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The Legacy of Ancient Customs. The Extreme Way of the Cross

ABSTRACT

The article presents what celebrating is and how it has evolved to our times. Phenomena which resulted in the crisis of customs at the turn of the 21st century are signaled. Historical events, twists and turn of civilization, and social transformations have caused a departure from the customs of folk tradition near the end of the 20th century. However, folk culture, which is characterized by traditionalism, has preserved many rituals. More and more people are participating, and the need to deepen spiritual religious experiences has led to new initiatives, such as the Extreme Way of the Cross.

KEY WORDS: festival, celebration, rite

STRESZCZENIE

Ślady archaicznych zwyczajów na przykładzie Ekstremalnej Drogi Krzyżowej

W artykule przedstawiono, czym jest świętowanie oraz jak ewoluowało do naszych czasów. Zasygnalizowano zjawiska, które spowodowały kryzys zwyczajów świątecznych na przełomie XX i XXI w. Wydarzenia historyczne, zmiany cywilizacyjne i transformacje społeczne przyczyniły się do odejścia od zwyczajów tradycji ludowej (zwłaszcza świątecznej) pod koniec XX w., jednakże kultura ludowa, którą cechuje tradycjonalizm, przechowała do naszych czasów wiele obrzędów.

Uczestniczy w nich coraz więcej osób, a potrzeba pogłębienia duchowych przeżyć religijnych powoduje powstawanie nowych inicjatyw, do których należy Ekstremalna Droga Krzyżowa.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: święto, świętowanie, obrzęd

In contemporary forms of celebration, we can find many traces of archaic religiousness. Often they are not recognized by the participants and interpreted differently than their archaic models. Processions, dances, loud music and sacrifice making have long accompanied celebrations. Roger Caillois rightly points out that if only the external aspects of the holiday are taken into account, it presents identical characteristics, regardless of the level a culture has achieved.¹ A feast is always associated with leisure, joy, and a certain ritual. It is a complex, cultural phenomenon existing from time immemorial, usually connected with religious worship. In this article I am going to focus on the descriptions of celebration, which in my opinion open the participants of certain rites to other people. Regardless of what reasons (religious, cognitive, or commercial) we participate in the celebration, we take part in a gathering. Thus, we must be ready for a dialog with the other participant, who may have different beliefs and recognize different values from ours.

What is celebrating?

Mieczysław Maliński writes about celebration in the contemporary context as follows:

To celebrate – to find ourselves in a new situation, in unexpected systems, in relationships that do not happen on a daily basis, in responsibilities for unusual matters. ... And it is essential to celebrate in a variety of ways – from sport and tourism to games and plays, to art, to the most important events in your personal life, in the life of your country and the world, to the anniversaries of these events.²

A similar sense of celebration in is presented by Caillois in his theory: “Everyday life involving daily work, peaceful, enclosed in a system

1 Cf. R. Caillois, *Żywot i ład*, transl. A. Tatarkiewicz, A. Tatarkiewicz, Warszawa 1973, p. 121.

2 Cf. M. Maliński, *Pokochoać życie*, Poznań 1989, p. 215.

of prohibitions, cautious, as the world order is based on the *quieta non movere* principle opposes the disruption that a festival is.”³ A feast is connected with a gathering, a crowd; it is a lively and noisy event that fosters the shared elation, which is expressed by gestures and shouts and various spontaneous motions.

Even today, traces of the collective “unbridledness,” characteristic of archaic celebrations, can be distinguished. Caillois emphasizes that there are no holidays, even sad by nature, which would involve not even a seed of excess and carousing: it is sufficient to recall the rural funeral wakes here. From time immemorial to the present day celebrations always involve lively dancing, singing, binge eating and intoxication. One has to indulge, to the bitter end, to indigestion. Such is just the law of celebrating.⁴ Many different factors have influenced the changes in customs, as has the fact that many of them have survived to our times. Social and technological changes, technological revolution, more and more free time available for urban and rural population alike, on top of the development of the entertainment industry have caused changes in the ways of celebrating. Today, less attention is devoted to experiencing religious holidays. More often than not, modern celebrations are just recreation and leisure, organized independently or by specialized service companies (including tourist agencies). During holidays we cultivate some rituals (wafer breaking, water sprinkling during *śmigus-dyngus*) but we choose only those that suit us or that have “always” been traditionally celebrated in our homes. Some of them are practiced out of habit, others because of the social environment, “because we should,” and some of the inner need to satisfy the needs of spiritual life. However, regardless of the motives that guide us, by celebrating holiday customs, we contribute to their survival.

