Diseases have accompanied man during the centuries following his entire historical development. That's why man has always looked for a way how to resist them and how to protect himself. The ways and means of healing art are in the closest possible connection and dependency on the cultural level of the epoch, on the existing knowledge, customs, technique and other opportunities.

The Bulgarian people have always been conscious of the significance of health for human beings and animals. That's why the purpose of most of the people's customs is turned to strengthening of health and to improvement of fertility. Whatever work is begun, whatever event is celebrated during the year, Bulgarian people don't miss to wish one-another: «To your health!» At the time of treating friends and on other solemn occasions we always wish each other: «To your health!» For the greatest self complacency and reassurance to the others are the words: «Everything will be all right and will be forgotten, if only there is health.» A number of folk beliefs, customs and rituals are dedicated to guarding, strengthening and preserving the health of our people. Bulgarian customs of the spring cycle of calendar holidays reflect the natural happy presentiment of the awakening of Nature. All forces in it awake for new life and that's why some common or more personal wishes for health, fertility, prosperity, family and personal happiness are expressed. One of the basic purposes of the spring customs is to secure health to the farmer and here come the numerous folk rituals that are held for its attainment.

The earliest Bulgarian spring holiday is Trifon Zarezan, celebrated above all by men — vine-growers, tavern-keepers and gardeners. On this day the custom «cutting» takes place, meant also for men who have no children. Such a man calls a barber to shave him. After being shaven, he is cut with the sharp blade of the razor in three spots of the neck. It is believed then that this man is sure to have children.

Entire dwellings have been overrun by plague outbreaks in the past. So out of fear «Plagueday» was celebrated on February, 10th. It coincides with the holiday of the Christian Saint Haralampii, who keeps plague in chains or shuts in a bottle according to people's concepts. Only when he lets it out, it causes damages. Saint Haralampii is painted on icons, beating and torturing plague. On this day women knead round loaves, coated with honey and carry them about for health. Some of the honey is kept throughout the year as a cure. For constant reconciliation with the plague, people never mention its name, but call it «the good one», «aunt», «the sweet-honeyed one».

In the people's holiday calendar «Vlasovden» (Vlasovday) is celebrated for the health of the horned cattle and sheep — not to be struck by the deadly disease
The health of the domestic animals is as vitally necessary, as the health of people is. According to the people the disease « vlas » is caused by tiny hairs that come into existence in animals' intestines. To protect animals from it, farmers carry round to their neighbours warm round loaves coated with honey and treacle early in the morning. Everybody breaks off the round loaf and wishes good health. In some places people even jump so that animals should be quick.

The so-called « Pessi Ponedelnik » (Dog Monday) is celebrated in spring. On this day a hygienic custom takes place — cleaning the dishes of the fat. In the morning domestic dogs are tortured in order to chase away the rabies, that they might have caught during the winter. An empty tin is tied to the dogs tail and it runs chased by its jangling. Also sticks and stones are thrown at it. And the dog is swung or whirled too quickly to catch rabies. It is considered that the dog, that has been swung is cured and it won't catch rabies. As in all other cases in the Bulgarian folk medicine the beating and the torturing of the cured one is in fact torturing and chasing away the disease.

Another holiday dedicated to the health of domestic animals, especially to the horses is « Todorovden » (Saint Todor's day). The celebration on this day is against the horse disease « guturach » and to reassure their breeding. Young brides who have been married during the winter celebrate on this day too, in order to give birth to children. In every house ritual bread is kneaded for horses' sake, and « kolatsi » (ring-shaped cakes) for the brides. The ring-shaped bun has usually the shape of a horse shoe or represents a small horse with or without a rider on it. Some of the dough is put aside, being dried and preserved to be used as a cure. Some of this dough is put in the horses' grain when they catch the most dangerous horse disease « guturach ». The ritual bread is carried about for the health of horses. The one who breaks it off usually pronounces a blessing: « Let horses be healthy and alive, let them breed and multiply ! » Maize and lentils are boiled, beans and other seeds are added to it and this mixture is put in the grain or in the bran of the horses to be healthy and alive. There are horse races on this day. Everybody who has a horse must take it out and ride it by all means in order to keep it from getting sick.

