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RITUAL HEALING ON TWO CONTINENTS: NATURE, TRADITION, AND BELIEF (PART I)

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Abstract

This paper examines how two types of healing trees were used in the Swedish folk tradition, and looks at the ritual actions and ritual speech connected with them, as well as the deeper belief systems surrounding them. The analysis traces how the beliefs changed as society changed, and how attitudes towards the healing trees finally went through a transformation from being used in general folk cures to being elevated to the status of valued cultural heritage. In the second part of this combined paper Nancy McIntire presents a closer look at the current use of a specific healing tree in the United States.¹

Key Words

Healing trees, traditional healing, folk cures, folk belief.

It is obvious that trees are symbolically charged and that they to a large extent speak to our feelings and are part of both individual lives and collective memory. Trees have the ability to transcend time and phases like few other things or events. How they are handled and how one speaks of them tells a lot about the time in which they are planted, cared for or cut down (Hagström and Sjöholm 2007).²

Trees in Swedish folk tradition

Human interaction with nature, the power of belief, and the uses of ritual actions and ritual speech provide valuable data for the analysis

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² All translations from Swedish into English in this article are the author’s own.
of traditional folk cures. In Swedish folk tradition, trees have played an important part in ritual healing. Aches and ailments of different kinds could be 'put away' and transferred to (specific) trees. In Sweden, healing trees have been used to cure the English disease (rickets), toothache, a bad back, a hernia, mumps, tuberculosis, cramps, feeble-mindedness, falling sickness (epilepsy), boils, and even the unwelcome presence of a changeling.\(^3\) This paper takes a closer look at the tradition, the different types of healing trees, the rituals that are used to achieve the transfer of illness, and the belief systems that surround them.

In Swedish folk tradition there are three main categories of trees connected with ritual healing: Bortsättningsträd (Put Away Trees) to which you could transfer illness, Smöjträ (Drawing Trees) with openings through which a person could be drawn or pulled and thus healed, and Värdrät (Care Trees) which were planted to mark occasions such as birth or weddings, drawing on the symbolism between families and roots. I have decided to limit the scope of this paper to the first two types, as they were used solely for healing, while the Värdrät had several purposes, of which only some were connected with healing.

**Transferring the illness**

The research examples in this paper primarily come from the archives of the Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research in Uppsala, Sweden. In the archive catalogue of Realia there are some 425 accessions on Bortsättning,\(^4\) referring to the transfer of illness, mainly onto trees. There are many names for these 'Put Away Trees,' including 'Troll Trees' and 'Märre Trees' (names referring to the unusual growth pattern of the tree, and linking the trees to folkloristic beings), and 'Ache Trees,' 'Toothache Trees,' and 'Boil Trees' (names referring to the specific use of the tree although these trees were also chosen because of their unusual look), and finally 'Sacrifice Trees' (a name referring to the sacrifice needed to be rid of the sickness, often consisting of a coin transferring the illness from the person to the tree).

In 1830 there were only four practicing dentists in Sweden, and needless to say they only treated wealthy patients. The men who pulled teeth from ordinary people used tools such as pliers, which were not made for dentistry, and thus 'Toothache Trees' were the preferable option for many. A nail or wooden splinter was used to pick at the aching tooth or the gums until blood was drawn, and then the nail or splinter was hammered into the tree, often accompanied by an incantation (Hagberg 1931).

Looking at the number of doctors we find that there were two hundred doctors in Sweden at the beginning of the 19th century, and with a population of 2.3 million, they were few and far between even if you had the means to pay one.\(^5\) Needless to say, wise men and women had an important role to play in this society.

