# The Folkloric Encoding of Meanings: Natural and Occasional Liminality in Polish Folklore

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Researching the aspect of folklore relating to the position of the text is undoubtedly one of the folklorist's main analytical operations, as the situational nature of the folkloric text is an immanent feature of its structure (in contrast to literary texts). This situation is productive;[1] it generates and models texts and determines their different genres and the scale of their semioticity. The decoding of meanings embedded in folkloric texts is the *de facto* decipherment of their temporal and situational determinants. We will indicate these dependencies as they apply to situations of change and to verbal forms of folkloric communication (as one possible code of these communications) that accompany changes in state, social position, or other important factors in an individual's life. By "change" we understand one of the features of rites of passage: the middle "liminal" phase, from the Latin *limen* (threshold), in Van Gennep's three-phase model. Victor Turner's category of "liminality," therefore, will be the main tool of scientific description here (see Turner 1966, 1969, 1974, 1992). It may also be successfully used as an anthropological category in relation to every threshold situation in areas of the world presented in literature, or in relation to contemporary crises or natural disasters, etc. This anthropocentric area of scholarly research (poorly developed in Polish and Slavic folklore studies) possesses massive interpretive potential: it makes it possible to decipher the profound meanings embedded in various forms of human psychosocial expression in boundary phases. It especially makes it possible to determine the rules for their encoding in situations of change. The signalisation of these principles based on Polish traditional folklore will be the main object of the present discussion.

I distinguish two varieties of liminality: *natural liminality*, based on the law of periodicity which governs the Cosmos (its cyclical renaissance and decay[2]), and *occasional liminality* (which applies to the order of the human world and its fate). This distinction arises from human ontology and the mutual relations between humans and the Cosmos, which guarantee the secure existence of the individual, both in the wider world and within his or her own community. A "folk" philosophy of time must be considered in order to understand these relations. It includes issues of the primary motives of human action and existence. This philosophy, embedded in folkloric texts, points to the instrumental role of the category of time as the organiser of all human conduct, and is expressly emphasized by the Polish proverb "time is the master of this world" (Brzozowska-Krajka 1984–85). The canon of ritualised magical and religious observations is released by awareness of the nonhomogeneous structure of time (units of time with a differentiated valorisation in the minor and major solar cycle, period, year); by the necessity for "turns of the wheel of time" (Koppers 1969); and by the constant crossing of its borders, which are a consequence of the periodic halting of the wheel of time (non-ordinary time, holy time). These observations guarantee a safe transition to the normal passage of time as represented by Leach's diagram (1961:134):
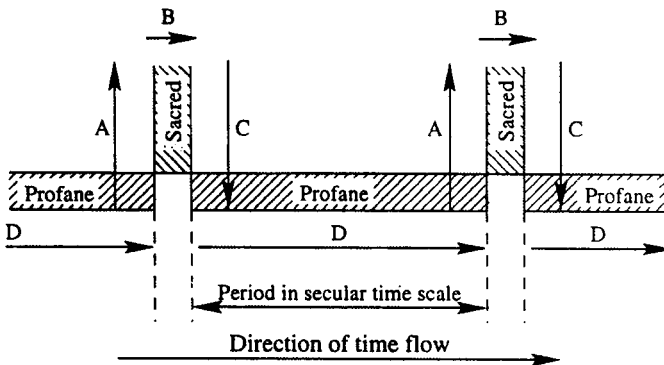
The threshold and boundary phases, with multifaceted characteristics, pose the greatest threat to the subject of transition (the individual), who may remain "betwixt and between" and deprived of his previous status. At the same time, these phases include pure potency

and power. They represent the most important period for evoking and maintaining cultural creativity, for the projection of the future and the achievement of a new, higher status (Turner 1975, 1992:153). The liberation of these powers, as the main aim of every transition ritual, has been made possible by familiarity with the rules of communication in relations between humans and the Cosmos (transcendence, God) and between fellow humans.