One of the most respected spring holidays that is characteristic for the entire Bulgarian ethnic community is « Sirni Sagovzni » (the first Sunday before Lent). The custom « hamkane » (traying to catch with the mouth only) takes place after supper. A coal, an egg and some cheese are tied to a cross-beam by a thread and then they are swung. Everybody tries to catch the coal, the egg and the cheese with his mouth. After the « hamkane » custom some of the coal is preserved as remedy against the evil eye. The white of the egg is eaten, and the yolk of the egg and the cheese are preserved as a cure against some children's diseases and some lamb diseases. At the end the thread is set on fire. People wait to see if it will burn out or if it will die out in the middle. If the thread burns out there will be fertility, health and all wishes will come true; if it doesn't burn out, disease and failure are expected. There are swings on this day and everybody should be swayed for health and against rabies. Big fires are built in the evening on the Sunday before Lent and people jump over them in order to banish away evil spirits and harmful small animals. Young men throw away fiery arrows prepared beforehand specially for this day. While throwing the arrows away, they outspoke wishes for health to the parents, relatives, to their beloved.

e.g.: « Cur-cur, dear father, this one is to your health ! »

If the arrow flies high, the one it was named for will live long and be healthy. The ritual fire, with its preventive, anti-demonic force against diseases, evil spirits and small animals, takes an important place among the customs on that day.
On the first day before Lent customs with masked participants — the « kukers » — take place in different regions of Bulgaria. The carnaval customs, connected with the agrarian way of life of the Bulgarian people, are saturated with a lot of magic for fertility and health. The fertilization symbolism of those customs is clearly expressed by a number of elements with phallic quality. This symbolism is characterised too by the fact that women, whose children often fall ill or die, give their low-cut sleeveless dresses to kukers to put them on and to play for health. Childless women who long for children do the same. An often met ritual mask is the doctor’s one, who carries different remedies in a bag. Kukers roll on the ground for health, in order to get vitality from the earth. Preventive qualities banishing away every sort of wickedness are ascribed to the sound of the bells, which the kukeri wear on the belts.

The belief in one indefinite evil in Nature that awakes in spring too, exists in the traditional Bulgarian folk culture. Usually it is called a wickedness, some people define it as a disease. The red colour is considered as a means against this wickedness or disease. That’s way on March, 1st red aprons, belts, rugs and yarn are spread on verandas and over the fence. This danger threatens mostly youngsters (children, lambs, kids, calves, foals) ; that’s way on March, 1st a red thread, called « martenitza » is tied on childrens writs and on animals’ necks. Later people began to twist together red and white threads, so that the person who wears the martenitza would be heathy and pretty « white and red », to answer the esthetic ideal of the people. The martenitza is worn by children till the storks and swallows arrive, and then it is put under a stone and on the next day people predict the future health according to what animal or thing is found beside it.

The folk holiday « Mladenzi » is dedicated to smallpox. On this day women knead ritual bread, decorated with grains like the disease smallpox. Small round loaves coated with honey are carried about for the health of children and lambs. On the Annunciation day according to the folk etymology, people expect everything they begin that day to come out successfully. The voice of the barnowl foretells how many years the person that has heard it will live. People predict future health after the sign in the cloth they have left on the roof. The abundance promises constant health and satisfaction. The jangling, shooting and building of ritual fires banish diseases and small animals away from home. On Annunciation day hygienic customs take place — people sweep the houses, the yards, the gardens and burn the rubbish. While the fire burns, young men jump barefooted over it and singe their feet not to be bitten by wickedness.

One of the most poetic traditional holidays — « lazaruvane » (ritual dances and songs for health, happiness and fertility on Saint Lazar’s day) is connected with spring. The lazarki (the girls fulfilling the ritual of Saint Lazar’s Day) sing for health and happiness, give blessing to the members of the family, foretell forthcoming marriages. The following day is Palm Sunday. Early in the morning young men and maidens go to the meadows and woods to pick flowers. Everybody takes sanctified willow branches from church, brings them home and preserves them. If someone in the family falls ill, these willow branches are set on fire and the sick person is smoked with them. If a child is a victim of the evil eye, its eyes are washed with water in which the willow branches were put. These customs are connected with the belief in the magic power of the fresh picked up green twig to transfer its vigor to man.