Gustaf Ersson, who was born in 1845 and living at Hagstugan in the district of Dalarna in 1937, tells of the healing rituals that were performed there:

> It's put in trees, boils and aches. I have seen that old man at Hagstugan put in toothache, boils and mischief. He took puss from the boil with a stick and drilled a hole in the tree — that apple tree standing out there — and then he put the stick in the tree. If you look, it is filled with little holes and bumps on the apple tree; they're showing. That crazy shoemaker farmhand, he sawed off two branches and grafted shoots to the tree; he got cancer. They call it putting away the ache.\(^6\)

In this account we learn a little about how the healing was done, that a stick is put to the wound and then into a drilled hole in the tree, but also that the tree is dangerous and that it can make you sick if you, like the farmhand in the story, take a saw to it and harm it.

While interpreting the archival material I found Sir James George Frazer's theoretical work in *The Golden Bough* (Frazer 1922) which was published in 1922 especially helpful, particularly in finding the deeper belief behind the ritual actions. In it he talks about the two laws of sympathetic magic: *homoeopathic* or *imitative* magic and *contagious* magic. Using Frazer's terminology the 'Put Away Trees' represent a form of contagious magic used within folk medicine: by transferring blood, puss, hair or nail clippings to the tree, the sick person established a bond between himself and the healing tree.

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3 See excerpts under headings 'Bortsättning' and 'Smöjning' in the Catalogue of Realia at the DPU Archives in Uppsala.

4 Excerpts 'Bortsättning'.


6 Dialekt- och folkmunnsarkivet i Uppsala, ULMA 10923, 225.
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This theory is partially supported by the archival material. Many accounts talk of the danger of cutting down these trees and in my research I have found two belief systems explaining the dangerous qualities of the trees: In the more common form the ache put in the tree was believed to transfer onto whoever harmed the tree. In the more uncommon form the aches could be released and transferred back to the person who originally put the ache in the tree, if the tree was harmed. The two belief systems can be illustrated with a couple of quotations: “Woe to him that cut such a tree, that person no doctor can cure,” revealing the contagious quality, and “The man gets to keep his teeth as long as the tree stands, but looses them when the tree is cut down,” pointing to the existence of a bond between man and tree.

Drawing through a cleft, loop twisted or entwined tree

In the Uppsala archive there are some 200 accessions on Smöjtträd, a magic folk cure in which the sick person is pulled through a natural or manmade hole in a tree or under an exposed tree root. This practice is known in Europe, as well as in more distant parts of the world (Hagberg 1931; Hansen 1950). Here too, several names are used for the tree, descriptive of the tree or of the main action used in the healing (Smöjtträd and Välbundet träd).  

To make the cure potent, the hole should be of an unusual kind (von Sydow 1932, 246–247). There are several sources describing how trees were cut into and of already existing wedges being opened to create a larger hole in the trunk through which a person could pass; later, the hole was closed up again and the tree bound to let it heal. Trees with natural holes in them were also used, and even cut out sections of trees with a natural hole could be used to draw a child through, and although the latter were functional as they could be kept at home, a living tree had more potency.  

When it came to children suffering from rickets, a nutritional deficiency causing bone deformity, drawing through a tree was the predominant cure (Engström and Marklund 1994, 415). Returning to Frazer and the division he makes between different types of magic, the drawing through a tree represents a form of homoeopathic or imitative magic (Frazer 1922), transferring the crookedness and odd growth of a child’s bones to a likewise wrongly growing and crooked tree.

Just as with the ‘Put Away Trees,’ a bond is imagined to have been created between the sick person and the tree: A tree trunk was wedged open, through which the patient was passed three times whereupon the tree was closed up again and tied together. When the tree mended so did the patient (von Sydow 1932, 247). However, if you did not take care of the tree afterwards the repercussions could be fateful; Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878–1952), who wrote an article about healing trees in 1932, writes:

*I heard an old tenant farmer in Småland tell the story of how his brother, as a child, had been drawn through a rowan tree, cleft for the purpose. The cure was successful, but the father was then so careful of the tree, because if it withered, the boy must die.*

There are several interpretations of the symbolism behind someone being drawn through a cleft tree, loop twisted or entwined tree: one

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7 Excerpts Bortsättning and Smöjning.'
8 ULMA 4165, 34.
9 ULMA 13559, 10.

