

Spelling it Out: Accepting and Recontextualizing Traditional East Slavic Understandings of Nature and Maladies as Expressed in Zagovory from Polesia

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine zagovory — East Slavic traditional oral magical healing incantations — pertaining to house sparrows, snake and snakebite, toothache, and epilepsy. I translated the zagovory from *Polesskie zagovory*, a 2003 tome of zagovory from Polesia from 1970-1990 compiled by A. Agapkina, E. E. Levkivskaia, and A.L. Toporkov, before analyzing their overarching motifs and structures. I found that while the traditional attitudes towards the four topics conveyed in the zagovory cannot contribute to existing scientific discourse, the zagovory are valuable as tools for understanding how East Slavic communities reliant on both traditional East Slavic folklore and Christian mythology commonly understand reality and once-inexplicable phenomena.¹

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1 Introduction

In *The Books of Magic*, Neil Gaiman wrote:

Science is a way of talking about the universe in words that bind it to a common reality. Magic is a method of talking to the universe in words that it cannot ignore. The two are rarely compatible.

Though Gaiman's words are poetic, they do not correctly articulate the purpose of magical practices throughout history. The scientific method did not emerge as a popular philosophy until at least the 16th century (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2021), and that the modern "scientific method" is less than a century old (Castillo 2013). Innumerable scientific discoveries which we now take for granted, like germs and dinosaurs, did not occur until the nineteenth century. And considering the contemporary upswing in ideologies that rebuke science as a means of understanding the world (Hotez 2020), it still does not bind the universe to a common reality.

People have always had means of binding the universe to a common reality and attempting to manipulate the world around them. For many, regional folkloric beliefs, like major world religions, continue to fill this role. One example is East Slavic folk tradition, in which magical practitioners called *znakhari* (literally, "those who know") practice magical healing incantations called *zagovory*².

Most academic study of folklore takes place through an anthropological or historical lens, with few studies connecting magical practices and linguistics. Because folkloric practices like spells and songs can be so linguistically rich, the lack of linguistic analysis on traditional folk beliefs presents a not-insignificant gap in knowledge. *Zagovory* are fundamentally oral compositions with formulaic language and somewhat clearly-defined structures that have survived being passed down throughout generations. They serve as much as a means for people to gain a common understanding of the world around them as they are a tool for people to manipulate it. Users of *zagovory* (*znakhari* and the recipients of the spells) employ *zagovory* to

² *Zagovory* are interchangeably referred to in English-language scholarship as "charms," "spells," and "incantations," though I will refer to them simply as *zagovory*.

describe phenomena that were unknowable before modern medicine and science, thereby binding phenomena they could not control to common understandings.

1.1 Methods

I first learned about zagovory while speaking with Prof. Sibelan Forrester, who sent me a tome of zagovory from Polesia called *Polesskie Zagovory (Полесские заговоры)*, compiled by A. Agapkina, E. E. Levkivskaia, and A.L. Toporkov and published in 2003. I took immediate interest in the topic, hoping to learn from the zagovory about traditional East Slavic attitudes towards natural phenomena. I began studying individual zagovory after running the PDF through an optical character recognition software called Readiris, which transcribed the text with medium-high accuracy.

Before looking at *Polesskie zagovory*, I read both Forrester’s 2013 “Russian Village Magic in the Late Soviet Period: One Woman's Repertoire of ‘Zagovory’” and folklorist Joseph Conrad’s 1989 “Russian Ritual Incantations: Tradition, Diversity, and Continuity.” I began my research by translating zagovory against house sparrows, a topic I chose because birds are cool. Through translating these zagovory, I became more familiar with the structure of the zagovor and the archaic language therein. After spending a week translating house sparrow zagovory, I spent the following few weeks translating zagovory about snakes and snakebite, epilepsy, and toothache. My body of translations consisted of two primary categories of zagovory — concerning natural phenomena and medical phenomena, respectively, with two subcategories, respectively. For both categories, one category concerns acute phenomena (epilepsy and snakebite)³ while the other concerns less remarkable, non-acute phenomena (house sparrows and toothache).

My initial translations were rough because of my inexperience as a translator and because of the nonstandard language of the zagovory. Because the zagovory I studied originate from Kaliningrad Oblast — an exclave of Russia bordering Lithuania and Poland — and likely before the emergence of a “standard” Russian, aspects of the zagovory more closely resemble contemporary Belarusian and Ukrainian than Russian. I searched online for words that I didn’t

³ The analysis of zagovory in this thesis, especially regarding epilepsy zagovory (2.2.2), concerns graphic depictions of both children and adults suffering death and violence. Please read at your own discretion.

initially understand, though occasionally, words yielded no search results. In these instances, I attempted to figure out the word's root and make an educated guess. If I could not make an educated guess, I left the word blank in the translation.

There were also some motifs in Slavic folklore that I initially had difficulty translating because of my unfamiliarity with mythological figures and locations. For example, several of the snake/snakebite zagovory refer to “Сиянской гора” (pronounced “Siyanskoi gar” and meaning “Mount Siyan”). Despite spending over an hour searching for the mythological importance of Mount Siyan, I found nothing. Only after reading more about East Slavic folklore and mythology did I learn that the zagovory referenced Mount Zion, a hill in Jerusalem that is prominent in East Slavic folklore.

After roughly translating several zagovory with little exposure to existing scholarship on East Slavic folklore, I began to read more about the history of zagovory and magical practices in Russia. Though scholarship on East Slavic folk beliefs is plentiful, I was dismayed at the dearth of scholarship on zagovory, specifically. Through reading about East Slavic folk beliefs and magical practices, I learned more about the rich history of magic, marred by religious persecution of practitioners, in present-day Russia. Moreover, I gained perspective into how people used zagovory and other magical practices to interact with the world around them before Western science became accessible. For example, though the zagovory discussed in this thesis pertain to natural and medical phenomena, there are also zagovory for love, fortune, and protection from legal persecution.

In the following section, I introduce and describe several concepts and topics instrumental to my analysis of zagovory and understanding their significance in the past and contemporarily. I then briefly review existing English-language scholarship on zagovory and the two topics of zagovory that I studied — nature and illness — by the four subcategories. Finally, I examine how these zagovory adhere to Joseph Conrad's 1989 framework for understanding the structure of zagovory. I propose an updated framework that is more flexible and inclusive of zagovory post-nineteenth-century.

