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Witches in Slavic Memes: Slavic Beliefs in Demons and their Humorous Interpretations

Dejan Ajdačić

Beliefs in demon creatures of different cultural origins appear in different genres of Slavic oral traditions – legends, fairy tales, mythological songs, curses, charms, etc. This paper examines the transformation of witches from figures of fear in Slavic folk belief to humorous icons in contemporary internet memes. The main hypothesis is that digital meme culture replaces local demonological features with internationally recognisable stereotypes derived from popular culture, while simultaneously resemanticising the witch as a symbol of modern female autonomy. A secondary hypothesis assumes that humour in memes functions through parody, role reversal, and the blending of horror and fairy-tale motifs. Methodologically, the study combines folkloristic, ethnolinguistic, and comparative literary analysis with a qualitative content analysis of selected Slavic-language memes. The research demonstrates that memes rarely preserve authentic elements of oral tradition, except in the case of Baba Yaga, and instead rely on simplified visual clichés such as the broom, pointed hat, and exaggerated personality traits. The conclusion confirms that memes represent a form of digital folklore shaped by globalisation, where the witch becomes a flexible cultural sign expressing changing gender norms and contemporary social values.

Keywords: witches, Slavic folklore, memes, digital folklore, parody, popular culture, gender stereotypes, globalisation

Demons in Pagan Times

In the polytheistic era, Slavs believed that natural forces and beings with superhuman powers brought fertility, health, victories, but also disease, destruction, and death. These encounters between humans and supernatural beings – such as *fairies, rusalkas, boginkas, upiórs, vampires, drekavacs, leshies*, wind demons, and devils – were described in stories and verse. With

the Christianisation of the Slavs, these human-like beings were categorised as demonic and could be repelled through baptism, prayer, the cross, and Christian burial rites, though many pagan protective rituals and magic practices persisted. Fear of evil spirits limited humour directed at them, but mockery emerged in tales of foolish devils who could be tricked or demons lacking full control of their powers.

Witches in Oral Tradition

Many cultures around the world believe in witches – women with innate or acquired skills to influence nature and people. Though details differ by culture, various traits, behaviours, and ways to recognise witches exist, along with regionally coloured protective measures. In Slavic traditional cultures, witches were women accused of misdeeds – stealing milk or grain, stopping rain, causing illness or death, sowing discord. They were believed to fly after anointing themselves with special ointments and met on bold mountain or trees with other demonic beings. One common Slavic witch trial method was throwing a bound woman into water – if she sank, she was innocent (Valencova (ed.) 2025: 99). Witch hunts were especially brutal in Catholic areas during the Inquisition.

Ethnographic, folkloristic, and ethnolinguistic studies describe witches in detail. They were known by many names in the Slavic world: *ved'ma, vedunja, znatuha, koldunja, čaraunica, znaharka, vid'ma,* (Valencova (red.) 2025: 55, 96, 145), *čarodejnica, kouzelnica, bobonica, bosorkyňa* (from Hungarian), *stryga/striga* (from Rumanian), *megera/magara* (Valencova (red.) 2025: 303), *wiedzma, czarownica, wróżka, znachorka, paskudnica, paskudziarka, zjadarka, zjadarska baba, baba, babucha* (Valencova (red.) 2025: 229) *veštica, vještica, vjišćica, vešterka, copernica/coprnica/cipernica* (from German), *štriga*, *činilica, činjarica, vešterka* (Valencova (ed.) 2025: 409, 449, 503; Vinogradova, Tolstaja 1995: ved'ma; Plotnikova 2004: 218–222). Witches inspired both fear and a desire for their help. Villagers distinguished helpful women – healers using herbs or incantations – from those who stole, cursed, or caused harm. Vuk Karadžić recorded a tale of a witch who, while preparing to fly, misspoke the magical phrase and was hurled into thorns by a higher power (Karadžić 1818: *vještica). In traditional culture, people feared witches too much to joke about them, but with the Enlightenment's critique of superstition, that fear faded, opening the door for humour.