Looking at excerpts under headings 'Bortsättning' and 'Smöjning' in the Catalogue of Realia at the DFU Archives in Uppsala the following names can be found: Smöjtträd, häftträd, krapptträd, vårdbundet/vålbundet/valbundet träd. Engström and Marklund 1994 — search word 'Smöjtträd'

12 Von Sydow 1932, 248. Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878–1952) has looked at healing trees using Frazer’s work on sympathetic magic. Although he never mentions Frazer’s work in his article from 1932, he does develop on his thoughts: using the terms emotional or fantasy association, discussing how a specific tree is originally chosen as a healing tree, and of how the sacrifice works, using the Latin “post hoc ergo propter hoc,” a logical fallacy meaning recovery came after the sacrifice and that the recovery thus is due to the sacrifice (von Sydow 1932, 229–230). Also, compare the belief shown in the quote to the theme in Oscar Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray from 1891.
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Another interpretation is that the illness was brushed or scraped off since it could not pass through the narrow hole in the tree (von Sydow 1932, 249; Hansen 1950, 34). Finally, the drawing through tree can symbolise rebirth; that the person is reborn and thus free from the illness that was contracted later in life (Hansen 1950, 34). This last theory also fits with Arnold van Gennep’s contemporarily presented theory of *rites de passage* from 1909 (van Gennep 1909).

**Magic and cosmology**

The variation in combinations in the archival material is endless and varies from one part of the country to another. It seems that the choice of tree, the sacred actions and sacred words were up to each healer’s fancy, finding the most suitable combination for each case treated. This is also the case when the patient treats him- or herself. In finding odd looking trees and designating them as possessing a healing quality, a specific place is established, but a few other things are also of significance (underlined in the quotation below).

A researcher who has looked at folk cures and healing trees was Louise Hagberg (1868-1944), former curator at Nordiska museum in Stockholm. In an article, she refers to a record from Salem County in Sweden, which in many ways is exemplary:

> At Rönninge farm (Sörmland), by lake Flaten, there once was a *cleft goat willow tree*, by which rotted clothes lay in the 1880’s, and by the year 1895 a large pile of clothes was still to be seen there. *Through a large hole in the trunk, children were taken through the tree, on the first Thursday of the month, at which time they were drawn, head first, to the East, around the tree three times, and then through again, whereupon the child’s vest or a shirt were thrown by the tree* (Hagberg 1921, 176).

If we begin by looking at the first underlined word, several accounts speak of water close to or surrounding the tree, and north running waters were preferred. Water of course has purifying qualities, besides giving the tree basic sustenance.

In this account, as in several of the accounts in the Uppsala archive, Thursdays are also mentioned, and the importance of Thursdays comes from the Christian tradition, as Jesus shared his last supper with the apostles and instructed the Holy Communion on a Thursday, pointing to the religious influence.

In this account we should also note the correspondence between the lunar phase and the patient’s age: that the child is treated when the moon too is young and emerging. More commonly though, the moon was thought to be at its most potent when full.

In this account we are given examples of the relevance of both the sun’s movement and the lunar phase, and their influence over patients, again pointing to the belief in the connection between nature and man, but also to the importance of choosing days which have religious meaning. The specific point in time thus played an important part in the ritual healing.

Also contained in the account is a reference to a point of the compass, and the movement from West to East. The inspiration for this is likely to have come from the layout of Swedish churches, where the entrance is usually found in the West and the choir and altar in the East.