With regard to natural liminality, these rules were encoded in verbal and nonverbal folkloric texts as elements of ritual code, subordinated to the boundaries of time. They pointed to the need for transitions to be simultaneous in the cosmic and social planes, and then to the principle of dual coding, taking into consideration the actual moment of transition. It is the situationally dual transition that determined the logic of the verbal code and created the situational stability of its reproduction, i.e., the recurrence of these very texts ascribed to certain chronoacts.[3] All sorts of signs, symbols, and signals (both on the verbal and the nonverbal levels) have been subordinated to this logic, simultaneously fulfilling the function of "transition operators." No crossing of the boundary between the worlds could do without them. At the same time we should note the functional identity of the verbal and nonverbal codes within a given chronoact and the isofunctional natures of word and action within the verbal folk ritual (verbal text as a component of the ritual act). For, in accordance with the statement by anthropologists researching the magic of languages, in societies aware of myths, language is the method of action and not the instrument of thought (Malinowski 1981). From the point of view of magical thought the *verbum* is equivalent to the operation, i.e., the action as a utilitarian act. The assumption that word and action are functionally equivalent ritual components in societies is equivalent to saying that speech and operation are equally material from the perspective of the magical subject (Kamiński 1988). The same logical-grammatical formula applies to the construction of both ritual acts seen as a whole (multicoded communication) and component verbal texts. The formula runs as follows: "condition—result": if A then B, or, A so that B. In other words, the subject says "A" in order to get B (Tsyvyan 1993:114-15).

We will demonstrate the principle of dual coding through the example of the rhetorical roles of two metaphorical images embedded in genres which accompany times of transition: the cross in private prayers ascribed to the individual transition in the minor solar cycle (time, microstructure), and the tree in the farmers' folk carol (good wishes) localised in the Christmas ritual complex (year, macrostructure).

The motif of the cross is part of the permanent benchmark of texts with a magical function in situations of change, both in Polish folklore and East Slavic folklore. As the most powerful symbol of Christianity it becomes an instrument of mediation, implying the transfiguration of reality on the boundary of time. It is a type of creative response to the overall situation in which the subject of transition has found him- or herself.[4] The perception of its significance arises from its religious nature and also from magical faith in the divine source of power. In the case of the evening chronoact in the minor solar cycle, this motif constitutes the main element of the symbolic phraseology of private prayers, with the initial deictic formulation "I'm going to bed" accompanying the evening home ritual. For example:

> Ide spać, ni mom se co posłać,
> Pościele se święto wangielijo,
> Świętym krzyzykiem sie przyodzieje;
> Ciebie, szatanie, sie nie boje
> Idźcie źli
> Wyganiojciez śtyrych kątów, piątych drzwi!
> Bo tu bedzie nocowała Najświętszo Panienka,
> Z dwunastoma aniołami
> Tak mi we dnie, jak i w nocy,
> Bedzie zawsze ku pomocy.

> I am going to bed, I don't have anything to make it with
> It will be made with the Holy Gospel
> It will take shape with the Holy Cross
> You, Satan, I'm not afraid of.
> Go, evil ones,
> Get out through four corners, five doors
> For the Most Holy Virgin will pass the night here
> With twelve Angels
> Thus, both by night and day
> She will always be here to aid me.[5]

This genre primarily encodes the information regarding the specific details of the chronoact: natural liminality and the consequences of this phase for the subject of transition. The individual is excluded from the society of the living, remaining in a state of stagnation, deprived of status (lack of marking), and is exposed to the danger ascribed to darkness (state of chaos, lack of order). The apotropeic function of the cross as insulation from evil powers—"I will take shape by this cross (magical cover)"—signifies cutting off the liminal subject from the four corners of the world (the opposition open/closed is one of the main parameters of liminality). In these prayers that function is linked with the creative and codifying function on two levels: on the social level, through God's *mysterium crucis*, implying the new status of the human being after the phase of sleep (symbolic death, the time of the beginning embedded in the time of the end), and on the cosmic level, the sign of the cross as the signal of the vertical and horizontal structuralisation of the world—*imago mundi*, including the most important elements of the traditional idea of the world, its form and organisation.

