

The Whisperers

Ancient Christian-Pagan Healers from Poland

Nicholas Breeze Wood

Above: the rural Polish landscape

Near to Poland's eastern border - in the Podlachia, or Podlasie region, which is close to the neighbouring country of Belarus - there can still be found an ancient healing tradition, a mix of pagan animistic and Orthodox Christian beliefs. These healers are known as the szeptun or szeptucha - the ones who whisper.

The area where they live is in the Polish part of the Carpathian mountains - long been said to be the home of ancient traditions - and the people of this part of Poland have much in common with other groups found within the mountains in Slovakia, Ukraine, and Romania; all of whom share the same ancient cultural roots.

The szeptun are a mostly female tradition, and they mix the mysticism of Orthodox Christianity, with much older traditions pre Christian roots, some of which are animistic and some of which have their roots in the shamanism of the Steppes, which stretch to the east all the way to Siberia.

Right: Orthodox Christian crosses



Male szeptun are sometimes found, but they are uncommon, and in much smaller numbers than the women, although there is a belief amongst some people that male whisperers are more powerful than the female ones.

Like many traditional healing practices around the world, the whisperers have diminished over recent years. The old practitioners are getting older, and young people

are not stepping forward to take their place, in great numbers; but although its long term future is uncertain, the tradition still currently survives.

There are a number of causes for the decline of the tradition. The biggest one is perhaps that the young people are simply not interested in the old ways, which they often see as primitive and backwards; young people often want to earn a good living, and so will move away from the rural areas where, traditionally the whisperers have lived and worked. Also there is now a better level of state healthcare than there was previously in the past, making the work of the szeptun less and less important.

However, interest - albeit mostly as a curious folk tradition - in the szeptun has increased in recent years, and whereas a mere decade or so ago, the practice was a very obscure rural one, today it has become much more a topic of mainstream urban conversation, portrayed even as characters in



popular novels, plays and films. Whether this will help the tradition to be passed on to in a meaningful way to younger practitioners is, however, still unknown.

One possible cause for hope is the increase of interest in the sacred feminine, found so commonly in the West's new age and alternative communities, has also made inroads into Poland - as have such things as medicine wheel teachings and core shamanism. Many young women are now drawn to a loose form of witchcraft - like they are in other places - and having a history of szeptun in their culture, some Polish women are modelling themselves on them. But - as in many Western cultures - these are often urban women, out of touch with the reality of the life of an old-time, rural szeptun, and so a fair amount of fantasy creeps in when they use the szeptun as role models.

The szeptun get their name from the way they whisper prayers, spells and charms for people - each prayer often being specific for a specific ailment. This whispering is done in a mix of Polish, Belarussian and Old Church Slavonic, which makes it hard for anyone outside of the tradition to understand what is being said.

The tradition is seen as a form of folk witchcraft, but is generally considered to be healing and helpful in nature, as the szeptucha generally do not curse people or perform harmful magic.

However, they will practice malevolent rituals at times, and have curses to cause illness - or even death - in the szeptun's tool kit.

One anthropologist, researching the tradition witnessed a friend of one szeptun asking if she could make their neighbour die.

The Whisperer replied, "Yes, I can do that," but added a caveat. "If your neighbour is a good person, you will die instead."

Duly warned, the szeptun's friend asked her to go ahead, and the szeptun prayed and did a ritual, but a month later, the szeptun's friend - the commissioner of the spell - died instead, having fallen under a tractor and been crushed.

The same anthropologist, taking photographs and having taken almost a hundred other photos

They believe their ability to heal is a gift from God, and can be traced all the way back to the healings of Jesus. But even though most whisperers are devout Christian believers, they include older pagan practices in their work



Left: a szeptun prepares for a healing ritual



Left: a szeptun recites prayers during a healing

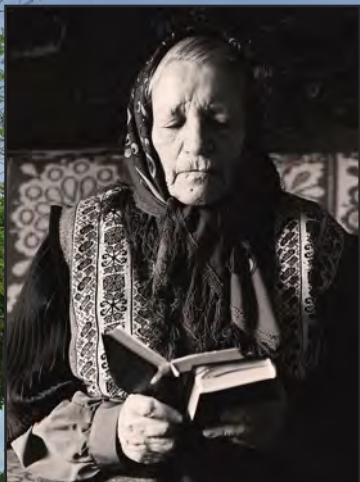


Left: a szeptun holding some of the objects she uses for healings, stands before Christian icons

Right: three elderly szeptun. Top to bottom Babka Fiadora, Babka Ilina and Babka Yanina



Below: a rural Polish Orthodox Christian Church



during the course of that day, asked to take a portrait of a szeptun, who allowed the photographs to be taken, but then suddenly got annoyed with the young urban anthropologist, and drove him from the house.