1.2 Zagovory

Zagovory are healing incantations intended to bring about positive outcomes for the recipient (Conrad 1989:422). In the context of zagovory, healing can refer to any positive outcome for the recipient, including but not limited to recovery from medical afflictions, an improvement in fortune, and protection from negative outcomes. They emerged from Russian pre-Christian folk traditions, though there is little surviving information about East Slavic folkloric beliefs prior to the introduction of Christianity into East Slavic tradition (Bilaniuk 1988:247). Zagovory often combine aspects of Christianity and East Slavic tradition. For example, some reference concepts of East Slavic folklore such as the world tree or the mythical island of Buyan alongside Christian deities.

Zagovory vary in length, some as short as one sentence and others numbering several pages (Ryan 1999 168). Znakhari must cast them in specific ways, paying close attention to the number of times they must be repeated, whether they must be spoken or whispered, and other rituals. Because zagovory are primarily oral compositions, details about how they must be performed are largely unknown (169). They are traditionally passed down through generations, usually but not always kept in the family (Paxson 2005:165); it is unclear whether znakhari are typically passed down from parents to children or via other familial relations. The short lengths of the zagovory require extreme word economy from speakers.

The scope of zagovory is wide. Leonid Nikolayevich Maikov, a prominent nineteenth-century researcher of Russian literature, divided his records of zagovory into nine categories: “Love, Marriage, Health, Sickness, Private Life, Trades and Occupations, Social Relations, Relations with Nature, and Supernatural Beings” (Conrad 1989:424).

It is thought that zagovory were most prominently used in the seventeenth century, though it is possible that seventeenth-century zagovory are simply the best-documented. Nevertheless, zagovory are still used today. People in Russia, including those from rural villages and from cosmopolitan families, turn to both Western medicine and zagovory for treatment of their afflictions (Avilova & Chernetsov 2013).

1.2.1 *Poleskie zagovory*

The zagovory in *Poleskie zagovory* were collected in Polesia, a region encompassing parts of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, and Poland, between 1970 and 1990 by A. Agapkina, E. E.

Levkievskaiia, and A.L. Toporkov. Agapkina et al. also contributed the tome's formatting, preparation, and additional commentary. The orthography of the therein zagovory uses the Cyrillic alphabet, often including letters unique to Ukrainian or Belarusian.

Standard Russian became the “literary language” of Russia throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the Bible was first translated into standard Russian from Old Slavonic in the early nineteenth century (Unbegaun 1973:xxii). Because of the rigid nature of zagovory, it is possible that the Poleskie zagovory preserve now-archaic forms that disappeared following intense reform of national boundaries in Eastern Europe.

Though the zagovory in *Poleskie zagovory* were recorded between 1970 and 1990 from various speakers, it is unknown when they were composed. Many have Christian references that date them as having emerged after the introduction of Christianity into East Slavic culture in the tenth century (Tikhomirov 1959:199), while some do not. Records of early zagovory are scarce, both because of a lack of intentional preservation and because of religious persecution of znakhari (Ryan 1999:168).

1.2.2 Practitioners of Magic:

English-language scholarship about East Slavic folklore interchangeably employs several translations of “znakhar,” including “sorcerer/sorceress,” “healer,” and “witch doctor.” I will refer to a practitioner of zagovory simply as “a znakhar” or “the speaker” (in relation to a specific zagovor), so as to not deform the concept by employing an English-language translation with a distinctly different connotation.

Men and women can both be znakhari, and traditionally the role of znakhari has neither skewed towards men or women (Zguta 1977:1194; Ivanits 1989:89). Because of the influence of the Eastern Orthodox Church, znakhari were persecuted by the Russian Empire for several centuries (Kivelson 2013). Znakhari are distinct from other magical practitioners in that they specialize in healing magic (Kivelson 2013:120), as opposed to practitioners who specialize in inflicting harm (Conrad 1989:423). Even though znakhari are healers, their magical practices were criminalized similarly to malevolent magical practitioners (Kivelson 2013:120).

Despite the Eastern Orthodox Church's official condemnation of zagovory, there remains overlap between clergy and znakhari. Eastern Orthodox clergy have been known to sometimes

turn to zagovory to help sick people in times of need (Ryan 1999 201). Zagovory have also been an accessible means of “healthcare” historically, with every Russian village claiming at least one *znakhar* by the end of the nineteenth century (Ivanits 1989:85).

1.3 Previous Work on Zagovory

As Conrad noted in his 1989 article about Russian ritual incantations, Soviet ethnographers and folklorists such as Agapkina, Levkieskaia, and Toporkov compiled numerous collections of zagovory throughout the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, these scholars viewed zagovory with ambivalence, if not embarrassment at the Russian *hoi polloi*’s lasting faith in the efficacy of magical practices (422). Ethnographers and folklorists instead focused on research and analysis of folktales and *byliny*, Russian oral epic poetry. The dearth of research and analysis on zagovory is evident in the lack of English-language scholarship on the topic. Though scholarly overviews on East Slavic folklore and magic often elaborate on the roles of *znakhari* and other magical practitioners in East Slavic tradition, they discuss zagovory at length.

Conrad’s article is likely the first expansive English-language survey of zagovory, covering terminology, structure, rituals, and history of zagovory. Conrad notes in a postscript to the article that the contemporary increase in analysis of folklore was the result of “new thinking” in academia at the time (436) that placed newfound importance on analysis of magic and folklore. Conrad discusses motifs and structures of zagovory, concluding that their scope is infinite and that the syncretism between Christian and East Slavic traditional beliefs enhances each zagovor’s individual power.

The most thorough English-language source on zagovory is *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, Ryan (1999)’s survey on Russian folklore, magic throughout history, and divination. The chapter entitled “Spells, Curses, and Magical Prayers” (165-216) surveys not only the history and role of zagovory in Russia, but also provides examples and analysis of zagovory ranging from medical zagovory to fortune-related zagovory. Ryan elaborated about how, in Russian culture, there is no clear distinction between Christian prayers and zagovory on account of the inclusion of Christian deities in zagovory (165).

Ryan also outlined the general structure of zagovory, defining the structure as a prayer-like invocation to some cosmic or mythological figure followed by an interaction with a prophet

or saint, an expulsion, and a prayer formula (169-170). This echoes Conrad's framework for the structure of a zagovor, which includes an introduction often involving a Christian invocation, exposition of the problem, expulsion of the problem, and final ratification (426). Conrad noted, however, that many recent zagovory are less complete than older recorded zagovory and therefore rarely follow the outlined structure (426).

