

Wałęciuk-Dejneka, Beata

**Between tradition and present times : Polish culture and globalization
(selected issues)**

Slavica litteraria. 2012, vol. 15, iss. 1, pp. [103]-109

ISSN 1212-1509 (print); ISSN 2336-4491 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124350>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

BEATA WAŁĘCIUK-DEJNEKA

BETWEEN TRADITION AND PRESENT TIMES. POLISH CULTURE AND GLOBALIZATION (SELECTED ISSUES)¹**Abstract**

The article concerns the problem of globalization in the Polish culture, or, to put it in a narrower sense – in the folk culture. It presents the traditional (19th century) and contemporary (20th–21st century) dimensions of culture, the transformations that have happened throughout the years, as well as the slow, yet unavoidable degeneration of tradition, which used to be the basis of life and moral code. The phenomena that are already common in the Polish folk culture – desemiotization and desacralization – being the result of transformations happening in the society and civilization, are now very distinct in every aspect of the life of Poles. The author's intention is not to call for the return to the magic vision of the world, but only to show the untypical vision of the Universe to the contemporary audience.

The subject of globalization in culture opens a rich, multi-aspectual research area, where the key notion plays a significant role in the humanities. Our explorations will be substantially narrowed, limited to a glance at globalization in the Polish folk culture, in its traditional dimension and relationship with the contemporary times. Therefore, all kinds of transformations of the traditional image of life, metamorphosis of approved and advisable types of behavior, as well as introducing new patterns of actions taken from the urbanized culture will be significant for our considerations.

As Zygmunt Bauman rightly said, “globalization is the world's mess” (Zygmunt Bauman 2000,71), and its processes, occurring in the Polish folk culture, introduce disorder, chaos, as well as slow degradation of tradition and of what used to constitute the universal code of life. The universally esteemed catalog of values has been subordinated to the principles of free market, and the Deca-

¹ This article has a Polish version: *Między tradycją a współczesnością. Kultura polska wobec globalizacji (wybrane problemy)* w: *Europa Środkowa salon czy przedpokój Europy*, red. A. Gogacz, Łódź 2010, s. 85–93.

logue of actions that used to be in force in the rural areas was changed into entertainment, play and pure consumerism.

In the traditional rural culture man perceived and interpreted the Universe through a set of categories that constituted the warranty of his actions, providing the feeling of sense, harmoniousness, self-security and, first of all – securing the order of life and the world. The invariability of rules governing that, were found in the sphere of *sacrum*, constituting the basis of folk ontology, based on the dialectics of the sacred and the profane. All cases that breached that order and introduced chaos made man act in accordance with the accepted folk code, to submit to orders and bans, which was to secure peace and quiet, as well as the protection against the unpleasant consequences that could occur. The formation of attitude towards the world was performed through ritualized types of behavior, gestures and words, easily noticeable in the family rituals (wedding) and yearly rites (Christmas, Harvest Home).

In the present times, desemiotization and desacralization of structures can be noticed in these rituals, as well as constant penetration and introduction of “new patterns of behavior taken from the urbanized culture” (Hanna Wesolowska 1988, 29). This results from transformations in the society and civilization, an echo of universal globalization, which is, obviously, an irreversible process, where certain elements, gestures and actions have absolutely extinct, or irreversibly lost their former values: “new elements penetrating the traditional ground cause significant changes in family and yearly rituals, mainly involving modifications of particular customs and adjusting them to changing conditions of life. These changes are marked mainly by more and more privatized family customs [...], by progressing secularization, manifesting itself through gradual elimination of magical-cultural motivations from customary behavior (Ibid, 29).

As a consequence of transformations occurring in traditional image of the world, not only the patterns of accepted behavior in especially important situations are changed. These transformations are much deeper, as they concern the ideas of these situations, motivation systems, or their legitimizations.

There are differentiations in the perception of the world by modern society. They are correlated with the differentiation and autonomization of the spheres of human activity. All human actions are now perceived as “results of convention and contract” (Michał Buchowski, 1992, 113), whereas the characteristic feature of “the traditional thought systems” was the assumption that “norms and rules governing operative acts are regarded to have been established by the supernatural [...] lawmakers (*sacrum*)” (Ibid, 112). Thus, what for the traditional culture “constituted a magical act with an ontological effect that changed the social world and properties of persons involved in the change” (Skorupski, 1976, 166–167), “for the mind being the subject of the modern European culture, it is only and exclusively an action, sometimes still a symbolic one” (Michał Buchowski, 1992, 114).

We will use a few examples to show an attempt to decode the cultural senses of words and gestures contained in the traditional rituals, as well as their contemporary variants, being a response to globalization in culture.