He took a few more photographs outside of the general area, and returned to his hotel to check on the images, only to discover all of the photographs he had taken during the day had come out beautifully, except those of the szeptun, which all had corrupted files on his camera's SD card.

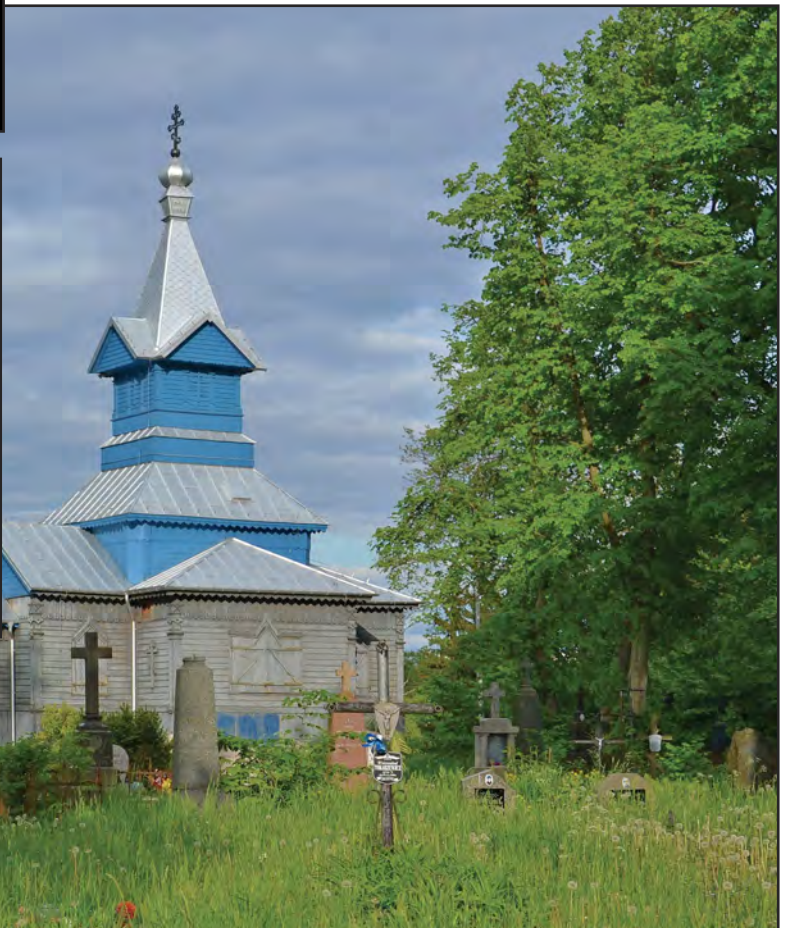
A szeptun believes that their ability to heal is a gift from God, and can be traced all the way back to the miracle healings which Jesus performed. But even though most whisperers are devout Orthodox Christian believers, because they include older pagan practices in their work, the Orthodox Church in Poland does not officially approve of them, but does turn somewhat of a blind eye to the tradition. The Church is pragmatic enough to know such healings work, and are of benefit to the community. There

are even accounts of a few Orthodox priest who have become male szeptun over the years; it is a complicated relationship.

The szeptun traditions often run in families, and they explain this by saying that 'God wants His gift to remain with a virtuous family, so He gives it to relatives.' In the past, people with the szeptun gift were often envied by their neighbours, this was because the ability to heal significantly increased the social status of an szeptun or thier family, as a szeptun was one of the most important people in the community.

