

Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska

Department of Folklore
University of Łódź

Polish Folklore

1. Definition of folklore and its modern meaning

A definition of folklore as formulated in UNESCO documents goes as follows: Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of traditionbased creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts.

The definition underlines the significance of cultural and social identity. Thus, folklore – as a form of cultural expression and socio-cultural heritage – must be safeguarded by and for the group (national, regional, ethnic, religious etc.) whose identity it expresses.

In the time of globalization and an enormous expansion of popular culture, the living folklore is an important element of cultural diversity, identity and heritage of different nations and ethnic groups.

For this reason, folklore courses offered at different levels of education help in understanding the ideas of tolerance and various world-views. In the modern world, traditional folklore may become not only a democratic counterweight to high and mass culture but also an instrument for better understanding of the cultural diversity at a local and global level.

2. Polish folk culture -a historical outline

Polish national culture consists of three systems: high (elite) culture, mass or popular culture, and folk culture. High culture is created by artists, writers, scholars and ideologists for well-educated people, especially those of refined artistic taste, who are intellectually prepared to understand its contents.

Mass culture is destined for general society. Its contents and forms are accepted by a Majority of urban inhabitants and a great number of modern rural population. To understand this type of culture its recipients need neither higher education nor particular intellectual capacity. Mass culture appears in everyday life in the form of popular television programmes and films, pop music, press tabloids, advertisements, internet communications etc.

The third system is the folk culture created for ages by peasantry for its own needs. Peasants were both creators and consumers of oral and musical folklore, traditional customs and rites, handicrafts, folk arts, traditional dress and vernacular material culture. It was only in the 20th century that a process of slow decline of traditional folk culture began giving way to an introduction of popular culture into the life of rural society.

The three systems described above can hardly be isolated either in the past or in modern times, because Polish national heritage has been formed by three socio-cultural currents associated with rural, gentry and urban strata.

The historical process of creation of Polish folk culture began in early Middle Ages by its divergence from ethnic culture and formation of its separate nature resulting from class differences typical of feudal society throughout decline of feudalism. Folk culture in Poland was basically a peasant culture. It was as early as the 13th century that emergence of an elite culture of feudal lords could be observed, based partly on cosmopolitan elements. It was characterised, among others, by its own, distinctive ethos.

The peasant culture, however, was ethnically Polish and originated within the family of Slavonic languages, though Christianity introduced many new elements into it. In the 14th century, a new current emerged

-city culture, which was linked to a separate social class and a different ecological milieu. The separateness of the currents was visible in the dress and in ceremonial costumes, for example. In musical culture only two currents emerged: a folk and a courtly one.

In the period of serfdom (from the 16th to the 18th century) peasant culture underwent significant impoverishment due to a steady worsening of peasants' economic position and socio-legal situation. Cities and their bourgeois culture were in decline due to constant wars. The village was cut off from the world and cast down to the level of an almost self-contained economy. In its culture, therefore, distinctive features of external influences could not be seen.

During Saxon times the general intellectual level of the petty and middle gentry deteriorated. The basic forms and contents of social and spiritual culture of these strata did not differ much from those of the peasants. Differences were visible mainly in the material culture. While the elite feudal culture began to undergo rapid changes already in the second half of the 18th century, the peasant culture preserved its archaic character deep into the 19th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, great positive changes took place in the peasant culture. The rapid and vivid development of peasants' life and folk creativity at that time was due to the abolition of serfdom and the introduction of agrarian reforms. It should be stressed that the living conditions of village population improved then. Fully developed were also regional folk customs and rites of the family and annual cycles. There was blossoming of all types of folkarts, handicrafts, oral and musical folklore as well. However, traditional folkbeliefs, superstitions, religious and magical world-view continued unchanged.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, a process of a gradual decline of folk culture began, first seen in the domain of material culture. Vanishing of ancient types of vernacular architecture, folk costumes, folk handicrafts etc. Was followed by decay in forms of social practice (a reduction of ritual activity) and finally in the intellectual domain. In the more conservative regions of the country these changes did not begin until after the World War I.

The transformation of the folk culture after the World War II was not only due to general cultural levelling, improvement of education and technology or democratisation of social life, but was a consequence of country's industrialisation and growth of cities that caused peasants' migration to big towns.

One should also take into consideration that after the World War II political borders of the Polish state changed; Eastern territories were lost, while Northern and Western lands were incorporated and settled anew with settlers from various ethnographic regions. In these areas, a characteristic clash took place of regional cultural traditions that had been brought into the new environment. A process of inter-cultural exchange, adaptation and integration began leading to cultural assimilation along the borderlands that was accompanied by a chain of local inter-ethnic conflicts.

