

**Functions of colours and coloured objects
in Slavic culture:
Magic, folklore and language**

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Abstract

Colours have always played an important role in Slavic culture. In the Slavic world of magic, each basic colour was meaningful and symbolized certain behaviours and their results. In order to understand the perception of colours in the modern times as well as the fixed expressions in which colour terms occur, we should take a look at this phenomenon from the cultural perspective. Adopting the cultural perspective allows researchers to trace the continuity of the Slavic perception of colours and their reflection in language.

The aim of this paper is to present the functions of colours and coloured objects in Slavic culture, with relation to their alleged healing, protective and wizardry properties. Besides, the paper presents the Polish and Russian names of plants which were believed to have healing properties as well as the names of illnesses containing colour terms.

Keywords

Slavic culture, colour, colour terms, plant names, names of illnesses, Polish, Russian

FUNKCJE BARW I BARWNYCH PRZEDMIOTÓW W KULTURZE SŁOWIAŃSKIEJ: MAGIA, FOLKLOR I JĘZYK

Abstrakt

Kolory zawsze odgrywały ważną rolę w kulturze słowiańskiej. W słowiańskim świecie magii każda podstawowa barwa miała znaczenie i symbolizowała pewne zachowania i ich skutki. Aby zrozumieć współczesne postrzeganie kolorów i utrwalone wyrażenia, w których występują nazwy barw, należy spojrzeć na to zjawisko z perspektywy kulturowej. Przyjęcie perspektywy kulturowej pozwala badaczom prześledzić ciągłość słowiańskiego postrzegania kolorów i ich odzwierciedlenia w języku.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie funkcji barw i przedmiotów o danym kolorze w kulturze słowiańskiej, w odniesieniu do ich rzekomych właściwości leczniczych, ochronnych i czarodziejskich. Ponadto w artykule przedstawiono polskie i rosyjskie nazwy roślin, o których wierzono, że mają właściwości lecznicze, a także nazwy chorób zawierające określenia barwne.

Słowa kluczowe

kultura słowiańska, barwa, nazwy barw, nazwy roślin, nazwy chorób, język polski, język rosyjski

1. Introduction

Colours have always played an important role in Slavic culture. In Slavic magic, each basic colour symbolized certain types of behaviour and its results. In order to understand the perception of colours in the modern times the meanings of fixed expressions in which colour terms occur, we should take a look at colours from the cultural perspective, which allows researchers to

trace the continuity of the Slavic perception of colours and their reflection in language.

The aim of this paper is to present the functions of colours and coloured objects in Slavic culture, with relation to their alleged healing, protective and wizardry properties.¹ I also wish to concentrate on the Polish and Russian names of plants believed to have such properties. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) Which colours were particularly important in the Slavic world of magic?
- (2) Which colour terms are found in words connected with folk medicine, i.e. the names of healing plants and the names of diseases?

It needs to be recalled here that numerous scholars have investigated the colour lexicons of Slavic languages, including Polish and Russian (see, among others, Ampel-Rudolf 1994, Badyda 2008, Bjelajeva 2005, Frumkina 1984, Komorowska 2010, 2017, Komorowska and Stanulewicz 2018, Kul'pina 2001, Narloch 2013, Paramei 2004, Stanulewicz 2009, 2016, Tokarski 2004 [1995], Uberman 2011).

2. Symbolism of colours

Before the presentation of the functions of colours in Slavic culture, let us concentrate on the symbolism of its three most important colours: black, white and red.

The colour black, according to Kopaliński (2007 [1990]: 48), is a symbol of evil, superstition, fear, gloom, worry, hatred, danger, deception, tragedy, catastrophe, destruction, sorrow, darkness, death, damnation, devil, despair, mourning, sorcery, sin, the unknown and mystery, inferiority, nothingness, ignorance

¹ For the functions of colours in the supernatural Slavic world, see, among others, Komorowska (2010: 70–82, 2022) and Stanulewicz (2022a, 2022b).

and total passivity. Although black receives mainly negative valuation, it can also have positive and neutral connotations, including fertile black earth (as opposed to brown, rusty desert), the earth, deities of the earth and underworld, constancy, absolute, wisdom, eternity, sleep and night.

White sometimes symbolizes opposites, such as life and death or consciousness and unconsciousness. Moreover, as Kopaliński (2007 [1990]: 17) claims, white is a symbol of perfection, spirituality, holiness, glory, salvation, revelation, redemption, rebirth, eternity, festivity, enlightenment, reason, truth, knowledge, timelessness, perfect wisdom, intuition, innocence, virginity, purity, honesty, temperance, marriage and friendship, sincerity, joy, merriment, happiness, simplicity and conventionality. This colour is also associated with the visible world, light, dawn, moon and time. As regards its negative symbolism, Kopaliński mentions fear, cowardice, death, and mourning.

