THE POLITICS OF TRADITION:
FOLK HEALING ON TWO CONTINENTS, PART I

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Abstract: This article is a continuation of my collaboration with Nancy Cassell McEntire, former director of the Indiana State University Folklore Archives in the USA, comparing traditional healing practices in Sweden and the United States. In our first joint presentation the subject of investigation was healing trees; this time we have turned our focus to the healing practices for warts and burns. In Part I of this topic I take a closer look at the explanations for the occurrence of warts, the different types of cures used to get rid of them. I also examine remedies for healing burns, and give examples of the use of ritual acts, which in turn reveal the belief systems surrounding warts and burns. In Part II Nancy McEntire makes a case study discussing current yet traditional healing practices for warts, burns, and asthma in the USA.[1]

Keywords: curing warts, healing burns, traditional healing practices, political correctness in medicine.

In Swedish folk tradition, many causes and cures were used to explain and take away warts. There also were many cures for healing burns, for which no explanation from folk belief was needed, as the cause was apparent from working with fire and hot materials, whether it was men's work in the forge or women's work in the kitchen or doing the laundry. This paper takes a closer look at the traditions, the different types of rituals used to achieve the healing, and the belief systems surrounding these traditions. Research examples come from the folklore archives of the Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research in Uppsala, Sweden, where the majority of data was collected from persons born in the mid-nineteenth century, and who lived in different parts of the country.

Explaining Warts

The most common explanation for how a person had been afflicted with warts (not to be confused with ageing/life warts, which were not to be touched)[2] was that he or she had washed in the same water used for boiling eggs, or had counted warts, or come into contact with blood from warts; other explanations could also

1 McEntire 2014.
2 ULMA 7635. 14.

be found, such as touching *tetterwort* (Lat. *Chelidonium Majus*)[3] or a toad[4] – i.e. using contagion to explain the occurrence of warts. Also in these examples is the fact that warts are similar in shape to eggs or the bumps on *tetterwort* or toads. Other explanations for the occurrence of warts are using water from cleaning the bread oven to clean oneself (bread baking being guarded by many rules to ensure a good result), or pouring water used for boiling eggs on grass, and even suffering the consequences for disturbing the elves.[5]

Looking at the explanations, Swedish folklorist Jan-Öjvind Swahn concludes that: "The presence of warts are associated with breaking a taboo of some kind, such as touching a toad or being 'defiled' by blood from someone else's warts".[6] Investigating this line of thinking further, British anthropologist Mary Douglas offers a key:

> Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. Hence any piecemeal interpretation of pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail. The only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thoughts whose keystone, boundaries, margins, and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation.[7]

So what does the Uppsala archive material tell us, applying this thought? I find that Mary Douglas' theories on dirt as matter out of place on one side and cleanliness and order on the other can give helpful insight to the structure of thoughts in a society. After looking through hundreds of examples of rituals for curing warts and relieving the pain of burns, I hope to trace the underlining thought behind these ritual acts. We have already looked at the explanations for the occurrence of warts, and we will now go on to look at the cures.

Common Cures for Removing Warts

In the Uppsala archive catalogue the cures for warts are divided into five predominant categories of actions: 1. rubbing pork fat on the wart, 2. counting and/or 3. tying warts away, 4. throwing away salt or peas, and finally 5. washing the warts away. There are plenty of examples to be found, and the categories do overlap, so I have limited my scope to the more common rituals connected with each of these five categories of actions.

3 Excerpts under heading '*Vårtor*' (warts) in the Catalogue of Realia at the DFU Archives in Uppsala.
4 Swahn: "Vårta".
5 Swahn n.d.
6 Swahn n.d.
7 Douglas 1979. 149-152.

