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## OPPOSITION "NATIVE – STRANGER" IN FOLK CULTURE (CHILDREN AND ELDERS IN POLISH FOLK CULTURE)

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**Annotation.** In Poland, regardless of the partition or ethnographic region, as well as in other rural cultures in the world, we can observe attitudes towards children and elders whose ambivalent character is typical of mythical paradigm. The youngest and the oldest members of rural societies were usually faced with antipathy or even aggression, as a result of negative attitudes towards their age and consequently, their social status. The former were immature – the latter were too feeble to be involved in life in society. Moreover, they had to be looked after and supported materially. Thus, they were placed on the borderline between live and death, and between the natural and the supernatural. They were perceived not only as members of society but also as mythical characters – intermediaries with the area of *sacrum* [1].

**Keywords:** children, elders, Polish folk culture, rural culture, myth, mythical paradigm

### Children in folk culture

Childhood, viewed as a state of innocence, pure and close to *sacrum*, is commonly perceived as extraordinary, as Heywood said in his *History of childhood*. Philippe Ariès claims that in some periods of history children weren't treated as an independent social type. Karolina Smoleńcówna, trying to characterize the attitude of nineteenth century peasants towards their offspring said: "A child from the moment it learns to walk is almost totally left in its own" [9, 61]. Indifference towards children could be explained by high mortality rate. A research by Kacprzak, *Więś płocka. Warunki bytowania*, shows that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century infant mortality on rural areas amounted to 20% – 30%, even as late as mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, baptized children who died at an early age were believed to go straight to heaven. Why should we take interest in creatures for whom the earth was not a real home and whose being in heaven was a blessing for the family?

In rural culture, child was commonly treated as workforce [5, 29]. Children worked mainly as shepherds. They were gradually introduced to this task. First, by looking after hens – by four or five- year- olds, then looking after geese – by six or seven- year olds, then pasturing pigs and cows at the age of eight [3, 148]. Young shepherds worked individually or in groups. Children also often worked as servants. They had also other duties depending on season (for example harvest), region and social conditions. Upbringing boiled down to, according to peasants, providing children with clothing, food, and preparing them for work. [2, 75]. Parents were happy that children started working for their food. The rhythm of a rural child's life, strictly integrated with its parents' work, shortened the time of childhood. It was also true about playtime, which was reduced because of numerous duties. Basic children's needs were given less importance than necessary duties. Even lullabies could contain information concerning duties awaiting a child in future. On one hand, it led to deterioration of health conditions among children, on the other hand, it contributed to forming an image of a child as socially unwanted.

In mythical paradigm, children, who were placed near biological and socio-cultural borders, had a trace of strangeness [6; 7, 17]. It contributed to their ambivalent status, where social ostracism towards them was paired with conviction about their supernatural character [2]. Especially orphans were

associated with the supernatural. Situated on the peripheries of the human world, they were commonly recognized as perfect intermediaries with the other world as we can read in *Śmierć w obrzędach, zwyczajach i wierzeniach ludu polskiego* by Biegeleisen. It was believed that they were under a special care of Mother Mary and Jesus, or even their dead biological mother.

They were also assigned a different status because of certain physical features. A baby with anatomical anomalies (e.g. number of organs or their shape) was considered extraordinary not only in its physicality but also far beyond it. For example, a child who came to this world with teeth was considered demonic. Although it was believed that the child would be extremely lucky in its temporal life, parents usually counteracted such pathologies. If a newborn baby was found to be different in any way (e.g. extra fingers, crooked limbs), very often such anomalies were dealt with immediately after birth. It was believed that the processes of cutting or straightening were supposed to be effective before the first bath, when the baby was still warm and flexible [11, 360]. Any instance of lack or excess stood against the principles of the human world, introducing the supernatural dimension. Children were also the object of interest for creatures of the other world. Continuously crying children were seen as victims of the supernatural. Crying, as it was believed, could be caused by spirits. The conviction of the supernatural character of babies' cry is confirmed by numerous magical treatments whose record we can trace as recently as in 1960s [10, 70-71].

A baby whose behavior was untypical was often treated as a changeling, which is exemplified in Biegeleisen's studies on mother – child relation in folk societies. This could be recognized by several symptoms: the ability to speak, excessive eating (e.g. the leftovers), ugliness (e.g. enormous head, goggling eyes). It was similar to its supposedly real mother – 'boginka' or 'mamuna'. Parents shouldn't have mercy over the changeling; they should beat it and starve until the demon took it away and give the mother her real baby back, as shown by Dworakowski in *Zwyczaje rodzinne w powiecie wysoko-mazowieckim*. It was believed that the sacrament of baptism could undo the evil done by the demon.