The colour red has an exceptionally rich cultural symbolism. According to Kopaliński (2007 [1990]: 51), red is a symbol of the human body, energy, enthusiasm, courage, anger, vigour, virility, action, robustness, joy, excitement, passion, affection, love, happiness and health, light and heat, spiritual enlightenment, inspiration, creativity and leadership. Red has associations with religion: devotion, sacrifice, mercy, martyrdom, Christ's passion, resurrection as well as the love of God and the Holy Spirit. It also symbolizes sin, hellfire, anarchy, lawlessness, savagery, selfishness, hatred, danger, crime, slaughter and disease. Politically speaking, red has the connotations of rebellion, revolution, socialism and communism. In comparison with other colours, red is perceived as the most ambivalent one (Stanulewicz, Komorowska and Pawłowski 2014).

3. Functions of colours and coloured objects

In this section, I concentrate on the protective, healing and wizardry functions of colours and coloured objects in Slavic culture.

3.1. The protective function

Slavs used numerous measures protecting them from the evil which, as they thought, could affect people, homes and animals, anytime and anywhere. This evil was related to not only the dangerous elements, like drought, downpour and hail or diseases, but also to the invisible powers of witchcraft, spells as well as many to demonic figures which could be encountered at cross-roads, in forests, fields and farms. Therefore, Slavs felt anxious while leaving their home, which was their safest place, to enter the unknown, untamed world full of dangers (Walencowa 1977: 194).

Slavs, above all, tried to prevent any misfortunes and thus various magic plants, objects and rituals were helpful. What was in particular well known then was all pricking, sharp, burning or strong smell-giving healing plants. Much attention was also given to colours, especially red (Leciejewicz, ed., 1972: 17).

A strong protective power could be manifested by any red object, which was the most effective against spells. Slavs commonly used red scarfs, beads, belts or ribbons which protected not only people but domestic animals as well (Moszyński 1967: 312). Even plants in the patches were adorned with a piece of red cloth. Sometimes a scarecrow or a rod with a piece of red cloth was placed in the middle of the patches so that no one could put a spell on them. It was believed that only red and crimson make the spells disappear. A passer-by who intended to harm the vegetables or flowers was to look first at the red cloth as the most visible element, and then the plants were to be safe because “only the first look is harmful” (Gustawicz 1882: 210). In the Middle Ages, it was believed that the colour red would protect people against demons and other dangers, therefore at that time in many cities, prisons and the places where justice was administered were painted red. The protective symbolism of the colour red has remained in the superstitions in Poland until now. For instance, to protect a child against “a spell” when the child’s looks are praised, cautious parents or

grandparents also place a red ribbon on the pram, believing it has the power to undo the spell.

The colour red of a burning torch had the protective function, along with the magical activity of walking in a circle. The magical power was attributed to going around a village, homesteads and fields with burning torches. That happened on the Midsummer Night. When the Midsummer Night was over, Serbs – from the dying bonfire – lit birch bark torches and, carrying them, went around homesteads in order to drive the evil spirit and all spells away (Ziółkowska 1989: 99). In Poland, going around the homestead with glowing embers deprived the evil spirit of access to it (Bartmiński, ed., 1996, I: 274).

One of the oldest and commonly practiced customs in Europe was the so-called “red interments”. This custom was first practised by Greeks and Romans, then in the east and west parts of the Roman Empire and later in the Balkans and among East Slavs (Gross 1990: 42). Their essence was to sprinkle the dead bodies with red ruddle (i.e. iron oxide) so that the sacrificed colours would bring relief to the dead people in the spirit world.

Black and grey, as the colours of ashes and smoke, were also meaningful for Slavs. The smoke itself had a protective power. The best smoke came from the burning of blessed herbs, and Corpus Christi procession twigs or from a blessed candle. It was also believed that it was given special properties when the blessed herbs were in a wreath (Moszyński 1967: 314). Before a thunderstorm, people used willow twigs to light up the stove since they believed that “when the blessed herb comes out along with the smoke through a chimney, it will disperse the clouds over the homestead and the thunderbolt will not hit it” (Bartmiński, ed., 1996, I: 215).