Humorous Traits in the Literary Portrayal of Witches

Critiques of superstition led to a variety of reinterpretations of witches in literature. One approach was the realistic exposure of intrigue leading to the death of an innocent woman wrongly accused, as in the novel *Dziurdziowie* (1885) by Polish author Eliza Orzeszkowa – though not humorous, unlike Serbian author Simo Matavulj's story *Čevrlja's Crime* (1899, Čevrljino zločinstvo). Of interest here are humorous, especially parodic, depictions of witches showing emotions not typical in traditional portrayals. The idea of the love-struck witch emerged in 18th century knightly fairy tales and later in Pushkin's poem *Ruslan and Ludmila* (1820), featuring the witch Naina. Rich parodic representations appear in Katenin's *Princess Milusha* (1834, Knjažna Miluša) and Nikolay Nekrasov's *Baba Yaga, the Bony Leg* (1841, *Baba Jaga, Kostjannaja noga*) (see Ajdačić 2015: 26–28). Witches also appear in children's stories, literary adaptations, and plays.

In modern epic fantasy with humorous elements, traditional witch imagery blends with urban life. For example, Krzysztof Piskorski's story "Cottage" (2004, Chatka) places Baba Yaga in modern day Wrocław (Troha 2023: 276). Serbian author Mina Todorović's fantasy novel for children features a cute little witch girl, Mala Mikuš in the novels *Vir svetova* (2003) and *Gamiž* (2012), who speaks incorrectly, wants to be a witch, wears black, doesn't bathe, and dons a witch's hat (Todorović 2021: 164–165, 167).

Witches in Visual Popular Culture

The entertainment industry has capitalised on the witch figure in films, TV comedies, and cartoons. While some traditional ideas about witches have vanished, others have been transformed. Horror now absorbs the dread evoked by demonological legends, featuring witches flying to demonic sabbaths. Popular culture has almost erased distinctions between helpful village healers and harmful witches. Such differences mattered in rural culture but are blurred in fictional witches, who are now closer to sorceresses.

The transformation of oral traditional witch imagery in popular culture is visible in literature, cartoons, and video games. Serbian folklorist Ljiljana Pešikan Ljuštanović notes how visual portrayals of

> Witches and warlocks are also characterised by varying depictions of witches from movies (fictional and cartoon) and heavily influenced by Western culture: high-laced heels, pointy hats, worn out black clothes, and unkempt looks – reflecting

> Western cultural influence, along with personality traits like aggression, emotional coldness, greed, and selfishness. (Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2021: 56)

Memes Featuring Demon Characters

In the age of rapid digital communication, memes have emerged as a visual textual format easily reflecting shifts in representations of unclean beings, offering humorous takes on stereotypes (see Banić Grubišić 2023). Memes, combining images and text, are part of modern internet culture – easy to create and widely shared. Witches, vampires, devils, zombies, and Count Dracula dominate memes involving demons. These often feature international visual styles and are shared across languages, with translated captions or localised text.

Oral traditional portrayals of witches appear less frequently in memes than in authored literature. Instead, visual genres like comics, caricatures, cartoons, and horror parodies shape the witch figure. Understanding parody is key to analysing the humour and messaging in these memes. Modern audiences do not believe in witches, and memes rarely draw on Slavic folklore, aside from figures like Baba Yaga, who appears in Eastern Slavic memes and beyond.

Today's witches symbolise powerful, independent, and sometimes rebellious women. These traits – which some women proudly call their 'wildness' – are viewed positively. The once-feared magical women have become icons of boldness and emancipation. Witch memes follow 20th century popular culture patterns and rarely reference traditional folklore directly.

Due to the volume of witch memes and their multilingual nature, a representative collection is hard to present without a curated database. Most lack local flavour, except for those featuring Baba Yaga. Visual similarities across languages suggest a process of internationalisation. Memes are a type of modern digital folklore, relying more on pop culture stereotypes than traditional oral elements. The memes presented in this article were gathered from Facebook in early 2025. This research was originally presented as the 34th lecture in the ISFNR Belief Narrative Network Online Lecture Series on May 2, 2025.

