Z. Słowo magiczne poddane technologii. *Magia ludowa w praktykach postsowieckiej kultury popularnej*. Kraków, Poland: Nomos; 2006. 51p. (Polish)
10. Karłowicz J, Kryński A, Niedźwiedzki W, editors. *Słownik języka polskiego*. Vol. 6. Warszawa, Poland: Wydawnictwo Kasy im. J. Mianowskiego; 1923. 604p. (Polish)
11. Zgółkowa H, editor. *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny*. Vol. 41. Poznań, Poland: Kurpisz; 2004. 297p. (Polish)



12. Doroszewski W. Słownik języka polskiego. Vol. 10. Warszawa, Poland: PWN; 1968. 641p. (Polish)
13. Libera Z. Znachor w tradycjach ludowych i popularnych XIX i XX wieku. Wrocław, Poland: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ossolineum; 2003. 83p. (Polish)
14. Piątkowski W. Lecznictwo niemedyczne w Polsce. Tradycja i współczesność. Lublin, Poland: Wydawnictwo UMCS; 2008. 223p. (Polish)
15. Linde SB. Słownik języka polskiego. Vol. 3. R-T. Lwów, Poland: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich; 1859. 604p. (Polish)
16. Lindquist G. The culture of charisma. Wielding legitimacy in contemporary Russian healing. *Anthropology Today*. 2001 Apr; 17(2): 3-8.
17. Mirowicz A. Wielki Słownik Rosyjsko-Polski. Vol. 1. A-O. Warszawa, Poland: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Wiedza Powszechna, Moskwa, Russia: Russkij Āzyk; 1980. 517p. (Polish, Russian)
18. Perzanowski A. Odmieńcy. Antropologiczne studium dewiacji, *Studia Etnologica* Warszawa, Poland: IEiAK UW, Wydawnictwo DiG; 2009. 66p. (Polish)
19. Stomma L. Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w. Warszawa, Poland: Pax; 1986. 151-203p. (Polish)
20. Page LA, Wessely S. Medically unexplained symptoms: exacerbating factors in the doctor – patient encounter. *J R Soc Med*. 2003 May; 96(5): 223-27.
21. Rubel AJ. The epidemiology of folk illness: *Susto* in Hispanic America. In: Landy D, editor. *Culture, Disease and Healing: Studies in Medical Anthropology*; London, Great Britain: Macmillan, pp. 119-28.
22. Kleinman A. Concepts and a Model for the Comparison of Medical Systems as Cultural Systems. *Social Science and Medicine*. 1978; 12(2): 85-93.
23. Young A. The Anthropologies of Illness and Sickness. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 1982; 11(1): 257-85.
24. Libera Z, Paluch A. Ethnomedicine and the plica. In: Szykiewicz S, editor. *Poland at the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*; Wrocław, Poland: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ossolineum; 1988. p. 149-60.
25. Charyton MA. Oblicza „chorób ludowych” w kulturze podlaskich Białorusinów. In: Jurkiewicz J, editor. *Białorusini – historia i kultura. Sesja naukowa*; 2010 June 25-26; Muzeum Narodowe Rolnictwa i Przemysłu Rolno-Spożywczego w Szreniawie, Szreniawa, Poland; 2010. p. 61-74. (Polish)
26. Musiatewicz J. Święte słowa i ‘biotoki’. Eklektyczny charakter lecznictwa ludowego. In: Smyrski Ł, Zowczak M, editors. *Podole i Wołyń: szkice etnograficzne*; Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UW, Poland; 2003. p. 176. (Polish)
27. Grębecka Z. 777 zamów syberyjskiej uzdrowicielki, czyli magia współczesnego Wschodu. (op. cit.) *Maszyna Interpretacyjna. Kwartalnik kulturalno-społeczny*. 2002; 7: 8-9. (Polish)
28. Zowczak M. Mitologia zamawiania i mistyka zamów na podstawie współczesnych materiałów z Wileńszczyzny. *Literatura Ludowa*. 1994; 38(4-6): 3-33. (Polish)
29. Wilczkowski A. Medycyna ludowa. Między tradycją a współczesnością. In: Perzanowski A, editor. *Centrum na peryferiach. Monografia społeczności lokalnej Ejszyszek i okolic na Wileńszczyźnie*; Warszawa, Poland: Wydawnictwo DiG; 2005. p. 204-34. (Polish)
30. Zowczak M. Modlitwa ludowa. *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*. 1998; 52(1): 33-42.
31. Szulc A. Baby zesłał Bóg. *Przekrój* (Internet) 2010 August 12. Available from: [http://www.przekroj.pl/wydarzenia\\_kraj\\_artykul,7305.html](http://www.przekroj.pl/wydarzenia_kraj_artykul,7305.html). (Polish)
32. Lingquist G. Not my will but thine be done: church versus magic in contemporary Russia. *Culture and Religion*. 2000; 1(2): 247-76.
33. Charyton MA. Współczesna medycyna ludowa na Podlasiu – oczyma szeptuch. In: Anczyk E, editor. *Szkice z nauk o zdrowiu*. Vol. 3. Anczyk A, editor. *Medicina magica. Oblicza medycyny niekonwencjonalnej*; Sosnowiec, Poland: IMPiZŚ Press; 2011. p. 57-84. (Polish)
34. Marcinowicz L, Grębowski R, Chlabicz S. Exploring negative evaluations of health care by Polish patients: an attempt at cross-cultural comparison. *Health and Social Care in the Community*. 2009 May; 17(2): 187-93.
35. Lindquist G. In Search Of The Magical Flow: Magic And Market In Contemporary Russia. *Urban Anthropology* 2000; 29(4): 315-57.