Ryan (1999), Conrad (1989), and Forrester (2013)'s "Russian Village Magic in the Late Soviet Period: One Woman's Repertoire of 'Zagovory,'" constitute the most thorough English-language scholarship on zagovory that I know of. Forrester (2013:541) posits that in the past two decades Western interest and research into Russian village life has increased, showing that scholarship in the field has increased since the publication of Conrad's article. Additionally, she describes the practice of transcribing zagovory for usage as amulets and elaborates on the possibility of zagovory extending into the written word. Namely, Forrester argues that while zagovory are primarily an oral tradition, literate znakhari may memorize longer zagovory with the aid of writing, though there would be no way of knowing (543). Forrester (544) then recounts the story of a woman, EP, upon whom an older znakharka bestowed her knowledge of seventeen zagovory through writing. The znakharka passed away soon thereafter, which is consistent with the tradition of znakhari passing down their zagovory through generations (Conrad 1989:171).

Agapkina et al. (2003) is one of the only annotated collections of zagovory (Agapkina and Toporkov 2011:2). The tome, entirely in Russian, provides a thorough introduction and individual analyses for hundreds of wide-ranging zagovory. These introductions and analyses explain the historic and symbolic importance of common motifs for every category of zagovor therein, as well as archaic words and motifs in each individual zagovor. The tome also notes the names of the recorder and speaker of each zagovor, the speaker's date of birth and place of origin, and the date and location of the zagovor's recording. Though this information could reveal helpful insights into the structural and grammatical divergence of zagovory, this thesis focuses on the content within zagovory.

2 Analysis of Zagovory

In this section, zagovory are examined in two groups: nature zagovory (2.1) and healing zagovory (2.2). Each group consists of zagovory on two different topics, which are examined individually in each section and then synthesized.

2.1 Nature Zagovory

I studied two categories of zagovory that pertain to natural phenomena: against house sparrows (2.1.1) and against snakes/snakebite (2.1.2). The zagovory in each respective subcategory were consistent in terms of overall structure and motifs therein.

2.1.1 House Sparrow Zagovory

For this study, eight house sparrow zagovory were translated and studied. The house sparrow zagovory in *Poleskie zagovory* are very formulaic. They typically begin with the speaker calling upon God and the Purest Mother of God and then asking the house sparrow patriarch not to harm his children or his wife. The zagovory then ask the house sparrows to travel to other places where they can eat plentifully, such as meadows, streams and bogs, and to stay away from the recipient's crops. The zagovory specify several plants, including cranberries (журавина), guelder roses (калины), and scirpus vines (череты), as food that the house sparrows should instead eat. Crops mentioned in the zagovory include wheat, oats, and barley.

Below is my translation of a zagovor against house sparrows that I found exemplary of the category altogether.

749. [От воробьев] (From house sparrows) (Agapkina et al. 2003:423)

Господу Богу помолюся,	I pray to the Lord God,
Прочистой Божой Мацер поклонюся.	I bow down to the purest mother of God.
Прочистая Божая Маци	Purest mother of God
с престола вставала,	Risen from the throne
Да з Ганниному ячменю	Yes from Gannin's barley
Веребий вгоняла.	She rounded up the sparrows.
Лецеце, воробейки,	Fly, sparrows,
На густые лозы,	Onto thick vines,
На буйстрие реки.	Onto fast rivers.

Лозы зъедайце,	Eat the vines,
А реки спивайце,	And drink the rivers,
А на Ганнином ячмене	And in Gannin's barley
не бувайце.	Do not be.

До сонца три раза окружить загон, и они больш не прилетят.

Before sunset gather three times around the pen, and they will no longer come (by means of flying).

One striking aspect of the zagovory against house sparrows is that the speakers maintain a gentle and even polite tone, compared to other zagovory which tend towards anger and violence (such as in the snakebite zagovory in 2.0.2). This polite tone reflects the speaker's relative lack of urgency to rid the recipient's crops of house sparrows. Whereas house sparrows are pests who eat staple crops and ruin attempts to cultivate grain, their negative impact is neither an acute nor deadly affliction. The lack of urgency or violence in this zagovor may be because the affliction of house sparrows is one that people have learned to live with. Before assessing the meaning of this gentle attitude of East Slavic people towards house sparrows, it is first crucial to assess humans' unique relationship with the birds.

House sparrows are one of the most common birds in the world, mostly because of their commensal relationship with humans (in which the sparrows benefit and humans are not acutely affected) (Anderson 2006). House sparrows evolved to their current form about 10,000 years ago when humans in the fertile crescent invented agriculture (Schembri 2018); it is reasonable to say that house sparrows would not exist in their current state without the benefit of human activities, which is relatively uncommon for non-domesticated species.



Fig. 1. Four house sparrow fledglings in the urban environment of Swarthmore, PA, where they are not a native species.

In addition to house sparrows' propensity to eat crops, their presence can also negatively impact humans because they serve as reservoirs of disease — notably including West Nile virus (Nemeth et al. 2009). Other birds also serve as reservoirs for the virus, but few thrive in as close of proximity to humans as house sparrows. A knowledge of house sparrows' ability to harbor disease may be a reason that the house sparrow zagovor call not only for the house sparrows to leave, but for them to go *far away*. Each zagovor distinguishes the speaker and recipient's village from more environments less affiliated with humans, such as the bogs, forests, meadows, and streams.

House sparrows also have a negative biblical affiliation, though it is not referenced in any zagovor that I translated. Unlike birds that walk alternating legs (similarly to people), house sparrows hop on both legs. In East Slavic mythology, this is because house sparrows' legs were shackled as punishment for returning the nails that had affixed Jesus Christ to the cross after they were removed (Ryan 1999:126). Because of this betrayal, house sparrows became acceptable to eat and a symbol of immense misfortune if they entered one's home.

Despite these negative affiliations with house sparrows, they have some notable redeeming qualities. As mentioned earlier, house sparrows have evolved to live in and around human civilizations. They're adept at both surviving in the wild and thriving in urban environments. They live on every continent except for Antarctica, having been imported from Eurasia to Africa, the Americas, and Australasia by Europeans (Miller 2019). Put simply, due to the Europeans' export of house sparrows to most of the world, wherever we are, they are. Moreover, though house sparrows eat staple crops, their impact on agriculture is not altogether negative; they hunt insects from crops to feed to their chicks, eliminating another source of agricultural losses (Audubon 2021).

In accordance with humans' relatively positive relationship with the birds, the overall politeness of the house sparrow zagovory reveals a somewhat benevolent attitude of East Slavic people towards the birds. It is understandable why the speakers and recipients want distance from house sparrows; after all, they eat staple crops, harbor disease, and have negative superstitions associated with them. At the same time, East Slavic people's attitude towards them is not altogether malevolent. They wish the house sparrows to find plentiful food wherever they go after leaving the village. This pleasant tone shows that despite house sparrows' status as a pest, historically people have had fondness for the birds as evolutionary companions to human life in Eurasia.