Limited Traits of Witches

In Slavic folklore, witches did not necessarily fly on brooms: traditional beliefs mention women anointing themselves with ointments and reciting secret formulas. Karadžić's 1818 *Serbian Dictionary* (Srpski rječnik) says witches glowed like fire as they flew at night, usually to the threshing floor (Karadžić 1818: *vještica). He added that once a witch's spirit left her body, she lay as if dead – if her body was moved, she wouldn't wake.

The modern witch is stereotyped as a broom-riding, a wart-nosed old woman in black with a pointy hat, and a bubbling cauldron of frogs. These visuals were cemented by 19th century illustrated magazines and 20th century comics and films, with roots in texts about witch hunts. The stereotype is so strong that we picture witches even without suggested images – though memes often amplify these clichés for comic effect.

In analysing humorous memes, the key question is: who does the witch represent? The meme witch is clearly a woman, but does she represent all women, or just a stereotype?

A Princess on a White Broom

A meme shows two well dressed, middle aged male friends. In Ukrainian, one asks, "Still not married?" The other replies: "No, I'm waiting for a princess on a white broom."

This reverses the common saying where women delay marriage waiting for a prince on a white horse. Here, a man delays marriage for a witch princess, replacing the noble steed with a white broom. The broom, like the horse, symbolises status, but also marks her as a witch. It's a humorous twist, pointing to role reversals and changing gender norms.

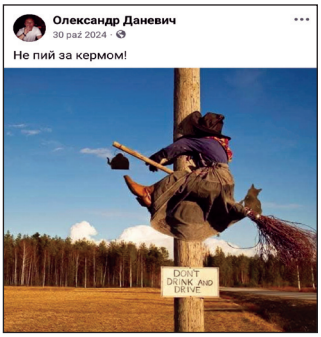


Men used to court well-off women; now, delaying marriage often reflects a desire to prolong youth and avoid responsibilities. The flying broom from sabbaths and devil dances becomes a fairytale element. The meme merges horror lore with fairytale whimsy. It raises the question: does the man believe all women are witches? If yes, he expects a powerful, glamorous partner. If not, he favours strong modern women. Many contemporary novels by female authors

portray witches as powerful, unique women. Lada Luzina's *Witches of Kyiv* is one such series (Fialkova 2012: 210–217), with others published across Poland (Troha 2023: 276–287), Serbia, and Russia (Šarović 2018).

Is the Broom for Cleaning or Flying?

Although most memes featuring a witch's broom allude to dangerous women, there is also a type in which the connection between the broom and the witch is different – the broom is seen as a means of transportation for the witch, and the witch is primarily understood as a careless or drunk driver. In one image, a witch has crashed and fallen to the ground because she is drunk. This is evidenced by the many empty bottles around her, as well as her dazed expression. That her drunkenness and broken broom are the cause of her misfortune is confirmed in the background by three other witches flying through the sky behind her. The drunken witch is funny in the same way a cartoonishly drawn drunk driver is funny, and the caricature-like drawing emphasises the witch's simplified features.



The idea of a traffic accident applied to a witch flying on a broom also appears in a colour photo in which a digitally altered image shows a witch supposedly having crashed into a pole. Displayed on the pole is an English-language warning, "Don't drink and drive," which is rendered in Ukrainian as "Do not drink at the wheel."

The broom as a vehicle also appears in a black and white meme with the following Ukrainian text:



А правду кажуть, що ти відьма. Та брешуть усе, а те, що на мітлі літаю, то це поки машину не купила!!!

(And the truth is, they say you're a witch. But they're all lying. The only reason I'm flying on a broom is because I haven't bought a car yet!!!)

The witch denies being a witch, even though it's obvious since she's flying on a broom. Her reply shifts attention to the reason for her

mode of transport, which sounds like an excuse: she hasn't bought a car yet.

The broom as transportation also appears in a meme featuring a man flying on a broom. The meme includes Ukrainian text, while his words – saying he borrowed his wife's broom because fuel prices have gone up – open up a space for an image foreign to traditional culture: that men, too, can fly on brooms.