During the political time of the so-called socialism, different institutions were formed to supervise preservation, documentation and popularisation of Polish folklore. They worked under ideological and financial patronage of the state, mainly the ministry of Culture and Arts. They organised ethnographic and open-air traditional museums, folk craft fairs, folklore competitions and festivals as well as local and national folk ensembles. This type of activity was promoted under the slogan of cultural expression of Polish identity and folk unity.

The cultural policy of the state aimed to produce a national style based on traditions of folk culture. It was easy to observe development of spontaneous regional socio-cultural initiatives. The idea of folklore on the stage was cultivated by thousands of ensembles of more or less amateur character. Their activity received financial support mainly from the state budget. Three basic categories of folklore groups were distinguished based on form and content of their stage performance: authentic, regional (showing partially elaborated folklore) and stylised ones.

Since 1989 Poland has been undergoing a process of political, economic and cultural transformation. The transformation combined with globalisation phenomena and the informational revolution have caused shocking changes in the Polish society which had been used to a living in a welfare state for more than forty years. The changes involve, among others, a social feeling of personal and institutional economic instability, rising

unemployment and zones of poverty (also impoverishment in the countryside), relativity of values and norms, coming out into the open of ethnic Minorities, problems with forming civil society.

Political and economic decentralisation, limited funds for cultural activities, and an enormous impact of popular culture have caused a general change in the significance and popularity of folk culture. Thus, in the last decade, deeprooted folk culture existing hitherto has undergone a rapid transformation in both spiritual and material sphere. Under the influence of contemporary civilization and the socio-economic and mental changes the traditional skills and needs have been depreciated. Popularity of visual culture and digital media has led to people's cultural inactivity and other negative outcomes. Mass culture aims rather at educating consumers than at their active and creative participation in the continuation of local folk traditions.

In the new political system the problem of safeguarding, preserving and disseminating traditional folklore has arisen anew. Various critics and reviewers of the former system claim that the state policy focused on organisation of excessive number of folklore festivals which, in their opinion, were falling short of meeting public interest. Similar criticism has been aimed at former tendencies to organise different folk ensembles and at presumably artificial attempts to support folk artists and creators. Such claims seem unjust and exaggerated.

Nonetheless, the overall number of folk ensembles has been sharply reduced, especially those supported by trade unions and big industrial companies. Other folk groups have been facing problems of sponsorship and funding.

It should also be stressed that the protective role of the Society of Folk Creators and Artists has been dramatically limited, because – like other social organisations – the Society has to become a self-financing institution.

One cannot neglect the actual situation of CEPELIA, a co-operative enterprise that played an important role in the domain of folk art for more than fifty years. The company consisted of many small enterprises producing hand made folk textiles, crafts, pottery, furniture and souvenirs. The entire production was supervised by professional ethnographers. Products as well as unique folk paper-cuttings, wooden sculptures etc. were

created by folk artists from different regions and sold in a big chain of CEPELIA shops. Simultaneously, this profit making company endorsed a variety of cultural folk activities. Under its patronage many folk bands and ensembles were organised and numerous folklore festivals supported. It is worth mentioning that CEPELIA was a member of the World Handicrafts Council affiliated to UNESCO. Unfortunately, this big cooperative enterprise collapsed in 1990 and transformed into CEPELIA Foundation that operates under typical difficulties and limitations that caused the loss of its former important position.

In this situation, the main coordinator of folklore festivals remains the Polish Section of CIOFF (*Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d'Arts Traditionnels*). CIOFF works according to its charter and the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* undersigned by member states during the 25th General Conference of UNESCO held in Paris in 1989. The *Recommendation* is also well known to the ministry of Culture where a folklore expert has been nominated since 1992. The Polish Section of CIOFF presents its activities on a national website (<http://www.cioff.pl>).

Affiliated to the ministry is the Centre of Cultural Animation (*Centrum Animacji Kulturalnej, CAK*) The Centre's tasks concentrate on promotion, popularisation and documentation of lively folklore phenomena, e.g. folklore competitions and festivals as well as folklore amateur movements. The CAK has its own (Polish language) website (<http://www.folkart.pl>) with a link to folklore festivals. The list of site's links is as follows: home; architecture; choreography; gallery; cuisine; literature; museums; music; customs and rites; organisations; Polish diaspora; regions; regional costumes; folk arts; folk dances; traditions; tourism; folk artists; cultural events; folk ensembles.