2.1.2 Zagovory Against Snakes

Compared to the house sparrow zagovory, the zagovory against snakes and snakebite incorporate clearer references to East Slavic folk tradition (Ryan 1999:169) and Christian mythology. Many begin with a description of a mythical place, usually involving either Mount Zion or the mythical island of Buyan. The zagovory then describe the world tree, which in East Slavic mythology is an oak tree (Matasović). Underneath or on a branch of the oak tree sits a viper. The image of a snake in a tree is syncretism between East Slavic folklore and Christian mythology; whereas the oak tree is a key motif in East Slavic mythology, the imagery of a snake in a tree could be an example of syncretism between East Slavic and Christian mythology.

Further cementing the syncretism is the speaker's calling upon the archangel Michael to destroy the snakes with thunder and lightning if they don't comply with the earlier request to leave. Though the archangel Michael does not have a distinct affiliation with snakes, icons

portray him as a militant angel who slays enemies underfoot with his sword. The zagovor invokes his name alongside mythical figures endemic to East Slavic folklore, such as the mythical snake Shkurapey and her husband, Siyas (Труфанова 2018:194). Despite the Eastern Orthodox Church's attempts to delegitimize zagovory and other East Slavic folkloric practices through persecution and accusing znakhari of malevolent magic (Kivelson 2013:120; Ivanits 1989:85), the syncretism in the snake zagovory show that there is no meaningful distinction between the legitimacy of Eastern Orthodox beliefs and that of East Slavic traditional beliefs.

My below translation of a zagovor against snakebite represents some of the common motifs of snake/snakebite zagovory.

660. [От укуса змеи] (From snake bites) (Agapkina et al. 2003:364)

На морэ, на Сияне	On the sea, on [mount] Zion
Стояў дуб.	There stood an oak.
На том дубе двэнацаць кокаты,	On the oak there are nineteen branches
На тых кокатох двэнацаць сучки.	On the branches there are nineteen knots
На тых сучках пухова перына.	On the knots there is a downy bed of feathers.
На той перыне змея Шкурапёй	On that down there is the snake Shkurapej
Са сваим мужем со Сиясом	With her husband, with Siyas (?)
Змея Шкурапёй,	Snake Shkurapej,
унимай сваих дзецей	Calm your children
Ярых-перэярых,	Ardent infants,
Чорных подкалодных.	Of black snakes.
Если не унимеш, пашлю на тебе	If you do not calm them, I will send to you
Михаила Архангела,	The archangel Michael
Каб ён тебе гromом пабиу,	That he destroy you with thunder
Молнию спалиу,	Burn you with lightning.
Па белому свету попил пусциў.	And let you drink in the white light.
[Потом читают «Отче наш», повторяют три раза.]	[Then read “Our Father,” repeat three times.]

Compared to the house sparrow zagovory, the zagovory against snakes and snakebite are much more violent in tone and content. As mentioned before, zagovory are exclusively healing incantations. Despite their violent nature, the zagovory against snakes and snakebite are in favor of healing because they intend to ward off venomous snakes, several species of which are endemic to Russia and Eastern Europe. The tone also differs from that of the house sparrow zagovory because the two phenomena are very different in nature; house sparrows eating crops is neither an acute nor a remarkable phenomenon, whereas snakebite is an acute and potentially lethal affliction. Additionally, the snake/snakebite zagovory wish harm on snakes that are named individuals. This heightened seriousness and urgency of the zagovory about snakes and snakebite shows the gravity of the issue.

Snakes being sinister and evil is a widespread concept because snakes are dangerous animals. Therefore, it seems only natural that East Slavic people would blend their two predominant belief systems to strengthen the magic of the zagovory surrounding the creatures. Whereas the image of a snake in a tree is iconic in Christianity's Book of Genesis, Slavic mythology has the "world tree," which frequently appears in the snake/snakebite zagovory. Widespread cross-cultural attitudes towards snakes make the snake/snakebite zagovory conducive to syncretism between the two belief systems.

2.1.3 Synthesis of Nature Zagovory

I chose to focus on house sparrow and snake/snakebite zagovory because they both address animal-related problems with different levels of severity. The tones of the zagovory reflect the respective severities of these problems. It can be concluded that the attitudes conveyed within the house sparrow and snakebite zagovory reflect both traditional East Slavic beliefs and Christian mythology concerning the creatures. As the house sparrow zagovory reflect East Slavic people's almost benevolent attitude towards the birds, so too do the snake zagovory reflect snakes' lethal danger.

These zagovory and the conventional knowledge that they convey must be recontextualized for a postindustrial world suffering an ongoing climate collapse. The world that produced these zagovory has changed linguistically, physically, and ideologically. Russia has industrialized and urbanized since the composition of these zagovory, and snakes and house sparrows are now less prominent pests to much of the population. Additionally, house sparrow

populations declined in many parts of Europe throughout the 20th century (though house sparrow populations have not noticeably decreased in Eastern Europe) (Leonard 2021). Meanwhile, enormous house sparrow populations have taken root in Africa, the Americas, and Australasia. This marks a massive and nefarious shift in the role of house sparrows; whereas before they were native pests whose only crime was eating staple crops, they are now invasive pests that displace and endanger native species (Audubon 2021).

It also may be that zagovory that attempt to control natural phenomena are not as common now as they once were. Every article I've read about the contemporary usage of zagovory focuses on healing or fortune-related zagovory (Conrad 1989; Forrester 2013; Kivelson 2013), almost never mentioning zagovory intended to manipulate nature. This is perhaps because modern Western science has succeeded at controlling natural phenomena to the extent that these zagovory are no longer as necessary as they once were. Harmful pesticides have "solved" the problem of house sparrows eating crops. There are more effective remedies for snakebite than washing the afflicted's wounds with holy water, as well as more hospitals with the facilities to treat snake venom.

Perhaps the lack of scholarly interest in nature-related zagovory is the recontextualization. As noted by Agapkina and Toporkov (2013:72), *Polesskie zagovory* is one of the "few annotated editions of East Slavic charms". The fact that *Polesskie zagovory* is one of the only annotated collections of zagovory indicates that while Soviet researchers did (at least in this instance) record zagovory, many did not see them as worthy of proper annotation or analysis. Though some scholars over the past few decades have penned articles about how healing zagovory are still used, this increased interest did not carry over to nature-related zagovory.