Thus the dynamic foundations of this symbol correspond perfectly to the idea of time of transition, making it an inalienable element of the morning chronoact as well: its verbal component, i.e., morning prayers, which are in essence a repeated swearing of a time of a good beginning. The principle by which the majority of morning prayers are structured with the initial phrase "The sun rises on Sunday morning" is parallel to the sacrifice of the cross and the fate of mankind:

W niedzielę rano, gdy słoneczko wschodzi
Najświętszo Panienka po ziemi chodzi
I swojego Synaczka za rączke wodzi
Wodzi Go po górach i lasach
Po gorących kamieniach
Cierpiał On rany za chrześcijany,
Cierpiał On trud za chrześcijański lud.
Niebieskie dzwony zadzwoniły,
Niebiosa się otworzyły.
Otworzył się Boży grób,
Obejrzał się miły Bóg na mizernego człowieka.
Mizerny człowiecze, co ty potrebujesz?
Potrzebuje letkiego skonania,
Po śmierci dusznego zbawienia.

> The sun rises on Sunday morning
> The Most Holy Virgin walks the earth
> And leads her Young Son by the hand
> Leads Him by mountain and forest
> On hot stones
> He suffered wounds for the Christians
> He suffered hardship for the Christian people
> The heavenly bells rang out
> The heavens opened
> God's grave opened
> God looked at the poor man
> Poor man, what do you need?
> I need an easy death
> And after death spiritual salvation.
>
> (Kotula 1976:119)

These texts, modelled on the essence of liturgical prayer, simply refer to the passion and death of Christ as a figurative reminder of the drama of redemption, the symbolic recreation of life on the threshold of a new day. However, the intentionality of this chronoact also grants the symbol of the cross another function: the magical opening which makes possible the aggregation with the community of the living. This idea in private prayers constitutes an essential element of inceptive magic. Its presence in the early phase of liminality becomes transparent, especially seen through the Christian optic of the Cross-gate: Jesus said: "I am the door. By me if any man enter in, he shall be safe" (John 10.9). These semantics may be related to the primary ideas of the symbolic birth of the sun: rising in the morning light, it is born anew, and it enters the gateway moving upwards to heaven. Thus, Christianised prayers evoke archetypal symbols. In accordance with the principle of semantic proportion and isomorphism, the plan of the Cosmos is linked to the plan of anthropogenesis, the creation of mankind in the twenty-four-hour symbolic recreation of cosmogony.

We observe the same principle of dual coding on the boundaries of time in the form of the tree in New Year folk carols offering good wishes, beginning with the phrase "There is a pine standing in the middle of the yard, hallelujah, hallelujah" (Southern Poland, noted in Świętek 1983:76; cf. Tomicka and Tomicki 1975):

Stoi sosna srod podworca
Na tej sośnie twój pożytek rośnie
A w spodku becka smoły
A w środku jare pscoły,
A na wierzchu stery kola
W kazdym kole po sokole. . . .

There is a pine standing in the middle of the yard
Your nectar is growing on that pine
And there is a barrel of tar on the bottom
And angry bees in the middle
And four wheels on top
And a falcon on every wheel. . . .

or "There is an apple tree standing in the middle of the yard" (Lublin, noted in Bartmiński (1986:117)):

W środku podwórecka stoji jabłonecka
Podaj podaj, Maniu, rącke, mojaś kochanecka.
Rącejka podaje, serce ji sie kraje:
Nie odjeżdżaj, mój Jasieńku, za dalekie kraje:
A jak mnie odjedziesz, Boże ci błogosław,
Tylko ty mi sto talary na trzewicki zostaw
Zostawie zostawie sto talary bite,
Bedzies miała te trzewicki samym złotem szyte.

There is an apple tree standing in the middle of the yard;
Stretch, stretch out your hand, Mania, my bonnie love.
She reaches out and her heart aches:
Don't leave, my bonnie Jasieńko, for distant lands,
And may God bless you if you leave me,
Just leave a hundred talers for my shoes.
I will leave, I will leave a hundred talers,
You will have these shoes sewn with gold itself.

Here as well, as in private prayers, we must deal with the symbolic repetition and the same model of ordering the cosmos: the cosmic tree and the projection of human fate—the tree of life. The tree growing in the centre of the world puts the world into order *(axis mundi)* and combines all its parts. It is an important element of cosmological myths, pointing to the substance of all things, and it is the implication of the creation myth. On the mythological level it is the universe itself and