3. Living traditions

In the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church in Poland introduced a customary calendar of sacred character. New feasts and ceremonies replaced old pagan rites and practices. Taking into account that old Polish

culture was of agriculture character, the annual customary calendar was strictly linked to the seasonal cycle of plant vegetation as well as climatic and astronomic phenomena.

At the same time, new holidays retained many elements of magic and amusement. Till nowadays, the traditional celebration of different feasts and holidays preserved the elements of local old, even pagan, beliefs of the peasantry.

Polish folk-customs and rites related to traditional feasts are more or less differentiated according to various ethnographic regions of the country. Nevertheless, there are many still living and universally celebrated traditions. The main ones are outlined next.

3.1. All Saints Day (1 November); all Souls Day (2 November)

Today, All Saints Day (a legal holiday) and All Souls Day are celebrated in very solemn manner in Poland. On both days, the Poles make pilgrimages to their local and far-distanced cemeteries. People decorate graves with chrysanthemums and autumn flowers and light up candles and votive lights.

When the graves are cleaned and decorated and countless flickering lights cast their shadows amidst the dusk, a mood is set for family gatherings and prayers for the deceased.

3.2. St. Andrew's Day (30 November)

St. Andrew's Day ends the church's year and leads directly into the Advent, the time of solemnity. That is why St. Andrew's Day is a day of gaiety, social gatherings, parties and dances. It is also a time of magic. On the 29th (St. Andrew's Eve) there is a tradition of fortune telling that sets the mood for an evening of merriment.

During evening gatherings people pour (through the hole of a door key) hot, melted wax into a bowl of cold water, and the hardened wax is then held up against the light. The shadow it casts on the wall is believed to reveal prospects.

This kind of fortune telling was traditionally concerned with girls' marriage prospects. Another popular custom on this day is for the girls to toss their shoes to the floor. The first shoe to go over the threshold is that of the girl who will supposedly get married ahead of others.

3.3. St. Nicholas Day (6 December)

St. Nicholas Day brings a slight reprieve to monotonous days, especially to children who feel that the Christmas Star and Angel's gifts will never arrive. St. Nicholas has been revered because of his love for orphans whom he often visited with little gifts.

Formerly, St. Nicholas was dressed in a robe of regal purple and gold, wearing a bishop's hat, and carrying a crossier, a symbol of episcopal office. He blessed the children and gave away goodies to well behaved children, and wishes to the naughty. The belief was that he was living in Heaven.

Actually, St. Nicholas Day is a day of mutual exchange of small gifts, mainly among children.

3.4. Christmas Eve (24 December)

Christmas Eve (Polish word *wigilia* – from Latin *vigilare* – “to watch”) is greeted with such mystical symbolics that it is considered by most a greater holiday than Christmas itself.

The Christmas Eve dinner has a very specific character, and although some customs connected with it vary in different parts of Poland, the importance of this day is observed across the whole country.

The day itself had mystical and mythical significance since it followed the longest night and the shortest calendar day. It was considered the last day of the passing year and would prophesise everything that was to happen in the forthcoming year. A custom arising from the past was the belief that spirits pervaded the home on this day. The rules were to behave peacefully, dress and keep the home clean in order to have peace and prosperity in the coming year.

Formerly, the top of the spruce or pine was hung from a beam in the ceiling. In addition, villagers laid a bundle of straw in the corner of a room. With time that tradition has been replaced by a decorated Christmas tree (real or artificial).

Christmas Eve dinner seems to be the most important meal of the year. The table is covered with a white tablecloth under hay should be laid. The dinner is to begin with the appearance of the first star. On the table there is always an extra plate for an unexpected guest. After a prayer, the family exchange good wishes by sharing *Oplątek* (the Christmas wafer). A meatless meal begins afterwards.

According to Polish tradition there should be an uneven number (11 or 13) of dishes served. The most popular ones are: red borsch (a beetroot soup) – in the East, a mushroom soup – in central Poland or a fish one – in western parts of country. The rest of the meal is composed of cabbage, mushrooms, sauerkraut, beans, dumplings, herring, carp, dried fruit, poppy seed mix, raisins and nuts.

Throughout all of Poland, it is a time for the family to get together, to sing traditional carols and exchange Christmas gifts which are supposedly deposited by St. Nicholas (formerly – by Angel).