Though nature-related zagovory may no longer be as prominent as the healing zagovory, it is equally important to study them. Though they may not reveal empirical information about house sparrows and snakebite in East Slavic culture, they reveal the connections that people held with both each other and nature in pre-industrial times. Zagovory are an example of community members helping each other through struggles instead of people facing afflictions having to rely on outside resources for support. Additionally, they reveal the ways that people reached a common understanding of reality through their beliefs in both East Slavic traditional folklore and

Christian mythology. Examining them through a contemporary lens also shows how the conventional wisdom of the preindustrial era is no longer as relevant to people's lives, exposing ways that life is different but not necessarily better in the age of modern science than when empathy and folklore bound communities together.

2.2 Healing Zagovory

In this section, I focus on zagovory intended to heal physical ailments. The two subcategories of healing zagovory I examine are zagovory against toothaches and against epilepsy. I chose these two categories of zagovory because, similarly to the nature zagovory, one subcategory focuses on a common phenomenon that is not acutely lethal⁴ — toothache — while the other focuses on an unusual and acutely lethal affliction — epilepsy. Because zagovory emerged before modern medicine, the healing zagovory make sense of inexplicable pain and ailments through the lenses of nature and mythology. This is especially true of the epilepsy zagovory; because epilepsy was such a poorly-understood ailment prior to the advent of modern medicine, zagovory refer to the disease interchangeably as “epilepsy,” “the black disease,” “the black grief,” and “the pillow disease.”

2.2.1 Zagovory against toothaches

The zagovory against toothaches are very formulaic, all taking the form of conversations between the znakhar and the new moon. I will refer to the new moon as “she” because at least one zagovor refers to the moon as a queen and because she assumes a personified role in these zagovory (though this is not the case in the below zagovor). The new moon has specific importance as one of the few times, including the Evening Star, that znakhari can perform zagovory (Zguta 1978:445).

The zagovory begin with the speaker asking the new moon where she was, as if the moon was once absent. The moon responds that she was on the other world — the world of the dead. The speaker then asks the moon what she saw there, to which the moon responds that she saw dead people. Finally, the speaker asks the moon if the dead people's teeth hurt. The moon

⁴ Complications of untreated dental issues that cause toothache, such as dental abscesses, can lead to mortality (Sanders and Houck 2021). Unlike snakebite, however, untreated dental issues cannot kill the afflicted in a matter of hours.

responds that they do not, and the speaker concludes by wishing that the recipient's teeth will not ache just as the dead's teeth do not ache.

Below is a zagovor against toothache that exemplifies this structure.

473. Говорать к месяцу зубы (To speak to the moon of teeth) (Agapkina et al. 2003:269)

Молодзик молодой, дзе ты быў?	New moon, where are you?
На том свеце.	On that world.
А што ты бачиў?	And what did you see?
Мертвы людзи.	Dead people.
А у их зубы не боляць?	And did their teeth hurt?
Не болятць.	They did not hurt.
Хай у свящёной, хрещёной	Let the sacred, baptised
Натальи не боляць	Natalie's [teeth] not hurt.

На дворе станешь и говориць трэба. Як змеркаеца, приходишь, шоб
месяц зайшоў и к месяцу говориць, Станешь и месяца позираешь. Як нема месяца, то
трэба у вёчэр говориць, в дзень не помогае.

Stand in the yard and speak. At dusk, come, so the moon has come and to the moon speak. Stand
and look at the moon. As there is no moon, it is necessary to speak in the evening, in the day
does not help.

This category of zagovory is notable in that it mostly does not appeal to Christian mythological figures such as God, Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, or a saint. Instead, the speaker exclusively appeals to a celestial body — the moon — which is personified. The zagovory do, however, reference some Christian practices, such as Natalya from zagovor 473's baptism. The zagovory against toothache also make a distinct mythological connection between the moon and toothache, an association also present in other folk traditions (Ristow et al. 2015). The origin of this connection is unclear, though there is no factual basis to the myth (ibid).

These zagovory also show that in East Slavic mythology, the dead, like the living, can articulate their thoughts in a manner consistent with the living. This representation of dead

people, which is similar to the living (Paxson 2005:193), may be new to readers unfamiliar with East Slavic mythology. This representation of the dead predates the lateral integration of Christian mythology into East Slavic traditional beliefs (Ryan 1999:193), with people occasionally appealing to spirits. The toothache zagovory portray the dead as not being altogether gone, but on another world that the moon visits when she isn't visible. The dead can feel pain and speak to the moon, the moon thus able to act as a proxy between the living and the dead.

While in other categories of zagovory speakers merely call upon Christian mythological figures, the speakers of the toothache zagovory outright converse with the moon. It is assumed that the moon has knowledge that the speaker does not have, which is the gateway to ending the recipient's tooth pain. Whereas speakers of other subcategories of zagovory also call on deities to bring about positive outcomes, the moon zagovory are the only subcategory in which the speaker uses new information to solve a problem.

2.2.2 Zagovory against epilepsy

Unlike the other subcategories of zagovory, the motifs and language that describe epilepsy are diverse. Because epilepsy is a disorder of the central nervous system, before modern medicine there would have been no way for people to know its causes outside of its physical symptoms (recurrent seizures). Because of the mystery surrounding the disease, most of the epilepsy zagovory refer to it using alternative names. There is no exemplar zagovor for this category, as the zagovory include diverse motifs, structures, and appeals to mythological figures. Below, three zagovory (427, 431, 434) show the diversity of zagovory against epilepsy.

431. [От черной болезни] (Against the Black Disease) (Agapkina et al. 2003:253)

Пречиста Божа Мацер	Purest mother of God
По мору ПО кладьцы шла,	Went by the sea to the treasure,
Залатые ключцы несла,	Carried the golden keys,
На дно мора ключцы упали,	Just as [it's] not [possible] to reach the keys at the bottom of the sea,
Як на дне мора ключей не достаци.	How to reach the keys at the bottom of the sea,
Так у (имярек) чорной балёзьни не бывацци,	So [should] (name) not have the black disease.

427. Чорное горе (Black Grief) (ibid. 250)

Слова шэптали:

Господу Богу помолюся,
Прэчыстой Божьй Мацери поклонюся.

Прэчыстая Божья Мацерь
З прэстолу ставала,
Кацц чорное горэ шэптала.
Шоў чорный дзид,
Чорныя очы, чорныя бровы,
Шоў чорнаго дуба рубачь.
Чорныя тріскі • леталі,
Кацц чорное горе згонялі.
Дзевяць раз перакажуць

Whisper the words:

To the Lord God I will pray,
To the purest mother of God I will bow
down.

The purest Mother of God
Stood from her throne
Whispered black grief of (name).
So that the black grandfather,
Black eyes, black eyebrows,
Went to chop down the black oak.
Black whispers flew,
The black grief flew from (name)
Repeat 9 times.