A number of protective herbs were also commonly used by Slavs. For example, *baneberry* (Latin *Actaea spicata*), also known as *black root* was considered by East Slavs (in particular those inhabiting Perm Governorate) to be an amulet protecting home against fire and other calamities. The sagebrush (Latin *Artemista*, Russian *černobyl'*, *černobyl*, *černobyl'nik* / черно-

быль, чернобыль, чернобыльник) was supposed to scare off evil spirits. As Chodurska (2010: 44) writes, the sagebrush is known as an apotropaic plant in all Slavic areas. Its protective function is praised by poets and described by the compilers of the oldest herbaria of Central Europe. Stefan Falmirz advised to perfume the home air with herbs to “scare off the evil” (witches, evil spirits, plague and other serious diseases). Marcin of Urzędów advised to hang herbs over the gateways to protect the household members from spells.

The very toxic houndstongue (Latin *Cynoglossum officinale*, Russian *černokoren'*, *černyj koren'* / *чернокорень, черный корень*, lit. black root) was regarded in the eastern Slavic areas as an amulet protecting from real dangers, for instance, from attacks of dogs or rats (Holubý 1958: 224). What protected against thunderbolts was the white bedstraw (Latin *Galium mollugo*, Russian *černyj metlûk, černaâ trava* / *черный метлюк, черная трава*, lit. black grass). The devil was effectively scared off with a stick made of the plant known as *common buckthorn* and that is why the twigs of this shrubbery were usually placed over the home entrance (Rostafiński 1900, II: 217). The protective function was also attributed to the black elder. This bush was typically planted in the vicinity of peasants' homesteads and it protected them and their property against the evil, fire, plague and various diseases. However, most of all, it protected people against witchcraft (Sikora 1992).

3.2. The healing function

In the healing magic, one of the treatments was the so-called “abandoning or avoiding a disease” which could result from an incautious behaviour. Big threats were associated with the atmospheric and cosmic phenomena, the earth, fire and water (Moszyński 1967: 191) as well as with those internal ones, e.g. some bugs living in the human body. One of the reasons for illnesses was light. For instance, in Poland, one of the reasons for which children were ill was moon light, i.e. the exposition to

the bright white colour. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, people believed that the Pleiades were harmful because by showing themselves from time to time in the sky, they shook off the down and vermin which fell to the ground. This brought serious illnesses to cattle, horses and sheep. Thus, when lights in the sky appeared, the domestic animals were closed indoors. Similar practices were observed during the time with no sunlight, i.e. during a solar eclipse which was believed to be dangerous to all living creatures.

Slavs treated diseases with herbs which “had to stand out by having an appropriate shape, colour and taste” (Chodurska 1993: 59). For instance, plants with yellow flowers were used to cure jaundices, herbs with white flowers cured paleness, i.e. anaemia and bleeding, while other illnesses related to the colour of blood were cured by plants whose flowers were red or whose juice looked as if it had been blood. For example, the petals of St John’s wort flowers secrete red juice so they were used to cure internal bleedings (Jabłońska 1965: 88–89). More serious diseases, usually of an epidemic character, were called “black” and were cured by black or grey plants. Black plants are those plants which have the “black” component in their names, e.g. Polish *czarna jagoda* ‘bilberry’ (lit. black berry), *czarna borówka* (lit. black berry) / *czernica* ‘blueberry’ and Russian *černica*, *černika* / *черница*, *черника* ‘bilberry’. As a rule, however, numerous names in this group do not point to the colour black directly; instead, they rather indicate the darker shade of the colour of the entire plant or its part (Chodurska 2010: 43). The herbs with the “black names” were used to cure “black diseases”, such as black fever, black cholera, black melancholy, black death (the plague) and black weakness (epilepsy). They were used in various magical procedures. For example, the baneberry (Latin *Actaea spicata*, Polish *czerniec*) was recommended in Western Polesie as a plant curing nervous system diseases, so, quite certainly, to cure melancholy as well (Chodurska 2010). *Black horehound* (Latin *Ballota nigra*, Russian *černokudrennik* / *чернокудренник*) was considered by East

Slavs to be an effective cure for hypochondria (Annenkov 1876–1878: 61). The white bedstraw (Latin *Galium mollugo*, Russian *černyj metlûk, černaâ trava / черный метлюк, черная трава*) was used as a medicine for epilepsy, for strengthening the condition of the organism and as a mood booster (Rostafiński 1900, I: 310). For scaring off epidemics and plagues by incensing closed rooms and open areas, Slavs used the greater burnet-saxifrage (Latin *Pimpinella magna*, Russian *černogolovka / черноголовка*). This herb was recommended in the 16th century as a preventive measure against cholera (Chodurska 2010: 44). At the same time, *salad burnet* (Latin *Poterium sanguisorba*, Russian *černogolovnik / черноголовник*), being dark red, was used in the treatment of heart diseases (Annenkov 1876–1878: 272). The black elder (Polish *czarny bez*) was used to treat all illnesses. The following spell is commonly known in the Polish folklore:

Czarny bzie, *święty bzie, weź moje bolenie*
Pod swoje zdrowe korzenie.
 'Black elder, holy elder, take my pains
 Under your healthy roots.'