Easter is the greatest holiday in spring. On Holy Thursdays eggs are decorated. The egg plays a very important role in the beliefs, rituals and customs of the Bulgarian people. With an egg are mumbled incantations against the evil eye, different diseases are cured with an egg, witchcraft can be practised or spoilt with an egg. On this day in some regions the yeast is renewed by kneading some cura-
tive herbs in the dough. Part of this « new » yeast or « fresh » yeast is preserved as a remedy against diseases for the coming year. In some districts of Bulgaria on this day children go from house to house and give a bunch of wild geranium meant for the health of the hosts, and the hostess presents them with a white egg and a silver coin each. On Easter people crack red eggs and foretell: The person whose egg is tougher is going to be healthier during the coming year. In the afternoon all the maidens in the village go under a branchy tree and swing for health. The swingings and the horos (ring dances) are performed against the « bad disease » (epilepsy) and against smallpox too. That’s why both young women and children take part in these swingings and everybody sees that he or she is swayed on this day. The swinging is a ritual magic action designed as a preventive means against diseases.

One of the most cheerful and gay holiday is « Gergjovden » (Saint George’s day). On the eve of Saint George’s day a nettle sprig is named for each member of the family and it is left on the roof. In the morning people predict the future according to its greenness — the person whose sprig has faded is going to be ill during the year or is going to die soon and the one whose sprig is fresh is going to be healthy. One can predict the future for health or disease with the help of a root of wild geranium put on the cross-beam for each member of the family. After a week the geranium is taken down and people plant it. Later they look which plant has taken root or not and accordingly they judge if the person will be ill or healthy during the year. In the morning of Saint George’s day old and young people pour water, in which herbs have been boiled, over each other for health. The people who keep on falling ill are taken to have a bath in « left waters » on this day. The « left water » is widely used in the Bulgarian folk medicine. The left movement has been taken as a magic sign of the spring regeneration and of every restoration to life. If it rains on Saint George’s day everybody goes out in the rain or washes his eyes with this water, because it is believed to have healing effects. The scabby people roll naked on the dew for the folk belief tells that they are going to be cured by this means. The dew of this day is gathered in bottles to be used as a remedy during the coming year; herbs are gathered too. A widespread belief is that the most curative herbs are those gathered on Saint George’s Day, on Enjovday (Midsummer Day) and during the Midsummer Week. Once again for health early in the morning on Saint George’s Day everybody is being weighed and swayed on swings that are tied on a green tree. At the time of the swaying the younger girls beat the older girls with a nettle or a green stick to get married during the coming year. This custom has a healthy and fertilizing function.

On Saint George’s Day for the first time in spring a lamb is butched. The children are marked on the foreheads with the lamb’s blood, gathered in a pot, not to be victims of an evil eye, to be healthy and red; the door sill and the door itself are marked with the blood too for it is believed that blood keeps diseases and witchcraft away from the house. In general the lamb’s blood plays a very important role in the folk beliefs. 5-6 nettle sprigs are put in the pot where the blood is gathered. The nettle is preserved as a remedy. When an « unclean » child is born, i.e. a child covered with pimples, it is washed with water in which some of this nettle was put and the pimples disappear. If the lamb is black the blood is preserved, because it is curative. When someone has acne the face is rubbed with this blood and the pimples disappear. In folk beliefs the red colour of blood has a meaning of banishing away the evil spirits and securing health and abundance.

In the beginning of May Eremiya Day is celebrated against snakes and lizards. According to the folk beliefs the snake possesses a secret power. It knows a remedy for every disease and the power of all herbs. The appearance of a snake in a yard or in a house is considered as an omen of death or disease and that's
why on Eremiya Day the custom « chasing of snakes away » takes place. The snake is very much afraid of fire and the symbolic chasing away from the yard is held with the help of a pair of fire-tongs and a poker — the instruments with which one stirs the fire. On this day sick women and those who have no children go out to the fields and roll naked on the dew before sunrise. The maidens and the young men go to the fields to gather wild garlic and they eat it in order not to be bitten by a snake or if a snake bites them, not to be poisoned. They pick flowers, put them in a pot of water and then they wash their heads with the water in order not to have a headache. They drink for health from the dew that is gathered in a bowl on this day. The folk medicine points out Eremiya Day as the most favourable time for curing the goitre. The sick person goes to the fields and carries a small bone kept from the Saint George's Day lamb; the goitre is prodded with the bone and then being left on an unknown grave; the same person swallows small stones. He or she carries an egg too and grains of millet; the throat is touched around with the egg and the person pronounces: « When a chicken is hatched from this egg, when this millet grows and this chicken pocks it, then my goitre will grow. » Then the egg is buried, the millet is thrown and the person comes back to the village. But everything must be done in great secret, for if someone sees or learns that there will be no cure for the person.