In the account we also find the use of a magic number, and this too is reflected in the archival material, where we find that the healing powers can be enforced by the use of magic numbers such as 3, 7, and 9; for the Holy Trinity, $3^3$ to triple the effect, and 7 for the seven days of Creation. The most common treatment for curing a toothache was to put three splinters to the bad tooth, which were then put into the tree, sometimes with a specific

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13 ULMA 6579, 33. ULMA 12580, 14.
14 Excerpts ‘Bortsättning’ and ‘Smöjning.’
15 This in turn goes back to Jewish tradition and the Seder Meal at Passover.
16 A previous parallel to this belief is found in Benedictus Olai’s work *Een nyttigh läkere bok* (A Useful Book on Medicine) from 1578, in which he states that bloodletting of young people should be done when a new moon was emerging, while bloodletting on old people should be done when the moon was full and receding (Benedictus, CXLI).
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incantation spoken. For curing rickets the common treatment was to draw the child counter-clockwise three or nine times through a tree on a Thursday with an approaching moon.19

According to von Sydow, the pieces of clothing left by the tree were items representing the illness, but because of the clothing's material nature, they could also be regarded as a form of sacrifice. In sacrificing, the more you sacrifice the more health you are believed to receive from the sacrifice, and again the sacred numbers can be applied; if three sacrifices are required, and one did not have much, three pins were considered the minimal sacrifice (von Sydow 1932, 240; 254–255). Like silver, steel was thought to ward off evil (i.e. apotropaic magic), and the sacrifice of a coin, metal pin or nail thus represents more than a sacrifice; it is also a protective action.

In 1930, Mrs Johansson in Skärtrask, a teacher who was born in 1881, tells of the healing rituals performed there:

There were two twins here in Skärtrask who were very sickly and whiny. They were both girls. It was thought they had rickets and needed to be cured. Two firstborn unmarried boys were chosen to draw the girls through a loop twisted tree. They drew the girls three times from West to East. I was there and watched when I was fifteen. Had it been a boy who was sick it would have been two firstborn girls who would draw the child.20

Here we are given an example of how gender and opposites were used, and the use of gender and direction is reported by Louise Håberg who found that boys were drawn from the right and girls from the left (Hagberg 1950, 299), which again corresponds with the Christian tradition, where the left is the female side, and the right is the male side.

**Incantations and prayers**

Combining magic actions was believed to make the cures more potent and the final ingredient was incantation or prayer. Going through the archival material in Uppsala, there were no examples of incantations or prayers used in the drawing through a tree,21 perhaps because this was a magical knowledge that was to be protected so as not to lose its potency. Looking at

an account from Enviken in von Sydow’s article, in which a child touched by rickets was drawn under a root, we only learn that ‘something secret’ was read (von Sydow 1932, 252). It is generally known however that wise persons could ‘read away’ illness. Sometimes the words were incomprehensible, at other times they were prayers in the name of God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. In old forms the incantations can even contain the names of the Nordic heathen Gods: Oden, Tor and Frej (Schlecker 2002, 46–47).

With ‘putting away toothache’ however, there are several examples of incantations to be found: On the first strike, hitting a rusty nail to the North side of a tree you call: “Here I strike!”, on the second strike: “...in my toothache!”22 In another account, three horseshoe-nails were put into a tree while the Lord’s Prayer was recited backwards.23 Family was also a source of strength as speaking one’s own and especially one’s father’s name held power.24 A firstborn woman could also transfer the toothache to a tree with the words: “I cut, and I cut, the toothache into you.”25 Worms were thought to be the cause of toothaches and from that the following incantation comes: “Stay here worm, in wood, under bark.”26 Other incantations were: “Here you can ache as much as you like,”27 “Take this and play with (it),”28 and “Now you can ache there.”29

Rhymes were also used: “It should ache alone, not in bone.”30 In the material there is only one record of a ‘reading’ for something other than toothache and that is for a boil: “Boils blue, there you flew.”31 There are also examples of a lack of words, where total silence is required to make the cure