Rubbing Pork Fat on the Wart

A common cure for warts was to rub the wart with pork fat which was then buried under an earthbound stone or in a dung heap. When the pork fat decayed the wart would go away.[8] You could also increase the power of the cure in different ways:

In many rituals secrecy was of the essence, including stealing the pork, and not letting anyone see where you buried it, nor speak of where you had hidden it. In some instances you were also required to walk backwards performing the ritual, or rub the pork fat counter clock wise around the wart.[9]

When a corpse passed through a gate you could also rub the gate post with pork fat and then smear the pork fat on the wart. Note that this ritual involves both a dead body, which is connected with the underworld, and a gate, which is a boundary and a gap between worlds. Both considered powerful and dangerous spaces. In another ritual you could also bury pork fat under stone in the cemetery.[10]

Specific times of the year such as Midsummer and Christmas, the lunar calendar, the week, and the cardinal points were also thought to hold power which could be drawn upon: for instance smearing the warts with pork fat from the Christmas ham, or acting when the moon was new, or on a Thursday (i.e. the day of Jesus last supper), or burying the pork fat on the north side of an earthbound stone.[11] (The north side being the mossy wetter side where things buried would decay faster and thus act sooner on the wart).

As you performed these ritual acts you could also add "readings" (charms) – rituals when something religious or magical was spoken: "I grease the wart that she goes away, and take it he who wants it"[12] or on a Thursday night go out and turn to the moon, stroke the warts with the fleshy side of the pork fat and say: "See moon, see moon, see moon". If done when the moon was receding, the warts would disappear.[13]

On a more sinister note, the wart could also be transferred to a living thing, human or animal, following an idea based on contagious magic; that a bond is created between the wart and the pork fat, and that the two can act on each other, and also that the wart can be forwarded to someone else. The pork fat can be given to a dog for instance, or buried under a stone; whoever then touches the stone gets the warts.[14] The transfer of illness from a person to an object and on to another person is discussed by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, where

8 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
9 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
10 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
11 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
12 ULMA 1642. 31.
13 ULMA 3307: 2, 14.
14 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.

he reveals the magic belief systems embedded in ritual acts.[15] This line of investigation was later continued by Alan Dundes in his theories on the balance of the universe, where the amount of available good is limited and your fortune can affect the fortune of someone else.[16]

Counting and Tying Away Warts

Another common treatment was to tie the warts away, usually by counting them, making one knot on a thread for each wart, and then burying the thread under an earth-bound stone or in a dung heap, or some other wet place where it would rot quickly. When the thread had rotted away, the wart would be gone. The thread itself could be made of cotton, wool, silk, a strand of hair, or a horse hair.[17]

To increase the potency of the cure you could look at the wart, tie three counter-clockwise knots, and bury the thread; if you used a stolen end of woollen yarn for the thread, it was even better. You could also bury a thread (with a knot for each wart) under stone on a Thursday night. And if you buried it on the north side of a stone, it was even more effective.[18]

Either there was a correlation between the number of knots and the number of warts, or a magic number was used, such as the number three, symbolising the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or the number nine (three times three for extra effect). You could also spit three times.[19]

Counting and tying away was often performed by a wise man or woman who would also "read" over the warts.[20] Three knots could be tied around each wart saying "Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit",[21] or the person afflicted could throw the thread in running water saying: "Take this!"[22]

Throwing Away Salt and Peas

Another way to get rid of warts was to take as many grains of coarse salt as there were warts, and throw the salt into the bread oven. Often the salt had to come into contact with the warts before it was thrown, but in order for the actions to work, you had to be quick about it and get out the door before the salt crackled from the heat.[23]

15 Frazer 1922.
16 Dundes 1992.
17 Excerpts *'Vårtor'*.
18 Excerpts *'Vårtor'*.
19 Excerpts *'Vårtor'*.
20 Excerpts *'Vårtor'*.
21 ULMA 1550. 3.
22 ULMA 24484. 48-49.
23 Excerpts *'Vårtor'*.