The black elder was an inviolable shrub. This concerned, in particular, its roots. Injuring them, as the Slavic magic held, could cause a family member's death, flood or cattle pest.

As one of the healing measures, Slavs used fire, smoke and coal, the colours of which were significant. A great role in the magic of undoing spells was attributed to fire and its colour – red. Fire was used as a medical, purifying measure which destroyed evil spirits (Bartmiński, ed., 1996, I: 274). Incensing with smoke coming from seeds of henbane (Latin *Hyoscyamus niger*, Polish *lulek czarny*) was used to treat a toothache. This smoke was mixed with yellow wax; then three candles were formed and stuck to the inside of a bottomless pot; the candles were lit and the pot was put into water. A person suffering from a toothache should have his or her mouth wide open over the

smoke coming from the burning candles. It was believed that henbane smoke, having "a strange odour", removed bugs from teeth so that the teeth would stop aching (Gustawicz 1882: 263). Incensing a house with the herb smoke (e.g. of sagebrush, oak tree leaves, St John's wort, birthwort, peony roots) was also a common way of scaring off the evil (Rostafiński 1900, II: 94).

What was also used in treating illnesses was colourful objects. The illness called erysipelas was cured with a piece of red cloth and some flax. The following procedure was used: out of the flax a ball was made which was then put on the cloth. Then, this all was placed onto the skin infected with erysipelas and the flax was burned on its four sides. After it was burnt, a woolen scrap was put onto it. This treatment procedure was repeated several times until the person recovered (Gustawicz 1882: 270). A red ribbon was worn on the neck against nose bleedings (Gross 1990: 63). In the Middle Ages, red clothing was used as a means against pox and measles.

White cloth was used to make one's liver recover after the devil's spell. For example, people waited until Pentecost so that the sick person could meet this devil. During that time, a family member took that person to the place with flowering plants, which was visited by samodivas or nymphs who ate those flowers. Underneath one of such plants, a pot with water as well as an offering were placed for them. Nearby, the sick person lied down, covered with white cloth. The accompanying person left and only after hearing the second cockerel, did that person return. If at least one flower fell into the pot with water, that meant that the demons brought back health to the sick person. Then, the sick person drank water from the pot and afterwards, with the accompanying person, secretly returned home so that nobody could see them (Moszyński 1967: 209).

3.3. The wizardry function

The wizardry function involved both helping in harvest, maintaining health and love as well as expelling the threats of dark forces.

For instance, abundant harvest was to be guaranteed by adding white-grey catkins from the palms blessed in church on Palm Sunday to the grain which was prepared for spring sowing. Abundant harvest was also to be guaranteed by incensing cows with the smoke coming from various herbs (e.g. sundew, white bryony) so that they could give much milk and “the butter was good” (Gustawicz 1882: 250).

In order to guarantee happiness and abundance, people used a number of magical procedures. For example, before selling cattle in the market, the cows were sprinkled with ashes in order for their owners to be affluent in money. Polish people buried the ashes from the remaining blessed ashes or from the last-year palm in the earth or ashes were added to the seed grain in order to boost harvest (Bartmiński, ed., 1996, I: 334–335). Ashes from the hair which the girl tore from underneath her arm were served by her in the tea to gain the love of the beloved person (Chodurska 2003: 169). For preventing spell, Slavs used the plant which is commonly known as *marsh woundwort* (Latin *Stachys palustris*, Russian *černozâbennik* / *чернозьябенник*).

The ritual and magical functions were also played by mistletoe known as “golden twig”. In the Slavic folklore, mistletoe was linked to the cult of continually regenerating nature, reviving sun, a magical symbol of life. Golden twigs were used to decorate spring palms, house interiors and under a mistletoe, a boy should kiss a girl to be happy.