In the country, the period approaching midnight is still treated as a time of magic when animals talk and well water turns to wine. At midnight, many of Poles attend the so-called Shepherd Mass (*Pasterka*) at a local church.

3.5. Christmas (25, 26 December – legal holidays)

Christmas Day (December 25th) is traditionally spent within the family circle. At morning, people go to church, and afterwards join family gatherings. Christmas day has its traditional menu that includes ham, sausage, different kinds of meat and *bigos* (sauerkraut stew) followed by variety of cakes made from poppy seeds, cottage cheese or honey.

The following day (26th), formerly known as St. Stephan's Day is the traditional day devoted to courtesy visits when good wishes are exchanged with relatives and friends. It is also an official day for Christmas caroling to begin. The custom may last until the Feast of Purification (2nd February). The caroling is performed mainly by young boys that wear carnival dresses, sing carols and present a portable crib or manger scene carried from house to house. They greet people and are rewarded with sweets (formerly) or money.

3.6. The Feast of the three Kings (6 January)

The ceremony of the Epiphany is one of the old church feasts when the twelve days of Christmas season come to an end. It is also the traditional day to take down the Christmas tree.

On this day, religious people visit churches where chalk and myrrh are blessed. Whenever the initials K+M+B of the three wise men (Kaspar, Melchior and Balthazar) are seen written in chalk at the top of entrance door, it is evident that a Catholic family lives there.

After the Epiphany, a carnival begins lasting until Ash Wednesday that opens the forty days of Lent. The last Thursday of carnival is universally celebrated by social gatherings and special sweet and fat menu, mainly doughnuts and dry biscuits of fried paste.

3.7. Easter traditions (movable spring holidays)

Polish Easter customs have not changed much for centuries. Easter observances in Poland begin on Ash Wednesday when willow twigs are cut and placed in vases. If their buds open within a few days, it means a good omen for nice spring weather. These willow twigs known as “palms” are taken to the church on Palm Sunday in order to be blessed.

From Palm Sunday on, women and girls begin to collect eggs and decorate them according to local and/or family tradition. Eggs are painted in various artistic patterns and designs. A decorated egg is called *pisanka*.

On Thursday of the Holy Week, a ceremonial feet washing of 12 impoverished men takes place at the church (in memory of the Last Supper). On Good Friday (the second day of the Paschal Triduum) there is a universally accepted general lent. For many it is a day without meat, for the very religious ones – a day of water and dry bread only.

On Good Friday and Saturday, town people visit various churches to view Christ's sepulchres artistically arranged and decorated with flowers. During Paschal Triduum all church bells are silenced; they resume ringing on Saturday at midnight, heralding the risen Lord.

On Holy Saturday, families go to church with *święconka*, i.e. Wicker baskets filled with decorated eggs, white sausage, ham, bread, pastry, salt

and pepper to be blessed by the priest. The time of Lent is over, though fasting is observed until the Resurrection Mass.

On Easter Sunday, families start celebration with a ceremonial breakfast. Blessed eggs, a symbol of life, are sliced and everyone present takes a piece and wishes the others good health and prosperity (egg sharing).

The breakfast menu consists of white borsch, ham, boiled white sausage, veal or poultry and eggs. There is also a great number of typical Easter pastries like "Easter baba", cheesecake, buns and "mazurkas". The table is decorated with miniature yellow chickens made from cotton wool as well as chocolate hares and sugar lambs.

On Easter Monday (also a legal holiday), there still exists a traditional custom called *śmigus-dyngus*. This custom of drenching others comes from the Middle Ages or even an ancient spring rite of cleansing, purification and fertility. Youngsters break the Easter's solemnity by a burst of frivolity and joy. Traditionally, the boys, after luring the girls out of the house, will douse them with water. The girls try to reciprocate, usually in kind and with limited success.

Nowadays, there are two versions of this custom: a rather elegant one, when only gentle sprinkling with water or scent takes place, and another, quite rough, when bucketfuls of water come into play. Although the latter custom is formally forbidden in cities, it is still in existence and restrains many people from walking the streets on that day.

The annual cycle traditions presented here are not fully comprehensive. Some important holidays have been omitted, e.g. Corpus Christi (in June), Feast of Greenery (*Matki Boskiej Zielnej* on 15 August) and the Harvest Holiday (*Dożynki* in August/September). Similarly, no mention has been made of *rites de passages*, traditions linked to the life cycle (birth, wedding and funeral) or other coincidental traditional behaviours, oral folklore (impossible for open interpretation) etc. Students interested in further studies are invited to attend author's folklore classes.