Example 1

“Poznań 1996. The groom and the guests are waiting for the bride, who appears in the doorway, wearing a cornflower blue and white wedding-gown [...]. The groom links his arm with his bride’s and they go to the car. There followed a general confusion [...], what to do? [...],”<and the blessing?> – someone asked in astonishment[...]. <Yes, and the blessing?>> Someone decided:<They have to be turned back>, someone else: <But you cannot turn back>.If it is not one thing, it’s another. Finally, all followed the bride and groom and it went without the blessing. (Katarzyna Leńska-Bąk 1999,192).

In the traditional rural wedding blessing was an obligatory part of the whole ritual act – it consisted of symbolic words and gestures. Its power and importance, like that of God’s favor, was the foundation of happy marriage and initiated the subsequent elements of the wedding rite. Many a time were the bride and groom the addressees of sacred actions performed by their parents, godparents, the master of ceremonies, sometimes the gathered guests, and, first of all, the priest. The belief in effectiveness of gestures and uttered words provided the newlyweds with all the best for their future married life and was a tool of magical protection against the evil. Similarly, color of the gown played a special role: this ritual-festive situation required the “ritual attire”- in the old days, in 19th century it was special –colored or white. A mistake or free replacement were unacceptable, as they constituted a threat of supernatural sanctions – unpleasant and dangerous for the bride and groom. However, on the eve of the 21st century, as it can be observed on the example above, the blessing does not have to take place at all. When the belief in magical-creative power of the rite vanishes, both the mistake (the bride’s attire) and lack of the basic element (the blessing), are possible and admissible. For the events occur only on the surface – what matters here is only to make things beautiful, colorful and merry. The contact with the sacred is experienced differently nowadays. The contemporary Pole has gone far away from the situation where nothing could have been violated and altered. The 21st century ceremony, detached from its symbolic roots has got deeply dysfunctional and standardized components, which are deprived of magical powers.

Example 2

– *“Oh, my little daughter, my girl, you will not be a maiden for a long time, you will soon leave your family home;*

– *Oh, do hush up, don’t you cry, woman!*

– *You must cry over maidenhood. Oh, my girl, my daughter, you will be married before long....*”

This fragment of a wedding farewell of mother and daughter, taken from a Polish satirical comedy *Kogel mogel* directed by Roman Zaluski (1988), is one of many examples of symbolic degradation and desemiotization of ritual structures. As a relic of the traditional wedding, preserved and cherished only by the mother, today it is just a conventional image of crying-wailing, appearing and disappearing “on cue”, deprived of magical senses and ritual grounds.

The values and meanings of gestures or attributes, characteristic of the folk imagination, preserved only partially in the exemplum referred to above, had a sacred dimension. Weeping of the bride was an obligatory act, imitated the superhuman order, was a kind of mediation, symbolically purifying the bride and preparing her for the change of status (maiden-married woman). It also provided protection, happiness and abundance of all sorts of goods. Bewailing was “notifying the community of the change, of violating the biological balance (Roch Sulima 1992, 81–82). During the traditional wedding the bride cried several times: already during betrothal, while preparing for the wedding, during undoing her plait, apologizing, blessing, going to church, saying goodbye to her mother, and even during the wedding itself, in church (Oskar Kolberg, 1961–).

Example 3

The wedding feast should be treated analogically. Nowadays it is only in ludic, carnivalesque form, constituting an occasion for partying, spending free time pleasantly, unwinding, getting rid of the everyday troubles and cares, drinking alcohol excessively. At present nobody knows the ancient, symbolic dimension of gathering. It is now more and more difficult to grasp and understand. For who can find in it the symbol of community, forces and powers? Who can find the basic signs of life in the foods eaten there? Who treats dividing of the wedding cake (in the old times it was bread) as a symbol of fertility for the newlyweds, securing numerous offspring for them? These foods have been deprived of their magical meaning, and the wedding, like many other family festivals, underwent the unavoidable desacralization. Symbols turned into decorations, what became important, was elegance, wealth, and lavishness. The contemporary wedding cake sometimes still is ceremoniously divided, because the bride has to display her dexterity. However, it is less and less often eaten at midnight (like the traditional wedding bread). It often happens that it is brought onto tables right after dinner and served with coffee (Beata Walęciuk-Dejneka 2002, 200).

The ancient rituals, replaced by ceremoniousness, have got no other messages besides the social code, and the sacredness is narrowed only to the liturgical actions that take place in the temple. It is the ludic, carnivalesque character, as well as the social aspect (e.g. prestige) that dominate the 21st century celebrat-

ing. Even the folk staffage of family or yearly rites does not change the fact that what matters is first of all the culture of leisure time, determined by actions resulting from universal globalization – commercialism and consumerism of the participants of festival.