presents the principle of its organisation.[6] It expresses the division
into three zones as well as the four sides of the world symbolised in
texts from southern Poland by wheels, birds, or apples. The tree that
figures in this carol is at the same time a tree of life, illustrating the
periodic regeneration of the world, a symbol of inexhaustible fertility,
and the image of the rebirth of dead vegetation. As well, the biblical
identification of the human order came about as a consequence of
eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The
connection between the etymology of this word and the cultural
function ascribed to the denoted subject points to the implication being
created in the liminal phase of the projection of the future embedded
in the motif of the tree. Its Indo-European etymology points to a
connection with the concept of "health." Compare, for example, the
Polish *zdrowy* and Russian здоровый (< *sъ +doru-, an ablaut
grade of the root *deru/doru/dru [dreu/drou]), which mean "healthy";
as well as the Polish *drzewo* and Russian дерево (< *deru-), "tree";
Russian дрова (< *dru-) "firewood"; and the Czech phrase *je zdravý
jako dub*, "He is healthy as an oak" (The Polish *silny jak dąb* means
"as strong as an oak").[7]

    In folk axiology health was assigned the highest value, a sign of
life essential in a boundary time, being a projection of new time/new
year. Thus it is not by chance that these two figures—the cross *(imago
mundi)* and the tree *(arbor mundi)*—have been entered into texts of
natural liminality. They are essentially isomorphic: the cross set up
on Golgotha (the central and initial point) is another version of the
Cosmic Tree (cf. Roux 1995:391). These image-symbols constitute
the transponents of supreme power. They have been boiled down to
the level of an "indicative" symbol—albeit a symbol with mythical
sacral force lodged in it—through the objectifying of their reality and
their loss of transcendency.

    Thus, the periodically repeated symbolic new creation of the world
and humankind—the magical repeated prayers of life in the cosmic
and social levels—is the main function of the verbal code of natural
liminality. It also takes place in occasional situations of change. These
include the rites of passage, fundamental for human life, linked to
changes in status of the subject—birth, marriage, and death—but also
to other situations of change, such as travel or sickness, that develop

according to the three-phase model based on the temporal metaphor. In each of these situations liminality is the border between symbolic death and life, which requires a new creation on every occasion. Its signs connote the texts accompanying it and leading to the raising of the transitional subject's status. Thereby, encoding meanings of texts of occasional liminality takes the principal direction—it is a social transition. The desire to achieve an essential stabilization of the subject of transition may be defined on the verbal level through various strategies determined by the quality of the situation of change. We will indicate the rules governing the strengthened mental operations in the verbal code of occasional liminality based on the example of a crisis situation, which sickness undoubtedly is.

The opposition health/sickness derives from the fundamental opposition of life/death. The direction of change leading to convalescence means a transition from the state of apparent death, chaos, disturbance of the natural order, antistructure—timelessness (cf. the parameters of liminality)—to a new life, order, arrangement, structure: social time. The antistructural liminality of a sick person signified his reduction to a select *prima materia* requiring a new structuring, a new identity, and renewed personalization, as the situation was before his sickness (see Turner 1992:136). This potency is embedded in the myth providing the possibility of "making the world," i.e., involvement in the holy game through ritual recital or playing—as if recreating the first history (cf. Doty 1986:15). And it is this paradigmatic nature of the myth (mythical time) that was at the source of beliefs and magical ritual practices (verbal and actional) in "threshold" situations. We find it in Polish and East Slavic complex magic acts (magic medicine), for which they constitute a type of metalanguage. The liminal gnosis enclosed therein abounds in signals pointing to strength: pure power to transcend the primary status of the individual, in accordance with the primary rhythm creation (health), destruction (sickness), renewed creation (convalescence). Let us note a Polish phraseologism with the unequivocally defined addressee, including the wish to *return* to health. This microform with the formulaic nature finds its development and rationalisation in complex magic acts in which the verbal text constitutes just one of the codes

considered a virtual commentary on ritual practices (cf. Libera 1995:56).

Based on existing Polish ethnographic and folkloric recordings from the nineteenth century and later (Biegeleisen 1929; *Dzieła* 1961), the strategies of transforming—with the implications of this "return"— may be shown without difficulty. First of all, we should note the main principle of the symbolic code of the texts of complex magic acts: the expansion of ideas of movement and wandering as an obligatory anticipation of signs of life in the liminal phase, as well as the form of the magical opening in a situation of "linking." (Compare ideas about sickness as the "bonds of death," as well as the Polish proverb that a healthy man should anticipate sickness and a sick man should anticipate death; see Krzyżanowski 1973:853.) This idea is revealed on many levels of structure of shamanistic prayer texts, albeit within the plane of illustration and of linguistic forms. Polish and Ukrainian prayers in particular abound in images of God and the Saints, evoking this aspect of their attribution. Very often the idea of movement is also strengthened by forms of the categorical imperative directed toward the demon of sickness that directly indicate descending movement: go out, go, run away, go down, etc.