The most desirable people to transfer the knowledge to are a szeptun's grown up children, but if a child of a szeptun do not agree to receive the gift, the circle of possible candidates expands to a szeptun's extended family or even their neighbours. There are also some recorded cases when a szeptun develops the gift in isolation, and learns to pray and heal by themselves.

A new szeptun must be someone with a specific character. Ideally, they





Above: a szeptun performing a fire ritual on a patient

should be a calm, patient, empathic, easily forgiving, and above all pious person. They must not come into contact with alcohol either, although drinking is socially acceptable with local villagers, if a szeptun drinks they will be shunned and excluded from the circle of other szeptun in the area. A new szeptun should be somewhat advanced in age, women should have entered menopause and men should be around the same age; people of later life have a quieter disposition, and have had the 'corners knocked off.'

When the gift passed to a new potential szeptun, the most important thing was their willingness to accept it. Once they had, they were taught the traditions and given copies of the ancient texts and prayers and taught how to use them. However, they say that a gift from God which is not well

used, or not used enough, can be taken away by God again at any moment, so a szeptun was never casual with their gifts.

A new szeptun starts their healing work by helping their immediate family, but over time, when they become experienced, their work is extended to neighbours and people from surrounding villages.

Because they see the healing abilities as a gift from God, they traditionally refuse to take any payment for treatments, and consider it obligatory to use any healing powers they have for the good of all, whenever someone asks for it. It is said that a szeptun must get rid of their anger, grief and other negative



Left: two elderly szeptun. Top to bottom Babka Katia, Babka Nadzeja



As well as praying over their patients, many szeptun rituals - such as burning flax - are designed to draw out the 'spirit of the illness' from a the patient and dispose of it





Right: a szeptun prepares for a healing fire ceremony by arranging flax. The flax is placed on the patients head and ignited, so as to draw out the illness

emotions, in relation to all people, so as to be able to help anyone, even those whom they consider to be their enemies

Although no charge is made, it is traditional for people visiting them to leave something on a table in the visiting room, something sweet like

a cake, or a few small coins. These are tokens of thanks and respect for the healing they have received and as a sign of gratitude to God. The szeptun generally gives these to their local church.

In more recent years some szeptun have started to charge set

fees for their service, but traditional szeptun tend to see these newer szeptun as bogus, only performing for the money, and say they have little power. Traditional szeptun say a true szeptun would never charge, and considered it immoral to get 'rich of the word of God,' because ministry should always be free.

Because they do not charge for their healings, szeptun have to earn their living just like other people do, and there are a number of trades and professions associated with them, including millers, shepherds, foresters, brewers, blacksmiths, fishermen, hunters, gravediggers, carpenters, potters, musicians, tailors and occasionally priests. All of these trades are non-agricultural, which seems to be an undesirable occupation for a szeptun.

The szeptun believe that God pays more attention to their prayers, than those of other people, because a szeptun has rock solid faith. Because of this, they are can bring down healing powers coming from above easier than other people can. Their faith has to be absolutely solid and unswerving for the healing to work, and the patient - or at least a member of their family - should also have a solid faith too, as if they don't, despite the best efforts of the szeptun, the healing will not be effective. The patient does not need to be an Orthodox believer, but ideally they should be a Christian.

But despite a szeptun's faith being deep and profound, they realise the healings they perform have limitations, and generally only say their prayers and do their rituals for a handful of illnesses.

A szeptun generally focuses on the treatment of only a few types of illness, so a person suffering from an ailment, which is not a speciality of their local szeptun will often be referred to another healer. In this way a szeptun can build up a deep specialised knowledge of their particular area of expertise. Most of their healings are associated with maladies which are not clinically diagnosed - organic or physical illnesses - for example, you wouldn't visit a szeptun with a twisted ankle or a broken arm, but if your life 'pinched you' in some way, if your symptoms were vague



and your path was heavy, they might be a first port of call.

However, in recent years, there has been a rise in the number of treatments offered for maladies which, in the past, were not normally treated by a szeptun. These are often more bogus claims, such as a szeptun saying they have a prayer or ritual to cure cancer. These are sometimes calculated attempts to manipulate the sick, and cases like these have provoked a backlash from some people in Poland against the false healers; just as people similar to bogus claims by healers have in other countries in the West.