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19 Ibid.
20 ULMA 3038:1, 36.
21 Excerpts 'Bortsättning' and 'Smöfnig'.
22 ULMA 3359:11a, 1. There are also examples of a nail or splinter from a coffin being used to cure toothache (ULMA 4601, 13, 7265, 13) or splinters from trees hit by lightning (for example ULMA 16983:7).
23 ULMA 1415:4, 60.
24 ULMA 4781, 22. ULMA 7782, 19.
25 ULMA 20446, 110.
26 ULMA 27943, 3–4.
27 ULMA 8039, 3.
28 ULMA 8162, 63–64.
29 ULMA 2051, 5.
30 ULMA 5874, 3. The adjustment of the Swedish word 'en' (Juniper) to 'alone' makes the rhyme work in translation.
31 ULMA 23031, 111. The adjustment of the Swedish word 'stå' (stand) to 'flew,' makes the rhyme works in translation.
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you sacrifice the more health you are believed to receive from the sacrifice,
and again the sacred numbers can be applied; if three sacrifices are required,
and one did not have much, three pins were considered the minimal sacrifice
(von Sydow 1932, 240: 254–255). Like silver, steel was thought to ward off
evil (i.e. apotropaic magic), and the sacrifice of a coin, metal pin or nail thus
represents more than a sacrifice; it is also a protective action.

In 1930, Mrs Johansson in Skärtråsk, a teacher who was born in 1881,
tells of the healing rituals performed there:

There were two twins here in Skärtråsk who were very sickly and
whiny. They were both girls. It was thought they had rickets and
needed to be cured. Two firstborn unmarried boys were chosen
to draw the girls through a loop twisted tree. They drew the girls
three times from West to East. I was there and watched when I
was fifteen. Had it been a boy who was sick it would have been
two firstborn girls who would draw the child.²⁰

Here we are given an example of how gender and opposites were
used, and the use of gender and direction is reported by Louise Hagberg
who found that boys were drawn from the right and girls from the left (Hagberg
1950, 299), which again corresponds with the Christian tradition, where the
left is the female side, and the right is the male side.

Incantations and prayers

Combining magic actions was believed to make the cures more potent
and the final ingredient was incantation or prayer. Going through the archival
material in Uppsala, there were no examples of incantations or prayers
used in the drawing through a tree,²¹ perhaps because this was a magical
knowledge that was to be protected so as not to lose its potency. Looking at

an account from Enviken in von Sydow’s article, in which a child touched by
rickets was drawn under a root, we only learn that ‘something secret’ was
read (von Sydow 1932, 252). It is generally known however that wise persons
could ‘read away’ illness. Sometimes the words were incomprehensible,
at other times they were prayers in the name of God, the Father, and the
Holy Spirit. In old forms the incantations can even contain the names of the

With ‘putting away toothache’ however, there are several examples of
incantations to be found: On the first strike, hitting a rusty nail to the
North side of a tree you call: “Here I strike!”, on the second strike: “...in my
toothache!”, and on the third strike: “Rest there and don’t come back!”²²
In another account, three horseshoe-nails were put into a tree while the
Lord’s Prayer was recited backwards.²³ Family was also a source of strength
as speaking one’s own and especially one’s father’s name held power.²⁴ A
firstborn woman could also transfer the toothache to a tree with the words:
“I cut, and I cut, the toothache into you.”²⁵ Worms were thought to be the
cause of toothaches and from that the following incantation comes: “Stay
here worm, in wood, under bark.”²⁶ Other incantations were: “Here you can
ache as much as you like,”²⁷ “Take this and play with (it),”²⁸ and “Now you
can ache there.”²⁹

Rhymes were also used: “It should ache alone, not in bone.”³⁰ In the
material there is only one record of a ‘reading’ for something other than
toothache and that is for a boil: “Boils blue, there you flew.”³¹ There are also
examples of a lack of words, where total silence is required to make the cure