Until the day of baptism, a child was protected by religious articles (scapular, rosary) or different magical objects such as a piece of steel. The sacrament of

baptism made a child a member of the local community – it was no longer treated as a stranger. At the same time, the custom of choosing the name of saint patrons points to the interconnection of the human with the supernatural. The association of children with the realm of the supernatural is further emphasized by different apparitions of Mother Mary, where most visionaries were children (Fatima, Lourdes, La Salette). Currently, there are available publications on children's association with sacrum. In a simple but convincing way, the children relate their encounters with saints and experience of heaven.

### Elders in folk culture

Ethnologists claim that elders were given some divine status in tribal cultures. Dyczewski, in his study on elderness, states that divinities were thought of as old creatures, although full of strength and wisdom. Of course, it is an idealized viewpoint. It is known that in Polish folk culture the elders were neglected, marginalized and often made homeless. Those contradictory approaches could be combined. The old age was associated with unproductivity and thus it was despised [4]. At the same time it was viewed as the process of dying, which is the transition to the other world. And the other world, or the supernatural, has always evoked feelings fear and respect. Some communities both hated their elders and at the same time treated them well, for fear of evil spirits' vengeance. It is illustrated in *Oblicza starości* by Lehr.

Many images created by historians of culture and 19th century painters that showed positive aspects of the old age were not realistic, as far as Polish rural life is concerned. Only those elders who were given help by their families or were particularly affluent could enjoy respectful life. Those less affluent tried to 'postpone' their entering into the old age (so to speak), as it would mean social vegetation for them. It was common that the poor, especially those that were incapable of physical work, were forced to become beggars [1, 121]. Agricultural reforms in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century gave elders some stability. People who were no longer capable of hard physical work had the right to so called 'life provision'. If parents gave one of their children their property, the child was legally obliged to take care of the parent, allocate a piece of land for them, provide place to stay, food and clothing. It was better if such contract was authenticated by a notary – otherwise children would often be reluctant to keep their commitment. No matter if the person stayed with their relatives, strangers or at the hospital, their social status was usually relegated. It also happened that the relatives were so determined to take over the whole property, that they disregarded official authenticated contracts and banished their elderly parents from the household. In order to avoid that, the oldest children (future heirs) were sometimes sent to work or serve away from home [8, 278]. Parents would even prefer to employ paid servants in their place. There was also a custom of bequeathing the property to the youngest child so that the father of the family would enjoy the ownership of his property as long as possible – thus keeping his respectful position. This situation was also reflected in folk poetry, which shows instances of throwing elderly parents away from home by the oldest

children, and instances of positive attitude towards their parents from the youngest ones [popular motive of King Lear]. Folk literature also provides examples of murdering elder parents. However, those instances cannot be easily verified. Some historians and folklorists claim that such stories were rather inspired by precautionary sermons of the clergy, which were meant to counteract the negligence of elders in society.

The attitude towards elders was largely determined by traditional thinking based on dichotomy 'the self – the other'. According to that, an old man could be perceived as an amazing counselor, a strange creature, or an enemy equipped with magical powers [12, 547-553]. In traditional cultures, blind, murmuring elders were treated as oracles with the right to judge, as it was believed, objectively and impartially. At the same time, they were treated with reserve and hostility, how Nelson is marking in *Ageism. Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons*. Different physical shortcomings typical of the old age, such as boldness, qualified elders as a part of the demonic world. They were accused of witchcraft. Sometimes encounter with them was considered to be a bad omen. People would avoid contact with elders e.g. before setting off for a journey or before going hunting. Those attitudes were a result of an adopted mindset, where sick or decrepit individuals were left on their own or sentenced to death [14, 133]. We also currently have access to folk stories dealing with this subject. [see Kolczyński J., *Ofiara z człowieka. Wspomnienie trzech wydarzeń z końca XIX i początków XX wieku w podgórskich wsiach w Polsce*]. It was done through the solidarity of a social groups, for whom e.g. the perspective of famine was a sufficient justification for such action. When the existence of the group was in danger, old and decrepit people would leave the village to die in solitude. Letting elders die on their own could also be strictly culturally motivated. Existence was viewed as a cycle, and death was a prerequisite for life to continue. It is illustrated by numerous ethnographical studies e.g. from Asia.