Old time - more traditionally treatable maladies which szeptun work on include *przewianie* - persistent shivers or physical pain caused by an attack by a cold wind; *przestrach* - a fright - an agitation caused by an abrupt, unpleasant event resulting in what shamanic practitioners might call a 'soul loss.'

Szeptun also remove spells and curses, said to have been cast upon the patient by someone else; and *nerw-ko tun* - the nerve plait. This condition is said to be caused by the activation of an additional spirit or soul - called a *gosciec* - which exists within all humans. Once activated, a *gosciec* causes insomnia, abdominal pains and a general weakness of the body. A Szeptun's skills is said to be able to pacify a *gosciec*, returning the patient to good health once again. If a *nerw-ko tun* is an extreme case, the treatment of it can take several weeks, or months, or even years.

One of the ways a szeptun treats a *nerw-ko tun* is by using sheep wool, which is put in a sick person's pillow for three nights, and then replaced with fresh wool three times. The patient sleeps on wool for nine consecutive nights, which draws the *nerw-ko tun* out of them. Wool may also be applied to places which hurt on the patient's body, which also draws out the suffering. But of course, it is important to remember that a szeptun realises it is not the use of the wool that is important, but the prayers and rituals which accompany its use.

Szeptun also are consulted because of their clairvoyant skills, asked to find lost objects, and

Methods of extracting an illness might include rubbing a patient with a glass containing wood ashes, or ashes mixed with water like a sort of dough ball, or pouring hot candle wax into a pot of cold water, placed on the head of the patient. Once the ritual is completed, the ashes, or solidified wax, are removed, and taken outside and left there - taking the malady with them



Left: a szeptun pours molten wax into cold water to draw out an illness and enable a reading to be done about the illness



Left: a szeptun scatters wood ash which has been used in a patient's healing

when needed, perform exorcisms

As well as praying over their patients, many szeptun rituals are designed to draw out the 'spirit of the illness' from a the patient and dispose of it. Some of these rituals are quite dramatic - such as the burning of a small pile of flax placed upon a cloth on top of a patients head - although other extraction methods are less so.

Methods of extracting an illness might include rubbing a patient's body with a glass containing wood ashes, or a ball of ashes mixed

with water like a sort of dough ball, or pouring hot candle wax into a pot of cold water, placed on the head of the patient. Once the ritual is completed, the ashes, or solidified wax, are removed, wrapped in a square of fabric and taken outside and left there - taking the malady with them.

A healing will often finish by the patient consuming a little food or drink, which has been blessed and prayed over.

Candle wax, when dripped in to





a container of water is 'read' by holding it up for interpretation, and wood ash can also be 'read' in a similar way. Wood ash is specifically used as a divination method for questions to do with an illness too. Ash is placed in a glass jar and covered in cloth, and then the jar is turned over while prayers are said. The ash-filled jar is then placed on a table, the cloth removed from it and the contents 'read'. If the ash has formed a smooth, compact mass it is a positive sign, but if there is a hole or gap in the ash, it means that the patient has been 'knocked out', badly affected by the illness, and more work will be required. Like many divination methods across

the world, this ash reading would be repeated three times to get a best of three result.

Occasionally very bizarre rituals to do with healings are reported, such as one notorious tale of an Orthodox priest who died in a car accident in 2011.

His car had swerved - and he had been killed - while trying to avoid a collision with a toilet, placed in the middle of a crossroads. The person who put it there was never traced, and police stopped their investigation, and nobody was ever convicted, but locals claimed it was one of their own who had put the bowl in the middle of the road, and they did it as part of a ceremony with a szeptun. This was a ceremony performed to stop a local feud, as in popular folklore, placing an object belonging to your enemy at the centre of a crossroads is a way of evading any harmful curse cast by them in your direction. Some local people said that it was actually the priest - the man who was killed - who the villager had the problem with.