Here too the ritual act could be combined with other acts to increase the magic. And again there could be a correlation between the number of warts and the grains of salt, or a magic number could be used. The size of the grain of coarse salt could also correlate approximately with the size of the wart. Furthermore, there could also be an inversion of action, such as going out the door backwards before the salt crackled.[24]

More commonly though, the warts would be counted, and as many peas as there were warts would be thrown into a well or a body of water, often after coming into contact with the warts. When the peas rotted, the warts would go away.[25]

The remedy for ridding a person of warts could be enforced through additional ritual acts: For instance, you could throw as many peas as there are warts into a well and then walk backwards home. You could also throw three peas over the left shoulder into a spring and not look back or speak thereof (a theme you may recognise from Greek mythology and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice). And it was particularly good if the ritual acts were performed on a Sunday (i.e. the Lord's day) or on a Thursday, using a north-running well.[26]

As with the rough grains of salt, peas too are approximately the same size as warts, and the power of similarity was thus drawn upon. Magic numbers could also be used, such as counting as many peas as there were warts. The ritual included the act of tracing each pea three times around each wart before throwing the peas into a well.[27]

Here too the effect of the ritual could be enhanced by "reading" over the warts. For instance. you could drop one pea for each wart in the well and say: "When this pea is dissolved into dust, so this wart will be dissolved into flesh",[28] or throw as many peas into the well as there are warts and say: "I put my peas and warts here".[29]

As with the example of throwing salt into the oven, there was also a sporting element to the ritual, where you should throw the peas into the well and run under a roof before the peas hit the bottom of the well and splashed against the water surface.[30]

Washing Away Warts

Warts could also be washed away, using rain water, water gathered on a stone or an earthbound rock, or a raindrop from gate through which a body has passed. Besides increasing the power in raindrops and dew by magical rituals, you could

24 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
25 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
26 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
27 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
28 ULMA 33921: 1, 196.
29 ULMA 11555. 758.
30 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.

also wash the warts in unusual conditions, such as moonlight; or you could make use of Christening water, water from cleaning the bread oven, water from washing a corpse, human spit, drool from a horse, frog roe, menstrual blood, or urine for the ritual act.[31]

There was a common belief that the use of water from church gates, church steps, and cemeteries, i.e. sacred places or places where the dead had passed through or were resting, increased the chances of getting rid of warts. Even water gathered in wheel tracks from the hearse carrying the dead could hold potency.[32]

These rituals were thought to be more effective if they were performed on a Thursday or Friday night (Friday being the day of the crucifixion of Christ); when the moon was full; using dew collected on Midsummer (one of the most potent times of the year); using rain water left after thunder; or using water from a gravestone.[33]

As with the grains of salt and the peas, raindrops have a similar size and shape to warts. And again, magical numbers could also be used, such as the number seven (representing the seven days of creation).[34]

"Reading" was not uncommon in asking the moon to take the warts: "Moon, Moon, wash the warts away".[35] One could go out, wash the fingers in the moonlight, point to the warts and say to the moon: "Look what I have and you don't", whereupon the moon would get jealous and take the warts.[36] You could also point to your warts as a coffin was passing by and say: "Go along, go along".[37] However, silence and absence of words could be just as powerful.[38]

In some cases a sacrifice was also needed, usually consisting of coins or needles being thrown into a well; however, if anyone washed in the well afterwards, he or she would get the warts.[39]

Healing Burns

In reviewing the cures for burns, a few main courses of treatments become apparent. These treatments consist of both physical and psychological acts.

31 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
32 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
33 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
34 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
35 ULMA 5911. 9.
36 ULMA 2706:2. 45.
37 ULMA 3932. 14.
38 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.
39 Excerpts '*Vårtor*'.