434. Дицке болель (Childhood illness) (ibid. 254)

Упаде, да уже колотит.
Приехали дзевять молоцов
И с дугами, и с пугами,
Серпами, сокерами, ножами,
Посекли Ивана, порубали,
Кров поразливали,
Мясо пораскидали,
Ивану помочи давали
И с голбуки, и с грудзей,
и с живота, с рук, с ног,
с пальцев, с суставов.

Fall, but it is already pounding.
There went nine young men
Both with bows and with whips,
With sickles, axes, knives,
Cut Ivan, chopped him,
Spilled blood,
Scattered the flesh,
Gave Ivan help,
From his head, and from his chest,
And from his stomach, from his arms, and
from his legs,
from his fingers, from his joints.

As the house sparrow zagovory are polite and mellow compared to the violent snake/snakebite zagovory, the zagovory against toothache are calm compared to the violent epilepsy zagovory. For example, zagovor 434 describes nine young men murdering and dismembering a boy named Ivan.

Zagovor 427 shows one of the most common motifs in the epilepsy zagovory — an old black man⁵ chopping down a black oak tree, which may be the world tree. Both zagovor 427 and 434 reference the number nine, which is recurrent in zagovory (such as the snake/snakebite zagovory). Though the exact significance of the number in East Slavic folklore is unclear, it also has mythological and spiritual significance in other belief systems and cultures. For example, in Norse mythology, Loki's daughter Hel has dominion over nine worlds (Abram 2006:1).

Two of the three example zagovory are also syncretic between East Slavic folk tradition and Christian mythology. Though neither zagovor appeals to Christian mythological figures to take action, both invoke the Purest mother of God and the Lord God. Additionally, the epilepsy zagovory are the only subcategory I studied that primarily reference mythological figures other than deities. They refer to the old black man and nochnitsa, a spirit in East Slavic folklore that haunts and torments children at night. The nochnitsa also appears in zagovory against disease in children, indicating a close association between epilepsy and childhood since children with epilepsy often did not live to adulthood.

The two mythological figures overlap in zagovor 429, which describes the old black man chopping down a black oak tree and thereby expelling the nochnitsa in the tree. Both the source and solution of epilepsy are represented by East Slavic mythological figures: the nochnitsa and old man, respectively.

The epilepsy zagovory are truly “outstanding for their poetic imagery” (Ryan 1999:168), which are diverse because of how poorly-understood epilepsy was before modern medicine. They show that when dealing with frightening medical phenomena, especially those which inexplicably caused the deaths of children, people turned to nature and mythology as a means of understanding the world. Additionally, despite their diversity, all of the epilepsy zagovory have one thing in common: they reference a place other than the speaker and recipient's village. The

⁵ This is **not** a racial description; the old man is literally the color black.

action of zagovor 431 takes place at sea. Zagovor 427 references the world tree, and though zagovor 434 does not reference a specific location, it mentions that the nine young men *went* somewhere. It may be that since epilepsy was so incomprehensible, the composers of the zagovory pictured them as being removed from village life altogether. In the faces of death and terrifying mythological associations, znakhari created elaborate works of poetic imagery to understand the zagovor recipients' problems and cure them of their afflictions.

2.2.3 Synthesis of Healing Zagovory

The differences between the toothache zagovory and the epilepsy zagovory mimic the differences between the house sparrow zagovory and the snake/snakebite zagovory. The house sparrow and toothache zagovory are calm, referencing a problem out in the open. The house sparrows are visible to the speaker, as is the moon. On the other hand, the snake/snakebite zagovory and the epilepsy zagovory are concerned with problems that are hidden. Throughout the snake zagovory, the speaker often describes the snakes as being hidden in branches on the world tree on Mount Zion. The epilepsy zagovory follow motifs and figures into the forest or to the depths of the sea. Just as snakes remain hidden until they attack, epilepsy is an invisible affliction until it causes acute seizures.

The healing zagovory show that before the age of modern science, folklore and magical practices were a means for people to attain a common understanding of the world in both nature and medicine. The lack of straightforward imagery surrounding toothache is also striking compared to the consistent imagery in the house sparrow and snake/snakebite zagovory. This could be because even though people could not outright manipulate house sparrows and snakes, they could see the creatures. People could readily observe house sparrows feeding on local crops and venomous vipers (even though they remained mostly hidden).

In comparison, the toothache and epilepsy zagovory describe internal problems. Regarding the topic of describing another's pain, Scarry (1985:4) wrote:

“The very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies ... is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about ... this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons.”

There is no way for the znakhar to understand a zagovor recipient's exact pain, so they approximate the experience using visually laden imagery. Composers of zagovory did this by comparing toothaches to the experience of the dead, as with describing epilepsy as a group of nine young men chopping Ivan into shreds. They use visual stimuli to describe problems that are rarely visible.

The rich images present in the healing zagovory are therefore a way for znakhari, who cannot feel or see the recipient's pain, to connect to the recipients through some level of common understanding. In this, the medical zagovory show what the nature zagovory cannot: magical practices are not only a means of binding people together to a common reality; in cases as with toothache and epilepsy, they *are* the common understanding. They explain our strange reality by putting words and images to phenomena that are not intrinsically verbal or visual. In this, zagovory and other magical practices may promote empathy and understanding of phenomena that are nigh impossible to understand otherwise.

3 Formulaic language in magic

Even though the zagovory examined in this thesis were recorded in text, zagovory are primarily oral compositions. Though they emerged as oral compositions that had to be accompanied by a magical ritual, eventually the oral aspect gained magical significance independently of the physical ritual (Zguta 1978:445). There are few records (both in *Poleskie zagovory* and in general) about how zagovory are performed aside from minimal written instructions. With hundreds of zagovory concerning a wide array of topics, the question of what defines a zagovor (other than their wide-ranging definition as “a verbal formula which initially served to explain a magical [healing] rite” (443)) becomes relevant. With this question in mind, it becomes important to examine the language of the zagovory in addition to their content and tones.

Throughout this thesis, I have identified categories of zagovory that tend towards distinct formulas (house sparrow zagovory, snake/snakebite zagovory, toothache zagovory). Formulaic is an essential component of oral compositions, including oral incantations and storytelling. Other than zagovory, globally prominent oral compositions involving extensive usage of formulaic

language include Homer's *Odyssey* (Finkelberg 1989:179) and Vyasa's *Mahabharat* (Smith 1999:267). The role of formulaic language in oral compositions is simple; it gives the speaker and listener a familiarity with the composition that prevents reliance on written texts (Niditch 1979:465). The formulaic nature and short lengths of zagovory are conducive to their oral transferal.