Attachment to tradition was a natural characteristic of the Slavs. The introduction of the new Christian religion was not met with resistance of the people, as new temples were built on the sites of old shrines, where the people came out of habit to worship God, slowly becoming accustomed to new concepts and rituals. The people’s attachment to the ancient faith was probably fairly strong, but as there was no large priestly social class and no highly organized worship, this resulted in the lack of a strong, long-term resistance to the new faith. Also, the proper methods of introducing Christianity, with little use of coercion and violence, contributed to the adoption of the new faith. However, the Polish people have preserved many Pagan customs, creating their own folk tradition. It was an attempt to escape from the incomprehensible liturgy, which was strongly imbued

3 Cf. R. Caillois, *Człowiek i sacrum*, transl. A. Tatarkiewicz, E. Burska, Warszawa 1995, p. 107.

4 Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 107-108.

with too much Latinization, centralization, clericalization and was performed in an incomprehensible language.

In cosmological religions, in which the religion of the Slavs can be included, a feast is a return to Chaos from which the world emerged.⁵ Celebrating holidays is participation in recreating the world anew through rituals and contact with the gods. The situation is different in the prophetic religions, which include Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For Christians, a feast is a time to remember an event, and to give testimony about the event. Participation in the festival is to strengthen the faith. The merry-making and feasting that takes place after the religious rites is a display of joy from being children of God and participants in the feast. It is the joy of a witness to a great event. Modern celebration is also the opposite of everyday life, it is done according to local customs, which are either a continuation of carefully cared for rituals and customs, or just a game.

The evolution and crisis of holiday-making

In the twentieth century, not only in Poland, but particularly in Poland, Christian faith was faced with various breakthroughs that had both positive and negative effects on it. The most important aspects were: the restoration of independence, World War II, the postwar fate of the state, and the fall of communism. These events, which have had a great impact on the changes that have taken place in our society, have also influenced the transformation and sometimes strengthening of the Christian faith but also the secularization of parts of society. Especially during the period of "people's rule" in Poland, there was a departure from the practice of many customs considered by the then authorities as a sign of superstition.⁶ At that time, the communist authorities sought to nationalize the family, by such action as introducing an obligation to conclude civil marriages and remove religious education from schools. This phenomenon was also accompanied by civilization changes, which caused changes in the way of life: electrification followed by the spread of television and media subordinated to the social policy of the authorities, the migration of the population from villages to cities and the disappearance of multi-generational families.

The aforementioned phenomena brought about behavioral changes. Senior members of families lost their importance and ceased to act as

5 Cf. M. Eliade, *Aspekty mitu*, transl. P. Mrówczyński, Warszawa 1998, p. 37.

6 Cf. A. Kłoskowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni*, Warszawa 2012.

guardians and teachers of tradition. The consumerist attitude of “to be is to have” has often been adopted. Old customs are disappearing, and their place is taken by new ones, most often created by the media (often for economic reasons). Nowadays, tradition is being marginalized and cultivating customs is becoming an activity of folklore animators. It is also difficult to see references to the sacred in these new customs, because they concern newly formed human relationships.

Why do we keep the old customs?

What factors have contributed to the survival of archaic customs? It seems that the relation to infinity – difficult to define, but always worth pondering – is an important factor for the survival of archaic customs in tradition. “Far away,” which used to be the next village, has now come a long way; today this term refers rather to interstellar distances. The understanding (perception) of space has changed, and the ultimate frontier has moved. The more the contemporary concept of infinity is “shrinking” (moreover, the frontier of infinity is moving away), the more customs are being forgotten or reduced to a crude form that aims to satisfy only commercial needs. But it is our search for the infinity, our desire to get to know the transcendence, why we remember (or rather recall) the customs of our ancestors. We recall and practice them, even without believing in their effectiveness, particularly in the breakthrough moments of our lives. However, respect for life and death in a way “forces” us to preserve tradition even when it is being transformed.