Physical Acts

One way to take away the pain from burning your fingers was to pinch your own ear. You could also burn the burn again,[40] either with something hot, or something strong that was connected with heat or burns: "If burnt in the smithy one can burn the burn back to avoid a blister".[41] A hornets' nest could be put on a burn, or newly pressed juice of stinging nettles. Other cures were to apply poisonous wormwood put in vinegar, castor oil, or bile from a bear or a swine, and smear it on the burn.[42] Behind these practices lies an old Swedish saying, "Ont ska med ont förgås" (Evil shall with evil be destroyed), going back to the Latin phrase "similia similibus curentur" (like cures like), coined by German-Swiss Renaissance man Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus (1493–1541).[43] His work in turn goes back to Hippocrates (460-377 BC) and the idea of humoral pathology: "By similar things a disease is produced and through the application of the like is cured". I mention this because I find it interesting that this idea of 'like curing like' could influence the thinking and practices hundreds of years on, and hundreds of miles away − becoming such an integral part of traditional folk cures in Sweden.

Physical Acts: Ointments and Bandages

Today, more politically correct remedies for burns are those that use healing, disinfectant, or cooling agents such as alcohol, fat, juice from the aloe plant, egg yolk, honey, breast milk, or shredded potato. Flour made from tree bark could also be put on the wound to stop it from oozing.[44]

Also cooling, but no longer thought politically correct, were the common remedies of applying snot or spit to the burn. Among the ointments that were mentioned, I also found references to mixing cream with manure from a swine, sheep, lamb, or horse:[45] "For burns of fire or hot water. Take swine pearls [i.e. manure], dry them in a pan, crush and mangle them through a sift leaving the rough, boil the flour with thick sweet cream, left on the milk after half a day, as thin as thin gruel: thereupon anoint the burnt limb, as warmly as can be tolerated".[46] These references relate to practices in the nineteenth century, but surprisingly the cure is not Swedish but of Neapolitan origin, taken from the book *Magiae Naturalis*, written by Giovanni Battista Della Porta and published in Naples in 1558.[47]

40 Excerpts under heading '*Brännskador*' (burns) in the Catalogue of Realia at the DFU Archives in Uppsala.
41 ULMA 28879. 61b.
42 Excerpts '*Brännskador*'.
43 Paracelsus 1529-1530.
44 Excerpts '*Brännskador*'.
45 Excerpts '*Brännskador*'.
46 ULMA 170. 68-69.
47 Battista Della Porta 1558.

This provides a second example of how a scientific work has travelled through Europe over centuries, and become part of folk cure tradition.

Psychological Acts: "Reading" Away Burns

Besides physical cures you could also "read away" burns. The contents of what was said was either religious or connected with death.[48] For example: "The fire shall lose its heat as certain as Judas Iscariot betrayed his saviour".[49] You could also trace your finger three times counter- clockwise around the burn and read: "It should dry as fast as man turns to dust in the soil".[50] If you did not read over burns it was believed they would continue to hurt for nine days.[51]

Summing Up

We have now looked at explanations for the occurrence of warts, as well as five categories of actions for curing warts, and remedies for healing burns. In doing so we have seen examples of the use of ritual acts, which in turn have revealed something about the belief systems surrounding warts and burns.

With burns, the causes were self-evident, such as exposure to fire and hot materials. Looking at the cures, the remedies often involved "readings" with spoken references to holy contents or to death. Warts, on the other hand, had more obscure causes, and were usually transferred through actions involving pork, peas, or thread; these "contaminated" items were then left to decay under a stone or dung heap, or were dissolved in a well. By establishing a bond between the wart and another substance through the use of contagious magic, the wart would be affected and would dissolve. However, the wart could also be transferred to other humans, to animals, to the moon, or even to the realm of the Dead.

When analysing the traditional folk cures for warts, I first thought that the ritual acts were solely designed to draw power to give the cures potency. However, examining them on a deeper level, using Mary Douglas' theories on defilement, I realised that warts were often connected with death and thought to originate from the underworld, and that the core of the ritual acts were thus intended to put the warts back where they belonged, thereby restoring the order of the world.

48 Excerpts '*Brännskador*'.9
49 ULMA 27505. 40.
50 ULMA 4006 8. ,7371. 6.
51 Excerpts '*Brännskador*'.

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