²² ULMA 3359:11a. There are also examples of a nail or splinter from a coffin being used to
cure toothache (ULMA 4601, 13. 7265, 13) or splinters from trees hit by lightning (for example
ULMA 16983, 7).
²³ ULMA 1415:4, 60.
²⁴ ULMA 4781, 22. ULMA 7782, 19.
²⁵ ULMA 20446, 110.
²⁶ ULMA 27943, 3–4.
²⁷ ULMA 8039, 3.
²⁸ ULMA 8162, 63–64.
²⁹ ULMA 2051, 5.
³⁰ ULMA 5874, 3. The adjustment of the Swedish word ‘en’ (juniper) to ‘alone’ makes the rhyme
work in translation.
³¹ ULMA 25031, 111. The adjustment of the Swedish word ‘stå’ (stand) to ‘flew’, makes the rhyme
works in translation.
work, both during the healing ritual and on the way home afterwards.\textsuperscript{32}

**From potent magic to cultural heritage protection**

Over time the healing trees, so it was believed, came to hold a lot of aches and illnesses, and harming these trees could be very dangerous, as it was thought that the sickness would then be released.\textsuperscript{33} But in magic there is thankfully the converse action as well: If you needed to cut a healing tree down, the danger could be averted if the first three splinters from the first chops of the axe were placed on the chopping block.\textsuperscript{34} In one account the man intending on cutting the tree down commanded the tree and then cut it down in the Lord’s name, and all was well.\textsuperscript{35} In 1922 Karl Persson from Risinge County gave this account: "He who unwittingly cut down such a sickness tree, without knowing it was such, could try to shield himself from the consequences by gaping over the blade of the axe and taking it in his mouth."\textsuperscript{36} Sharp objects were thought to cut through pain, and axes were of course made of iron or steel, and this combined countermeasure might thus ward off the released evil.

A change in the old beliefs was however underway: In 1932 Oscar Olsson, an agricultural labourer born in 1855, made this account:

> When little children did not want to walk (i.e. they were suffering from rickets), they used to draw them through an oak here in Eknäs. They said, that it was a cleft tree, that. I was about twelve or thirteen years old, when they drew a girl from the Smitty's cottage there. They were supposed to draw so that her vest got stuck in the hole and decomposed. No-one was allowed to touch the tree afterwards. The hole in the oak goes from West to East, but nowadays it has grown shut. There was a farmland from Malm there who took an axe to the tree, because he wanted to see if he would get sick, but he didn't get any boils.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{32} ULMA 24526, 2.
\textsuperscript{33} Excerpts 'Bortsätning' and 'Smöjning.'
\textsuperscript{34} ULMA 4781, 18, 5529, 93–74.
\textsuperscript{35} ULMA 5229, 73–74.
\textsuperscript{36} ULMA 1756a-1, 105.
\textsuperscript{37} ULMA 4872, 13–14.

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In von Sydow's article from 1932 you can see the shift in the belief system as well. Previously it was believed that the coins transferred the illness they were sacrificed for, and that taking the coins would transfer the illness to the person taking them. But when von Sydow does his fieldwork, he finds that the money is often gone, taken by someone who needs it, and who no longer believes in this magic (von Sydow 1932, 227–228; 241–242; 253–256).

Changes in society led to the shift in the belief systems: due to the great medical developments of the 19th century many diseases and aches became a thing of the past, and consequently the healing trees lost their importance as a general folk cure (Fähræus 1970, 328–337; Honko 1978, 1–2). With this said, the healing trees were still in use in the 1920s, and some can still remember what was said about them. The trees have therefore not been forgotten, although the imagined danger of touching them has been discarded with time. Instead the healing trees have become part of the cultural heritage and are put on display by museums and local antiquities societies\textsuperscript{38} and, like buildings, trees like these can get listed and protected by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, County Administrative Boards, and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences\textsuperscript{39} – taking the healing trees from general folk curing traditions to being regarded as valuable cultural heritage.

From potent magic to cultural heritage protection

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33 Excerpts 'Bortsättning' and 'Smőjning.'
34 ULMA 4731, 18. 5529, 73–74.
35 ULMA 5229, 73–74.
36 ULMA 1756:1, 105.
37 ULMA 4872, 13–14.
REFERENCES


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MIGRATIONS

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