We can directly observe the vehicular function of the ritual played out in a liminal situation in the strategies of "returning," to its beginnings, constituting the essence of the liminal code of complex magic acts. These strategies are based on laws of analogy, participation, and metonymy, as well as metaphor. I describe them on a broader foundation in a 1999 work (315–22). The magical language of shamanism (and all other types of the liminal phase) clearly points to its logic, which serves not so much the passing on of information as the creation of the desired reality: the modelling of the new status of the subject of transition. I consider this modelling function of verbal and non-verbal texts in a situation of natural and occasional liminality to be absolutely central, and I would strongly argue against differing positions. This view converges with the positions taken by other researchers into ritual practices (see Bell 1992:111–12).

Of the many strategies for achieving a "nil" position (zero) that appear in the verbal code of complex magic acts, the most simple was

the strategy based on the principle of reduction, i.e., "reversion backwards." This could be accompished by taking a word or number and reducing it to nothing; an example from Central Poland would be eliminating a tumour under the jaws (described as a turtle) by counting, "There was a turtle here, it had nine wives, from nine to eight, from eight to seven, from seven to six, from six to five, from five to four, from four to three, from three to two, from two to one, and from one to zero, and may you disappear yourself" (Biegeleisen 1929:52).

The precedents of "sacred history," especially those evoking the myth of the resurrection of the dead, etc., would also be considered a guarantee of the desired change. Various transformations and transfigurations of biblical or apocryphal stories in shamanistic prayers point to the problem, also well known in the context of magical East Slavic folklore, of so-called dual faith (двоеверие)—the harmonious coexistence of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, and the magical valorisation of Christian decorum for achieving a concrete goal in a crisis situation.

The magical-religious foundations of texts in "threshold" situations arose from their central creative function (projection of time, new status) both in situations of natural and occasional liminality. Thence their inclusion in verbal forms of a performative nature (the act of speech expressing the action of creating reality in a special way which is to come, and in a defined form) should also be recognised as an invariant feature of the ethnopoetics of genres specific to a situation of change. In such circumstances, however, a question is raised of a more general nature: can we talk of the logocentrism of ritualised behaviours in connection with this particular role of the verbal code assigned to situations of change? For Polish and Slavic ritual folklore the answer is certainly "Yes," as "In the Beginning was the Word" (John 1.1).

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] For productive situations as such, and not differing at a given moment, as a socially objectified communications structure maintaining the internal cohesion of the social group, see Sulima 1977.

[2] In Polish and Slavic traditional folk culture the Cosmos is considered a living entity that is born, develops, and dies. Its existence is governed by the same sort of laws and principles as human life. The life of the Cosmos is a chain built out of a number of temporal segments, which are split by periods of qualitative transformation). See Czerwińska 1984.

[3] I take the concept of chronoact to mean permanent patterns of conduct fixed in tradition and subordinated to significant divisions of time. Cf. also Gacak 1989: 9–24, Топосы длительности ["Topoi of Permanence"] and хроноакты ["chronoacts"].

[4] This feature of the symbol "as instrument of mediation" is properly emphasised by Waardenburg (1980:44–45).

[5] Kotula 1976:112 [hereafter Kot Znp]. This collection contains the most extensive Polish collection of private prayers.

[6] Cf. the entry "drzewo" in Kowalski 1998:94–97.

[7] This semantic development is also found elsewhere in Indo-European with the same root; cf. (Germanic) English *tree* (< Old English *treow* < *dreu, also *true*; cf. German *treu*—"faithful, loyal"); Old English *trum*—"strong, healthy" (< *dru); Greek (Argive) δρωον—"strong" (< *drou-); (Iranian) Avestan *duruva* —"healthy"; (Celtic) Welsh *derw* —"oak"; Scottish Gaelic *dearbh* —"certain, true" (< *deru). See, e.g., Trautmann 1923:53; Pokorny 1973 II:90; Sławski 1979:54–57.

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