According to folk ideas on « Spasovden » (Ascension Day) the top of the fairy herb fraxinella falls down. It has high curative qualities for different incurable diseases. That's why on the eve of the holiday the disabled people are taken out of the village, in the open air to special spots where the fraxinella grows. There they leave a round loaf of bread for the mermaids, the wood nymphs who pass in the night leaving tokens showing whether the disabled people are going to be cured or are going to die. In order to get cured the people bathe in the dew in the morning and gather the herb fraxinella, which is especially curative, if it is gathered on Ascension Day. It is believed that the sick person must run away from the fairy place before sunrise in order to leave the disease behind him, but if he is still there after sunrise he is not going to be cured. It is particularly important that everything should be done in silence.

A widespread custom in Bulgaria for people suffering from chronic ailments is to spend a night on a certain healing spot during the Midsummer Week in order to get cured or learn a remedy for their disease. Among the Bulgarians a belief exists that mermaids harm people, but at the same time they can cure them as well. These beliefs have created a whole system of interdictions and of ritual acts having the purpose of preserving people from the mermaids, and at the same time use their curative power. Women bring home wormwood, walnut foliage, osiers twigs and put them on the beds and on the floor at home. Every maiden, woman and child must carry some wormwood. It is believed that it preserves people from diseases and mermaids.

And despite the precautions and measures, if somebody falls ill during the Midsummer Week, it is said that the mermaids « have run into him ». It is believed that he has stopped on the spot where mermaids eat or where they go. That's why people avoid to walk through the fields and forests without following a path. They are careful not to fall down, not to be injured or to get ill. For about a person, that falls ill during the Midsummer Week is said that he is not going to be cured; if he isn't cured during the Midsummer Week he is going to die before the next one. They try to cure him by mumbling incantations, he is smoked with fraxinella, or washed with water in which there is fraxinella. In Bulgaria mermaid-games are organized during the Midsummer Week too. Trained and skillful men take part in them. They cure the sick people whom the herbs, the prayers and the sorceresses have not helped and about whom is said that they've got the « wood nymph's » or
« mermaid’s » disease. It is believed that no disease will enter the village and especially the house where the « russalii » have played.

The Bulgarian spring customs are gay and cheerful, enriched by a lot of songs and games. Once upon a time the Bulgarian people believed that with those customs and songs interwoven with them, they would make Nature merciful and benevolent to their labour and life. Everything that is done during these holidays points to good care for securing health and abundance. The widespread use of flowers, green twigs symbolizes the magic union with the vitality of the vegetation. The original meaning of the decorating and winding things, animals or people, with vegetation has served to transfer the fertility and the power of the branches in full bloom and thick with leaves to man and to everything. Such is the principal meaning of the swaying during the most of the spring holidays — to transfer the power of the tree to man. The swaying is a ritual by means of which force and health are transferred to the body. The pouring of water, in which herbs have been boiled, is connected with the renewing power of the vegetation and the faith in the magic power of water. The statements that one can be healed after a bath or a wash must be accepted as having a healing effect by means of auto-suggestion. The Bulgarian people believe in the curative qualities of the water and fire.

Except the magic practised for the acception of Nature’s vitality, the people have experienced the protective magic too; the one that has to preserve man from some bad outside effects, caused by people, spirits, or wood nymphs. The preventive and antidemonic meaning of the ritual fire plays an important role in the Bulgarian spring customs. The hitting and the decoration with flowers or green twigs has a preventive function too, following the principle of compactness and the transferring of the qualities from one object to another in order to let people get the power and vigor of spring vegetation.

The concern about man’s health is expressed in the holidays of the spring calendar cycle. People predict future health and life during most of the holidays. The kukers dance for health and to preserve everybody from evil spirits, people wear martenitzas, wormwood, walnut foliage and follow certain interdictions. Every ritual act and giving out blessings has the purpose of influencing favourably on Nature and people to gain fertility and health.

Literature