Example 4

The extraordinary time of Christmas used to require special types of behavior, suitable for the rank of this festival, reflected both in the festive menu and in the undertaken actions, e.g. divinations. The magical procedures that took place on Christmas Eve, Christmas, or Boxing Day had one distinctly specified aim: to bring wealth, agrarian abundance and all the happiness and success. The Christmas night, the special, holy time, was favorable for divinations provoking good harvest and creating new, better time. During that evening man sought success in the household and personal life, as well as in the relationships with the community, because in the traditional rural culture Christmas Eve was regarded as the time of good beginning (Beata Wałęciuk-Dejneka 1999, 33). Nowadays the extraordinary character of Christmas manifests itself first of all in the abundance of dishes, not necessarily prepared by the hostess herself, often ready-made, bought at a supermarket, as well as in “staring” at the TV for many hours. The great joy for which in the old days people prepared for a long time, nowadays gave way to all kinds of plays, joke, or festive overeating or overdrinking. What matters, is to make everyone happy, contented and self-assured, to make people wit for another festival with smiles on their faces – just like you wait for another day off from work. In the present way of thinking, more and more free from bygone symbolic meanings, everything is becoming a sign that no longer refers to specific and rich associations. Simple, easy things that require no effort and serious thought at all are referred to as symbols (Piotr Kowalski 2000, 236).

The obligatory character of formulas and gestures occurring in the traditional folk culture in our times ceased to be legally valid: “the performative nature of an utterance in the context of a rite (ceremony) with reference to modern European societies has got its own, strictly defined communicative-legal character, without the philosophical-religious dimension (Michał Buchowski 1992, 125). If certain parts of rites, some elements of the 21st century ritualistic decorum are in conformity with the ritual itself, they have nothing to do with the magical outlook on the world, nor with the knowledge of their obligatory character. What decides here, is exclusively the participants’ willingness to preserve the tradition.

Example 5

An important element of the Polish traditional agrarian culture was Harvest Home, the festival of grains, providing continuity of vegetation, supporting the

vitality of natural forces. The undertaken procedures and practices were always concentrated on the primary principle: new time inscribed into old time, new harvest inscribed into the old one). All the actions: harvesting, preparing and making the wreath, decorating it and giving to the landlord, performed with due accuracy, secured a successful finale and guaranteed richer harvest for the next year. Man tried hard to make future grains more abundant, ears fuller and harvest better. The contemporary Harvest Home has become a state (communal, provincial) or religious festival, losing its magical meaning completely. What became more distinct was, for instance, its religious aspect, supported by Christian values and motifs. Such a change and absolutely different character of this holiday were influenced by transformations in agriculture: modernization or more common use of machines, dictated by general globalization.

In the present ritual situations, the undertaken actions do not result from opinions and views: they rather play a decorative, esthetic and ludic role.

The symbolic degradation, susceptibility to conventionalization and institutionalization of the tradition nearly dominated the contemporary family and yearly rituals, we can also notice the participation of mass culture in the formation of the today's folkloristic repertoire.

It is difficult to hope for the return of the magical imagination, because the contemporary audience could not comprehend the world whose legitimization is so different. However, it is worth reminding of what is still inside the deep layers of even the most modernist or rationalistic culture, undergoing the unavoidable process of globalization. The inhabitants of mass imagination, brought up in the environment of different reading of the world, or "rationalists prone to behave according to the advice of practical reason" (Piotr Kowalski 2000, 12–18) should be shown what constitutes the foundation of many kinds of behavior, actions, or undertakings, performed automatically, in complete unawareness. They may also need a lesson on an untypical vision of the Universe every now and then.

Translation: A. Monies-Mizera

Literature

- BAUMAN, Z.: Globalizacja, tłum. E. Klekot, Warszawa 2000
 BUCHOWSKI, M.: Logika sprawczej mocy obrzędów (w:) Między sensem a genami, red. B. Tu-
 chańska, Warszawa 1992
 KOLBERG, O.: Dzieła Wszystkie, t. 6, 16, 20, (s. 18,; 139, 237, 145, 146; 98) Wrocław 1961–
 KOWALSKI, P.: Chleb nasz powszedni. O pieczywie w obrzędach, magii, literackich obrazach
 i opiniach dietetyków, Wrocław 2000
 LEŃSKA-BAK, K.: Zapraszamy na wesele... Weselne oracje i ceremonialne formuły, Kraków
 1999

- SKORUPSKI, J.: *Symbol and Theory. A Philosophical Study of Theories of Religion in Social Anthropology*, Cambridge 1976
- SULIMA, R.: *Między płaczem a milczeniem (w:) tegoż, Słowo i etos. Szkice o kulturze*, Kraków 1992
- WAŁĘCIUK-DEJNEKA, B.: *Symboliczny wymiar słowiańskiej uczty weselnej (w:) Świat Słowian w języku i kulturze III*, red.E.Komorowska, Ż.Kozicka-Borysowska, Szczecin 2002
- WAŁĘCIUK-DEJNEKA, B.: *Projekcja nowego ładu w obrzędowości bożonarodzeniowej*, „Literatura Ludowa” 1999, nr 3
- WESOŁOWSKA, H.: *Przemiany zwyczajów rodzinnych u rdzennych mieszkańców Śląska Opolskiego*, „Kwartalnik Opolski” 1988, nr1