Today in Poland we have our own unique form of Christianity that has integrated Christian and Pagan elements. These Pagan values which could not be adopted by Christianity have survived in non-liturgical folk customs Christmas or died out. Nowadays, when modern society has entered the road of manipulating the outside world and multiplying possessions, not wanting to lose any of its dynamic development, does not distinguish individuals who have insight into themselves and the world, but prefers ones gifted with the skills of concrete, systematic and organizational thinking, there is a group opposed to technical, economic and management intelligence that topples the myth of widely understood technology. People opposing consumerism and universal secularization are particularly predisposed to care for the preservation of customs. Culture is the value thanks to which any nation can survive and customs are an integral part of it. Their survival is not only a testimony to the survival of the community (nation), but it is a necessary condition for this survival and

the preservation of social ties. Especially the folk culture, which is characterized by traditionalism, aversion to innovation, respect for authority, especially for the elderly, and religious syncretism, which made it possible to bind together relics of Pagan beliefs with elements of the Christian faith preserved the old customs for as long as it was possible. Thanks to this, traces of these ancient customs whose meaning we often no longer understand, have survived.

As Stanisław Kowalski writes in his book *W poszukiwaniu początków wierzeń religijnych*, “Rituals strengthen such social values as: family, clan or tribal bonds, courage and endurance, and knowledge. ... Thanks to these social values, a ritual can remain alive even when it loses its sacred meaning.” It seems, therefore, that traces of archaic customs can still be found in folk culture and piety. Participation in these still practiced traditions (processions, pilgrimages) makes us remember them.

New customs as a response to change

A novelty custom that attracts new participants every year is the EDK – the “Extreme Way of the Cross,” organized since 2009 at the initiative of Fr. Jacek Stryczek. This “extreme” form of devotion, combined with the long distance (about 44 km), and thus facing one’s weaknesses, is an attempt to build a new tradition for all those who, during the hard night march, want to find the meaning of the cross in the reflections prepared by Fr. Jacek. “You can experience the Way of the Cross in the church, sitting on a bench and listening to the sermon. You can be standing, sitting, alone, or in a crowd of people gathered at the church service. Each way is different, and there are no better or worse ones.”⁷ Despite the dynamic changes taking place in the modern world, which is moving away from the sacred, some people resist atheism and have a need to deepen their spiritual religious experience. Perhaps it is filling the empty spiritual space created after those customs that have been forgotten, or a search or opening up to the sacred for people living in a reality from which the sacred is removed by so-called “social progress.” To paraphrase Eliade, we may be dealing with a substitution or replacement of old customs with new ones, more appropriate to the present reality.⁸

7 Cf. J. Stryczek, *Ekstremalna Droga Krzyżowa*, <http://www.edk.org.pl/edk/o-nas/idea.html> (access: 12.08.2017).

8 Cf. M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, transl. J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Warszawa 2000. p. 69.

Participation in the Extreme Way of the Cross allows for a special inner dialog during the lonely practice. The enormous tiredness from the marching and the physical effort put into overcoming one's weakness change our perspective of viewing oneself and the world of other people around us. Firstly, we have time to think. Circumstances that differ from our normal reveal a lot of things in a different perspective. The hierarchy of their importance is changing. We consider things about which we do not think on a daily basis. We open both to the interior and to other people. The distance we overcome together with other participants, while reflection and prayer happens for us alone. The inner dialog with oneself while overcoming one's weaknesses seems to be deeper. It opens new, hitherto unnoticed horizons. It deepens the openness to dialog with other people. A dialog that is not only a discourse, an exchange of opinions, views or thoughts, but also an existential phenomenon – an event of a meeting.⁹

Today, unfortunately, the vast majority of what people consider to be a conversation is simply empty chatter. People do not talk to each other. They express themselves without paying attention to whether they are being listened to or not (without any interest in the recipient). They speak to cater to their need for expression and this is where their interest in conversation ends. Although our communication capabilities have been enriched, this wealth does not necessarily go hand in hand with an increase in competence and skills. Thanks to modern technologies we can support our communication with images, and even with interactive elements, but this does not mean that we can read the meaning of images supporting our statements. It is common to receive communication superficially, only by reading information, without going into the relationships and emotions between interlocutors.

The situation is different when participating in rites. It changes our attitudes to reality and others. Direction at experiencing the reality around us, the solemnity of participating in a ritual, and the slowdown in time which seems to accelerate everything around us, allow for insight and inner reflection.

9 Cf. J.A. Kłoczowski, *Filozofia dialogu. Antologia tekstów źródłowych do wykładu*, Kraków 2001, p. 4.

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