It was mostly women who resorted to magic which kindled feelings. In order to draw the attention of a beloved person, people used both plant as well as animal means, taking care of specific external conditions, like those related to the light of day and night. However, if people did not use magic on their own, they usually went to a healer who typically ordered them to take

medicine added to drinks or meals or to carry this medicine under their clothes, close to the skin (or perhaps under their arm) or to add it to the bath. What was the most popular in the Slavic areas was the lovage (Latin *Levisticum officinale*, see Chodurska 2003: 169). Each of its parts, eaten by a young person, made him or her immediately fall in love. What was recommended was consuming the lovage during the full moon time. It was believed that like the glowing face of the moon became bigger and bigger night by night and made the night brighter, the feelings of a person who consumed the lovage would grow. This plant was given to girls because it was believed this could bring them “the attention of all handsome boys” in the future. Girls washed their faces in the extract from the leaves or root “to make them smooth and be always admired by boys” (Jabłońska 1965: 68–69).

Another flower of love was the lesser butterfly-orchid (Latin *Platanthera bifolia*, Polish *podkolan biały*) whose characteristic shape of bulbs was seen by Slavs as a symbol of marriage. The butterfly-orchid bulbs look like two hearts connected with each other. Also, as the Slavic practice held, boys gave girls a bouquet of lady’s slipper orchids as a sign of their feelings and on the basis of the way the bouquet was received, they could assess their chances of love (Sikora 1992: 15).

In Ukraine, a girl wanting to be loved, tried to obtain a thread, most preferably of the colour of love, i.e. red, from the boy’s clothing or a bit of dust from the sole of his shoe. When she obtained one of those things, she put it in wax threw into fire, saying a spell wishing the boy to miss her. The boy subjected to such magic would either fall in love with her or wither and die (Moszyński 1967: 294).

4. Colour terms in the names of healing plants and illnesses

As indicated above, the colour terms related to magic are mainly found in the names of plants believed to have healing and

protective properties. The most frequent colour terms found in these names include the Polish and Russian words for black and white, e.g.

- Russian: *černokoren'*, *černyj koren'* / *чернокорень*, *черный корень* (lit. black root) 'houndstongue', *černica*, *černika* / *черница*, *черника* 'bilberry';
- Polish *czarna jagoda* (lit. black berry) 'bilberry', *czarna borówka* (lit. black berry) / *czernica* 'blueberry', *lulek czarny* 'henbane', and the words for white, e.g. Polish *podkolan biały* 'the lesser butterfly-orchid' (Chodurska 1993, 2003, 2010).

As has been indicated above, coloured objects, including plants, were used to treat illnesses whose symptoms were of particular colours (e.g. blue skin). It comes as no surprise then that colour terms are also found in names of illnesses. The following examples are Polish names of some diseases:

- *czarny* 'black': *czarna ospa* 'smallpox';
- *biały* 'white': *białaczka* 'leukemia';
- *czerwony* 'red': *czerwonka* 'dysentery';
- *żółty* 'yellow': *żółta febra* 'yellow fever', *żółtaczk* 'jaundice';
- *różowy* 'pink': *trądzik różowaty* 'rosacea';
- *brązowy* / *brunatny* 'brown': *cukrzyca brązowa* / *brunatna* 'hereditary haemochromatosis';
- *siny* 'grey blue, livid': *sinica* 'cyanosis', *siny obrzęk* 'oedema' (Gonigroszek 2015, Maciejewska and Maciejewska-Szaniec 2012, Stanulewicz 2009: 202–203).

These names involve the metonymy SYMPTOM FOR ILLNESS, more exactly COLOUR FOR ILLNESS (Gonigroszek 2015: 106). It is worth pointing out that there exist other metonymy-based expressions with colour words which refer to emotional or physiological states, e.g. *być czerwonym (ze złości etc.)* 'to be red (with anger etc.)', *być sinym (z zimna / przerażenia etc.)* 'be grey blue (with

cold / fear etc.)' (see, among others, Komorowska 2004, 2005, 2010: 209–214, Stanulewicz 2009: 183–185, 2016).

5. Concluding remarks

As emerges from the presentation of the selected aspects of Slavic culture, colour – along with ritual practices – was an immanent part of the magical world of Slavs, playing the protective, healing and wizardry functions. Coloured objects, including red scarfs, beads, belts or ribbons, were used to protect people, animals and plants from misfortunes and evil spirits. Consequently, colour terms were used not only to describe those practices, but are also found in the names of illnesses (e.g. Polish *czarna ospa* 'smallpox', *czerwonka* 'dysentery', *żółta febra* 'yellow fever') and plants which were believed to cure them (e.g. Polish *czarna jagoda* 'bilberry', *czarna borówka* / *czernica* 'blueberry', *lulek czarny* 'henbane', *podkolan biały* 'the lesser butterfly-orchid').

Finally, it is worth pointing out that black, white and red appear to be its most important colours, which coincides with the first three colour categories of the evolutionary sequence proposed by Berlin and Kay (1969).

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