Wings or Broom – Witch or Angel

In a meme with the Ukrainian caption "Choice of the Day," a woman is drawn standing in front of a wall on which both angel wings and a broom are hanging. The caption suggests that the woman is choosing what kind of person she wants to be that day. Beyond that short, everyday context, the idea of two flying modes appears in another Ukrainian text:

"A woman will always fly. On wings or on a broom."

A comment adds: "It depends on the man", meaning the woman's choice is influenced by how the man treats her. This meme reduces all women to either witches or angels – a banal simplification, but one that can be funny in its exaggeration.



Once Persecuted – Now Free

Some memes depart from the image of the ugly witch and portray them as attractive and seductive beauties. This type appears in memes that contrast the time of witch hunts with the present: what was once deadly dangerous, leading to the tortures of Inquisitors or the stake, is now not only safe but also allowed and desirable.



This comparison alludes to the times of the Inquisition and the countless trials in which many women were killed. While it's unlikely that modern women often think about the Inquisition, the meme compares the surveillance and punishment of women in the past with the freedom of women today. An example is a meme with Polish text:

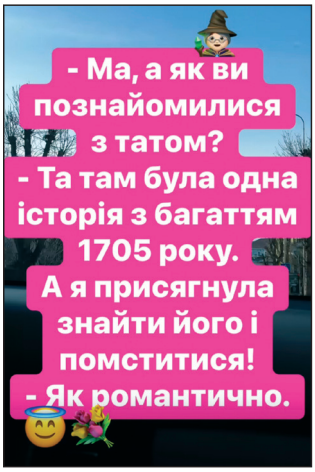
"Zrób dzisiaj coś za ci 400 lat temu spalono by cię na stosie!!!"

"Do something today that 400 years ago would have got you burned at the stake!"

The meme shows a young woman with a provocative gaze.

The Long Life of Witches

It has already been mentioned that memes with witches and Slavic language texts rarely feature characteristics of witches from Slavic folk beliefs. What never existed in traditional Slavic folklore can still appear in a meme. In folk beliefs, witches died like other women and did not live longer than them. However, a meme can express the idea that witches are long-lived, which can be understood in the context of the immortality of other demonic beings, like Satan or Melmoth the Wanderer. The theme of extended witch life appears in some works of epic fantasy, and thus modern popular literature can be the source of a meme featuring a mother – daughter dialogue in Ukrainian:



"Mum, how did you meet dad?"

"Well, that's a story to do with a fire in 1705. I swore I'd find him and take revenge."

"How romantic."

Baba Yaga

The figure of Baba Yaga from East Slavic folk belief entered written culture through illustrated books known as *lubok*, then through authored 18th century fairy tales referred to as "heroic tales," as well as through romantic parodies and Afanasyev's collections. The Brothers Grimm's story of Hänsel and Gretel corresponds to Ivica and Marica in Serbian culture or Jas and Malgosia in Polish culture (Wróblewska 2018a: 39, 42; Ucherek 2024:

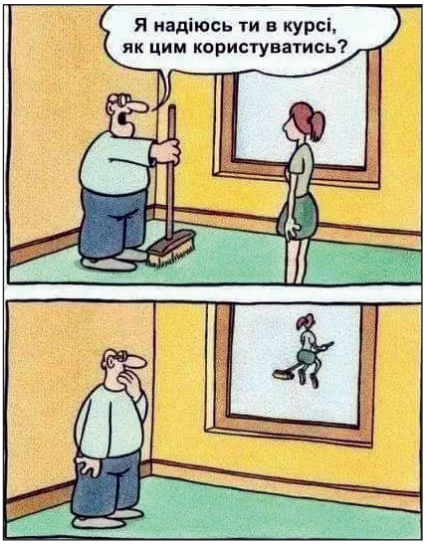
98–99).

The famous Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, in his book *Historical Roots of the Wondertale*, using a wide range of international sources, outlined the stages of the formation of Baba Yaga and her three main roles: kidnapper, tester, and helper (Propp 1990 [1946]: 86–130). She is portrayed as a hideous old woman who lives in a hut on chicken legs and eats children (Johns 2020: 139–238; Ucherek 2024: 148, 153). Baba Yaga became a popular figure not only among Eastern Slavs but also through translations of Afanasyev's Russian fairy tales into other languages. Similar witches appear in German fairy tales, like the Grimm's story of Hänsel and Gretel. Numerous cartoons, video games, and caricatures have been made featuring her, and the tradition of humorous depictions of Baba Yaga continues in memes.