With regards to incantations and spells, the formulaic serves another role as well: adding "magical purpose" to incantations. The formulas are spiritually significant because they reiterate tested methods of magic usage, meaning that an incantation's consistency over time strengthens its magical power. Only practiced znakhari who understand the usage of magic can intentionally change zagovory to make them more verbally expressive without negating their magical properties (Oinas and Soudakoff 1975:98). Therefore, formulaic language in zagovory serves two roles: to allow a speaker to memorize zagovory without recourse to written texts and to enhance the magical properties.

Conrad's (1989) framework for understanding the structure of the zagovor is shown in Figure 2.

- I. Introduction
 - A. Christian invocation
 - B. other formulae, *e.g.*, "I will go out . . ."
- II. Exposition
 - A. description of the problem
 - B. enumeration of designations, mythic lands, magic helpers, *etc.*
 - C. description of ritual actions
- III. Expulsion
 - A. dispatch of the spell to distant anti-worlds, where spirits, animals and humans do not behave as expected
 - B. command for the destruction of the spell or cessation of its negative force
- IV. Ratification
 - A. pre-Christian, *e.g.*, "May my word be hard and firm," "Lock and key . . .," *etc.* and/or
 - B. Christian "Amen", three times.

Fig. 2. Conrad's (1989) framework for understanding the structure of the zagovor, from "Russian Ritual Incantations: Tradition, Diversity, and Continuity" (426).

Though zagovory transcribed post-nineteenth century are “less complete” (426) in accordance with this framework than earlier zagovory, it remains a useful means of understanding how zagovory are structured. All of the zagovory examined in this paper involve at least one component that Conrad described. In the following sections, I will discuss the four main components of Conrad’s framework (Introduction, Exposition, Expulsion, Invocation) and discuss how the zagovory in this paper concur with and depart from Conrad’s analysis.

3.1 Invocation

In all of the zagovory that I studied, the speaker invokes either a Christian mythological figure, a celestial being, or both. The house sparrow and epilepsy zagovory begin with invocations to the Purest Mother of God, Jesus Christ, and God himself, while all of the snake zagovory invoke the Archangel Michael later on in the composition. The toothache zagovory also begin with an invocation, but to the moon instead of a Christian mythological figure.

The formulas of invocation in the house sparrow and epilepsy zagovory are also largely the same. The house sparrow zagovory always begin with the speaker praying to the Lord God before making a declarative statement that they are bowing down to the Purest Mother of God. The author of the zagovor usually presumes that the Purest Mother of God has the power to drive out the house sparrows. In epilepsy zagovory that appeal to mythological figures, the author presumes that the being in question has the power to solve the problem. The same is true with snakebite zagovory and their appeal to the archangel Michael.

Likewise, the toothache zagovory always take the form of a conversation with the new moon. Though this formula diverges from the other three subcategories of zagovory, the speaker still calls on a powerful spiritual figure to enhance the magical power of the zagovory. Therefore, all four categories of zagovory have invocations to powerful spiritual and celestial beings even if the invocations are not always at the beginning of the zagovor.

3.2 Exposition of the problem

In Conrad’s words, exposition of the problem in zagovory involves “description[s] of the problem,” “enumeration of mythic helpers or mythic lands,” or a “description of ritual actions” (1989:426). The expositions are not as formulaic as the invocations to Christian and traditional East Slavic mythological figures are, but they are a crucial component of the zagovor. Because

they are healing incantations by nature, they cannot solve or heal a problem before first describing that problem.

Since Conrad's definition of exposition is so broad, all four subcategories of zagovory feature it. The house sparrow zagovory enumerate the problem through addressing the house sparrows by name; the snake/snakebite zagovory enumerate mythic lands with mythical snake tsars and tsarinas (who are portrayed as sinister); the toothache zagovory enumerate the mythic land of the dead; the epilepsy zagovory either enumerate the mythic lands (such as the forest and the sea) and helpers or describe the problem. The epilepsy zagovory do not "expose" epilepsy as explicitly as the other three categories of zagovory describe the afflictions that they aim to dispel; nevertheless, the enumeration of mythical lands and helpers is in accordance with Conrad's definition of exposition. Because expulsion can involve the destruction of negative forces, it is possible that in the epilepsy zagovory the oak tree in fact represents a negative force; indeed, it is from within the oak tree that *nochnitsi* emerge in zagovory in which they appear. Similarly, in the zagovor about young men murdering and dismembering Ivan, they do help Ivan in the end, indicating that the negative force behind the need to murder him has been expelled⁶.

3.3 Expulsion of the problem

The third component of the structure of the zagovor is expulsion of the problem. This component is also crucial, as expelling the problem is instrumental to healing. The expulsion of the problem is the climax of the zagovor, as well as the most illustrative component other than the exposition. The manner in which speakers expel the problem, as with exposition, varies throughout zagovory.

Speakers of house sparrow zagovory ask the sparrows to travel to another place, where they may eat and drink freely but not touch the recipient's crops; speakers of toothache zagovory ask for the recipient's teeth to stop hurting; speakers of snakebite zagovory call upon the Archangel Michael to destroy the snakes with lightning and thunder. There are several ways that speakers of epilepsy zagovory expel the problem, through oftentimes it involves the old black

⁶ In a note accompanying the text, Agapkina et al. note that another iteration of the same zagovor describes the men helping the child through chopping his *illness* (2003: 255). Agapkina et al. also note the similarity between this motif and

man chopping the oak tree. As with exposition, the epilepsy zagovory tend to more abstractly “expel” the problem.

3.4 Ratification

The aspect in which the zagovory from Polesia most prominently diverge from Conrad’s framework for the structure of the zagovor is the ratification of the problem. Ratifications are typically short formulaic phrases that close and fortify zagovory. For zagovory that rely on aspects of Christian mythology, the ratification can be as simple as the speaker repeating “Amen” three times. For zagovory that do not involve Christian mythology, ratifications can be more flexible and involve symbolic phrases. Some zagovory that I studied required the znakhar to repeat the names of Christian deities. The ratifications also sometimes require Christian physical rituals; for example, zagovor 672 requires the speaker to clean the snakebite wound with holy water. This ritual, which specifically demands water blessed in the Christian tradition, constitutes a Christian ratification.

Though none of the zagovory had traditional East Slavic verbal ratifications such as “May my word be hard and firm” (Conrad 1989:426), some also involved non-Christian physical rituals. These sometimes involved the speaker spitting over their left shoulder three times (an act which remains prominent in Russian superstition as to not jinx something—the equivalent of “knocking on wood”) or other actions.