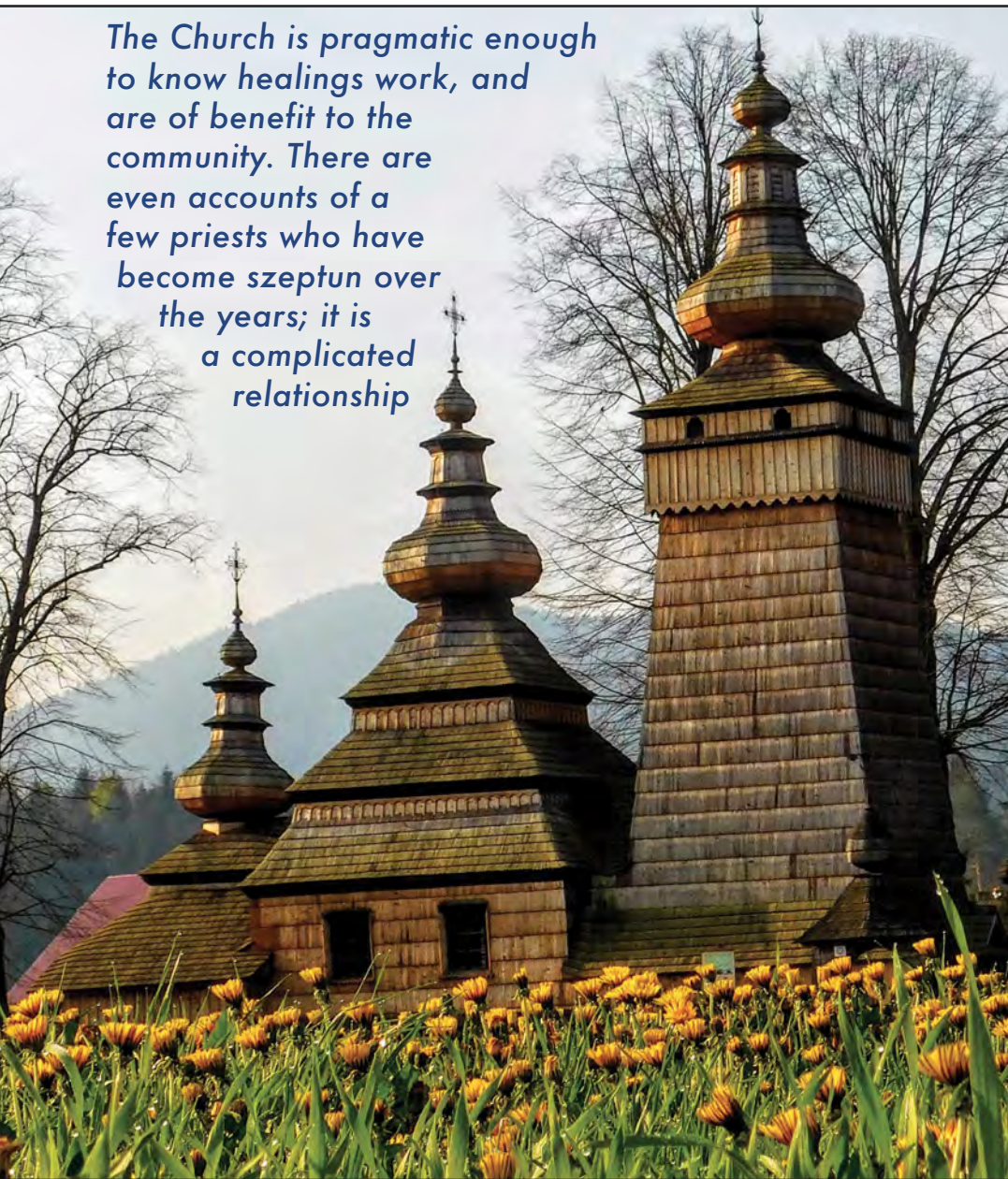
The use of a crossroad for magical ritual is, of course, very common in many folk traditions across Europe and beyond, and they have long been considered a liminal space, between two directions, and therefore somewhat sacred and magical in their own right.

The szeptun traditions of cursing is often known as psucie - spoiling. This is the working of magic against someone, and there are many ways of performing it.

One way of spoiling is to measuring out the exact length of someone's footprint with a string, and then burning the string. Another method involves finding a footprint, in mud or snow, of the victim, which should be cut out and buried under the victim's house, thus symbolically putting them in a grave.