Идёт мужик по лесу. Навстречу ему старушка. Мужик говорит:
— Бабушка, что же ты делаешь в такой глуши?
Бабка отвечает:
— Я, сынок, Баба Яга. Хожу, вот, по лесу, собираю мухоморы. Потом их с говном смешиваю, и на спирту настаиваю. Получается целебная настойка, я её людям продаю, тем и живу. Хочешь, и тебе секрет целебной настойки расскажу?
— Нет, спасибо, бабушка, — говорит мужик, — как деньги на говне с мухоморами делать, я и сам знаю.
— Ну, тогда прощай, сынок... Всего доброго!
— И тебе, бабуля, до свидания!
Баба Яга развернулась и пошла в свою сторону, а Пелевин в свою...

Whereas Baba Yaga's home was once seen as an inhuman, wild forest space, modern reinterpretations transform it into a humorous setting that surprisingly fits into contemporary culture.

There is even an ecological version of Baba Yaga, who lives in a natural setting, gathering and selling hallucinogenic mushrooms, that has a funny twist for fans of contemporary Russian literature, as her dialogue partner in the joke is the modern Russian writer Viktor Pelevin, who describes such characters in his novel *Generation P*.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of memes featuring witches confirms that media researchers focusing on the general traits of memes align with the international nature of easily exchangeable visual identity. This identity reflects global traits and attributes of witches that are limited

but widely understandable. Humour, as a key feature of memes, relies on reinterpreting witches as modern independent, bold, or dangerous women.

In a two-panel meme, the first image depicts a man commandingly handing a broom to a woman while saying in Ukrainian, "I hope you know how to use this," expecting that she will use it for housework. However, the second image shows the woman flying away on the broom, while the man remains confused by the unexpected realisation that she does know how to use a broom—but as a witch rather than as a housewife.

The humorous approach of this meme, as well as others, reinforces the feminist position articulated in Kristen Sollée's *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (Sollée 2017), where the mention of feminists appears combined with derogatory labels directed at women – such as witches and sluts – which have historically functioned as instruments of male domination and subordination. Here they can instead be reclaimed and used by women as symbols of liberation.

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Вештице у словенским мимовима: веровања Словена у демоне и њихова духовита тумачења

Дејан Ајдачић

Резиме

У раду су анализирани преображаји представа о вештицама из словенских народних веровања у хумористичким приказима у интернет мимовима. Полазна претпоставка јесте да дигитална култура у мимовима потискује заједничке словенске и локалне фолклорне особености и замењује их интернационално препознатљивим стереотипима преузетим из популарне културе, док се истовремено лик вештице реинтерпретира као симбол модерне, самосталне и еманциповане жене. Друга хипотеза односи се на механизме хумора који се заснивају на пародији, инверзији традиционалних родних улога и спајању елемената хорора и бајке са свакодневним контекстима. Методолошки оквир обухвата фолклористичку, етнолингвистичку и компаративну књижевну анализу, као и квалитативну анализу садржаја одабраних мимова на словенским језицима. Посебна пажња посвећена је мотиву метле, представама саобраћајних незгода, инверзијама мотива „принца на белом коњу", као и савременим реинтерпретацијама Баба Јаге. Истраживање показује да мимови ретко задржавају аутентичне елементе словенског народног веровања, осим у случају Баба Јаге, док се већина представа ослања на редуковане визуелне клишее – шиљати шешир, црну одећу, метлу као превозно средство. Закључује се да мимови функционишу као облик дигиталног фолклора у којем глобализовани обрасци надјачавају локалне традиције, а лик вештице постаје

флексибилан културни знак кроз који се изражавају савремене представе о родним односима, моћи и друштвеној слободи.

Кључне речи: вештице, словенски фолклор, мимови, дигитални фолклор, пародија, популарна култура, родни стереотипи, глобализација.

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