Some of the zagovory, in addition to syncretism involved in the oral composition, had ratifications that combined both Christian and East Slavic tradition. Zagovor 488 against toothache requires the znakhar to cross themselves three times before blowing on their right hand and spitting on their left. Whereas crossing oneself is explicitly affiliated with Christianity, blowing and spitting in specific directions are not.

3.5 Synthesis

Out of the four categories of zagovory, the house sparrow zagovory are by far the most faithful to Conrad’s framework for understanding the structure of the zagovor. The most divergent are the epilepsy zagovory, which sometimes conform and sometimes diverge. This may be because house sparrows are a relatively straightforward problem involving simple birds that are more of a pest than an acute affliction. Epilepsy, on the other hand, is by far the most

complicated of the four afflictions; as mentioned earlier, epilepsy was a poorly-understood phenomenon until the twentieth century brought modern medicine to most of the globe. At the time that zagovory were most popular in Slavic cultures — the seventeenth century — epilepsy claimed countless lives because treatment did not exist. The many names for epilepsy corroborate its indecipherability as a disease before modern medicine.

Conrad's four-part framework for understanding zagovory is a good starting point for understanding zagovory, including zagovory collected post-nineteenth century. I propose a modification of the framework that is more inclusive for more recently-collected zagovory. This modification involves invocation, exposition, and expulsion as compulsory aspects of zagovory, whereas ratification is optional. The former three parts can occur in any order, while the ratification must take place at the end of the zagovor. Expanding Conrad's framework allows for the inclusion of all of the zagovory included in this thesis, since all of them involve invocation, exposition, and expulsion but not in that order. Only some involve ratification, which I also account for in my proposed modification to Conrad's framework.

Considering both that global literacy rates were low until the twentieth century and the persecution of *znakhari* in the Russian Empire, the use of formulaic language in zagovory and other oral compositions was crucial because people could not rely on written texts. *Znakhari*'s inability to rely on written texts also explains why earlier zagovory are more refined than ones collected in the late twentieth century, when literacy rates were higher and the zagovory had had decades to deviate from their original forms. It is impossible to know which of these zagovory were passed down through text and which were passed down exclusively through oral repetition. If it could be known, it would be fascinating to perform a similar analysis separating entirely oral zagovory from ones that have been written down.

4 Conclusion

The zagovory that I studied do not reveal new information about nature and medical phenomena. In fact, some aspects of them — like the ratification requiring the *znakhar* to wash snakebite wounds with holy water — are outdated altogether. Nevertheless, there is a reason that

people continue turning to zagovory in the age of modern science and continue to pass them down; they are still a tool for people to reach a common understanding of their shared reality.

The most important information that the zagovory convey is beyond the scope of science. Modern scientific methods, for example, can tell us much information about house sparrows. Scientific methods can help people deduce how the birds decide where to nest, which factors affect their rates of fledging, and why they thrive alongside human civilizations. These facts alone cannot tell us, however, about how the birds' unique proximity to human civilization impacts cultural attitudes about them.

Zagovory and other magical practices, on the other hand, can reveal information about individual people and communities' relationships with house sparrows. The house sparrow zagovory approach the birds with a gentle and polite tone, indicating that East Slavic people wanted the birds to prosper, albeit elsewhere. Similarly, the usage of individual humans' names (such as in zagovor 479 (Agapkina et. al 2003:271) when the speaker asks the house sparrows to stay away from Gannin's barley) ties these attitudes to concrete individuals. These representations of social behavior are just as crucial to understanding nature as purely scientific means of understanding the world.

Similarly, the medical zagovory indicate East Slavic people's traditional understandings of various afflictions about which they could not have had complex medical understandings prior to the twentieth century. Modern medical science can discern the causes of epilepsy (Stafstrom and Carmant 2015), how it affects sufferers' well-being, and precautions that can decrease the disease's disastrous impact. But these facts, alone, cannot convey the pain associated with the disease to people who do not suffer from it. The rich imagery of the moon visiting the world of the dead and the various figures and places associated with epilepsy are a way for people to understand the afflictions beyond knowing their physical symptoms. As with the nature zagovory, the respective tones of the speakers reflects the seriousness of the issues. The morose imagery of the toothache and the epilepsy zagovory, much of which concerns the dead and violent topics, indicates the intensity of these understandings.

In this, through healing zagovory we can see, if not empathy itself, significant attempts to understand others' pain and suffering. Because people today continue turning to znakhari alongside licensed medical professionals for care, the attitudes conveyed in zagovory are not

merely archaic understandings. The use of zagovory remains ongoing because the incantations fill a gap in people's understanding of nature and diseases that modern scientific methods cannot satisfy: the social aspect of it all.

Moreover, though I only had the ability to study transcribed zagovory, they are primarily an oral tradition. Their formulaic nature and short lengths are conducive to their oral transferal between generations. Semitic incantations also share these qualities (Niditch 1979:464). Their formulaic nature identifies them as indicative of a culturally common understanding of reality. They were composed for the benefit of a community instead of a single individual, a purpose that they have served well.

Zagovory could not exist in their current form without a community of people who believed in them as a way to manipulate and understand the world. They could not be passed down so long if their role was not integral to maintaining a community's spiritual and cultural beliefs. It is necessary to broaden Conrad's existing framework for the formula of zagovory to include more post-nineteenth-century zagovory, which are more diverse in terms of structure than earlier zagovory. Their diversification over time to fit different znakhari's needs show their importance and continued relevance.

Overall, zagovory incorporate aspects of science that are observable to the human eye, such as that house sparrows eat crops, that snakebites are often fatal to humans, and that epilepsy is a complicated disease whose causes are varied and unidentifiable without modern medicine. Nevertheless, they are distinct from modern science in that they focus less on objective facts than on ways that problems affect specific communities. Healing practices that consider the human underneath objective struggles are complementary to, and not opposed to, the pursuit of modern Western science. Through studying zagovory we gain a more thorough understanding of East Slavic communities and their unique understandings of phenomena that they would have had no way to control before modern scientific and medical interventions.

The zagovory that I studied for this paper, varied as they are, all were recorded in Polesia. Though *Polesskie zagovory* thoroughly covers a vast variety of zagovory, it neither is exhaustive of zagovory from Polesia nor reflects the total range of East Slavic magical oral compositions (i.e., does not include malevolent incantations). As it is remarkable that the people of Polesia produced such an expansive body of zagovory, so too is it unfortunate that for so long magical

practices were overlooked in academia or studied through a purely anthropological lens. Studies on magical folk traditions of any culture could yield similar information about how magic binds communities to shared understandings of an often-inexplicable world. Future studies on *Poleskie zagovory* through a wider or morphological lens could also yield notable linguistic and cultural findings about the attitudes of East Slavic people concerning various phenomena.

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