The vast and wild Carpathian mountains are an area where many ancient traditions have survived. Quite isolated until recent years, they have been a cultural backwater, which enabled old ways to remain unmodernised, like the endangered species they are. Folk tales and traditions of magic of all kind, vampires, werewolves and witches are only some of the rich traditions

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Because they do not charge, szeptun have to earn their living just as other people do, and there are a number of trades associated with them, including shepherds, foresters, brewers, blacksmiths, hunters and potters...



Left: a szeptun with her small flock of sheep

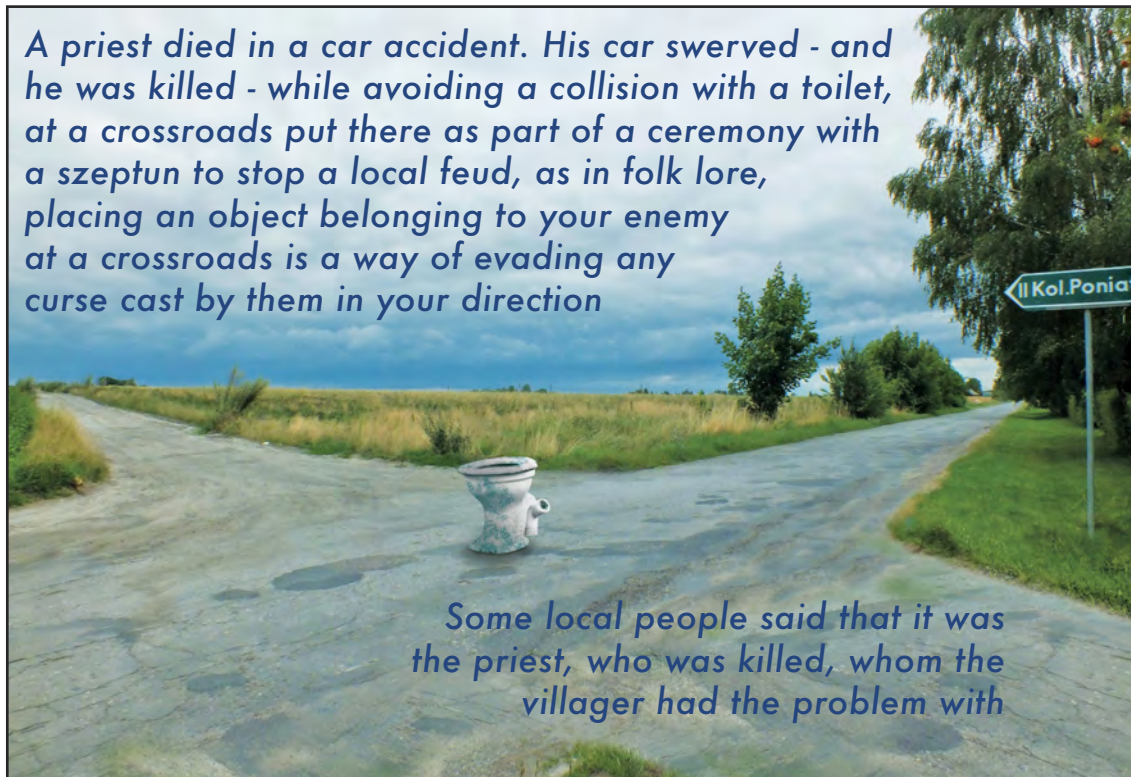
which come from them. The mountains were the western edge of the empire of the Scythians, the folk lore of the peoples contains traces of shamanism and Tengherism, and there are some actual shamanic traditions from the mountains in Hungary, remnants of ancient Mongolian and Scythian traditions. Some of the Carpathian peoples themselves come from Central Asia, having migrated from there, and up until a thousand years ago Christianity was not common in them.

No wonder the Polish szeptun have survived, along with other traditions, hidden away for centuries in these mountainous



Left: a table in a szeptun's consulting room, with balls of wax and icons

A priest died in a car accident. His car swerved - and he was killed - while avoiding a collision with a toilet, at a crossroads put there as part of a ceremony with a szeptun to stop a local feud, as in folk lore, placing an object belonging to your enemy at a crossroads is a way of evading any curse cast by them in your direction



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