Elders, as they were heading towards the end of life, were placed in a borderline area, and thus they were in the same social space as children, whose borderline character resulted from being at the beginning of their lives. We can observe this phenomenon in rural culture. Old women, called wise-ones, were asked to help deliver a baby; they were also allowed to touch dead bodies. Children, on the other hand, were believed to help souls to go to heaven, by their presence, prayer and sacrifice. This is especially true about orphans. A newborn baby, as well as a dying person, was often placed on the ground or under the table, as these places were believed to have magical properties. Water from the first and the last bath of a person was given special treatment – e.g. it could not be simply thrown away (there used to be special customs). Both a dead body and the body of a child before birth needed a carrier. For the baby, the womb was a carrier; for dead body, it was a coffin [13, 277]. The existence of children and elders also intersected in the area of work: they would graze cattle together, pick fruit and mushrooms. Representatives of both of these borderline groups were present in rites connected with the new year – a child

symbolized the new year, while a person dressed as an elder – the old year.

Children at the beginning and elders at the end of life, because of their place within a social group, and a set of features attributed to them, had an ambivalent identity, which reflected the rudiments of rural life. They were both 'the self' and 'the other' at the same time [3]. They had intermediary roles. Being at the peripheries, both in the social-economical and cultural aspect, the youngest and the oldest members of rural communities were faced with attitudes typical of the dichotomy of *sacrum*. They evoked both fascination and fear.

In Polish folk culture, a historically conditioned change of the approach towards the aforementioned issue can be observed. When village life was dominated by traditional cultural model, children and elders were perceived in an ambivalent way. The sacral context would engender positive, though fearful attitude towards them. On the other hand, the economic aspect would evoke negative emotions. They were treated with ostracism due to their unproductive age. Christian religion had little influence on these traditionally grounded attitudes which were devoid of sympathy or mercy. It is confirmed by peasants' diaries and ethnographical studies. The development of medical and social care for the poor (through a variety of organizations and institutions) had improved the living conditions of children and elders, lifting up the burden off families. The diaries also point to another reason for this improvement; namely, financial support from those members of families that had emigrated, especially to the USA. Some also took their elders abroad, so that they could take care of them. As a result, myth, which used to organize and unify rural existence, was beginning to lose its systematic character and was being reduced to isolated traces, gestures and testimonies, which have survived predominantly in folklore.

#### Notice:

[1] Some concepts and examples come from my PhD thesis *Mythical strangers. Children and elders in Polish folk culture of*

*the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, Toruń 2012. The dissertation was supervised by Violetta Wróblewska.

[2] Supposition that there is supernatural power within a child gives basis to numerous ritual practices, as shown by de Mause in *The History of Child Abuse or The Origins of War in Child Abuse*.

[3] A person with ambivalent status is, according to Perzanowski, a misfit [see *Odmieńcy. Antropologiczne studium dewiacji*].

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#### ОПОЗИЦІЯ «СВІЙ-ЧУЖИЙ» В НАРОДНІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ (ДІТИ І СТАРІ В ПОЛЬСЬКІЙ НАРОДНІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ)

Міфічна парадигма організованого сільського суспільства бере до уваги дихотомію світу внутрішнього – світу зовнішнього. Традиційна реальність в народній культурі була розтягнена між поняттями «свій» і «чужий», що визначало життя дітей і старих в сільських громадах. З одного боку, вони були типовими представниками своїх громад; з іншого боку, вони функціонували як особи, відокремлені від групи. Їх соціальна та економічна маргіналізація, що визначалась, серед іншого, їх непродуктивним віком, суперечила їх міфічній і сакральній валоризації. В статті підкреслюється ця подвійність. Стаття містить етнографічні та фольклорні матеріали, що відносяться до польської культури з кінця 19-го і початку 20 століття. Іноді, для наочності, наводяться дані з загальноєвропейської етнології, історії і також психологічних або соціологічних досліджень вікових груп.

*Ключові слова:* діти, старі, польська народна культура, сільська культура, міф, міфічна парадигма

Т. Калнюк

#### ОППОЗИЦИЯ «СВОЙ-ЧУЖОЙ» В НАРОДНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЕ (ДЕТИ И СТАРИКИ В ПОЛЬСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЕ)

Мифическая парадигма организованного сельского общества принимает во внимание дихотомію мира внутреннего и мира внешнего. Традиционная реальность в народной культуре была растянута между «своей» и «чужой», что определяло жизнь детей и стариков в сельских общинах. С одной стороны, они были типичными представителями своих общин, с другой стороны, они функционировали как лица, отделенные от группы. Их социальная и экономическая маргинализация, как результат, среди всего прочего, их непроизводительного возраста, сталкивается с их мифической и сакральной валоризацией. Статья подчеркивает эту двойственность. Она содержит этнографические и фольклорные материалы, относящиеся к польской культуре конца 19-го – начала 20 века. Иногда для наглядности, приводятся данные европейской этнологии, а также исторических исследований в рамках возрастных групп.

*Ключевые слова:* дети, старики, польская народная культура, миф, мифическая парадигма.