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Magic Charms and Healing Rituals in Contemporary Yugoslavia*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional folk medicine and ritual healing have been studied extensively in Yugoslavia since the end of the last century. The serials Zbornik za narodni život i običaje Južnih Slavena,1 Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja u Beogradu,2 Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja u Sarajevu,3 Makedonski folklor,4 Traditiones,5 and other scholarly publications such as Narodna umjetnost6 and Narodno stvrdalaštvo-Folklor7 have published numerous articles on this subject. In addition to the copious information about folk beliefs and healing found in his monumental Naš narodni život,8 Tihomir Djordjević produced three monographs devoted to the evil eye,9 witches and conjurers,10 and folk medicine.11

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1. Zagreb: Jugoslovenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1896-. Abbreviated as JAZU.
2. Beograd: Etnografski muzej, 1926-40, 1953-. Abbreviated as GEM.
3. Sarajevo: Zemaljski muzej, 1885-. Abbreviated as ZEM.
4. Skopje: Institute za folklor, 1968-.
5. Ljubljana: Institut za Slovensko narodopisje Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti, 1972-.
6. Zagreb: Institut za narodnu umjetnost, 1962-. The Institute was reorganized in 1977 as Zavod za istraživanje folklora and continues to publish the journal on an annual basis. Abbreviated as NU.
In contrast, this topic has been relatively unexplored by English-speaking folklorists. The single, book-length study dealing with South Slavic folk medicine was written prior to World War II. In her *Healing Ritual: Studies in the Technique and Tradition of the Southern Slavs*, Phyllis Kemp drew on a large number of pre-war publications by Yugoslav ethnographers as well as her own observations in several regions of the country. Kemp's monograph is an exhaustive treatment of the psychology and pathology of folk healing and as such it is an invaluable introduction to the study of folk medicine and ritual in Southeastern Europe. Yet it does not treat the charms themselves in detail.

It is no understatement to say that South Slavic healing charms have been neglected by American folklorists. Yvonne R. Lockwood's *Yugoslav Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography of Contributions in English* cites only six publications, of which one is Kemp's monograph and two are reviews of it; another is Mary E. Durham's *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans* and there are two articles cited, of four and six pages, respectively. The single notable contribution to the study of South Slavic charms is by Barbara Kerewsky Halpern and John Miles Foley, who have analyzed the structure and symbolism of several variants of Serbian charm against erysipelas, an acute, infectious inflammation of the mucous membranes. Their article, "The Power of the Word: Healing Charms as an Oral Genre," is the only substantial English-language investigation of a South Slavic charm to date. The present study will provide an overview of the most common charm types, their linguistic formulae, and their attending ritual ceremonies as found in Yugoslavia today.

The modernizing influences of the post-war economy have eliminated or significantly diminished the role of many traditional customs and superstitions. But recent ethnographic field work has shown that belief in the positive and negative powers of magic charms, or basme, has not entirely died out among farmers and stock breeders in many regions of Yugoslavia. Despite modern facilities such as hospitals and agricultural enterprises, continuing faith in the magic power of basme has been attested recently in Bosnia-Hercegovinia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia.