

Izabella Bukraba-Rylska,
Maria Wieruszewska,
Konrad Burdyka

Local Cultural Heritage in the Experience of Residents of Rural Areas
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This publication is a summary of research done by IRWiR PAN thanks to a grant funded by the National Science Centre (2014/13/B/HS2/00832). The main interest of the research team focused on local cultural heritage experienced by the inhabitants of four selected villages located in different parts of Poland: Białowieża in Podlasie area, Czarnia in Kurpie, Krobia in Wielkopolska and Prażmów near Warsaw. The research areas were chosen based on the criterion of regional difference, as well as based on historically developed specific features: Białowieża offered community which is diversified in terms of ethnicity and religion; Czarnia is a village where tradition is still cultivated and remains an important element of the daily lives of its inhabitants; Krobia (a small town which has got all the main cultural features of the entire Biskupizna micro-region) represents an example of tradition, most of which has been effectively institutionalized and thus petrified into a certain canon of folklore, which is cherished in the forms of reinstated folklore or even folklorismus (fakelore); and finally Prażmów located near a big city, is a type of village which is only currently seeking its tradition and reconstructing cultural resources held in the past.

The analyses had a few objectives. The first one was to present a fragment of contemporary cultural reality of local Poland from the point of view of perceptions (mental, sensual and physical ones) experienced by the inhabitants coming in touch with elements of the local culture rather than from the point of view of a cultural institution and its offer or traditionally understood participation in culture (attending cultural events, number of books read by individuals, etc).

The second objective of the project was to empirically verify the functionality and scope of awareness of a notion of 'cultural heritage' which is becoming more

and more popular and which, at least in official discourse, seems to prevail over hitherto used terms, such as tradition, culture or folklore. It was especially important to check the extent to which the notion of local cultural heritage can encompass less obvious truths and phenomena, i.e. those not commonly regarded as culture in the narrow sense of the word (such as local celebrities, events or anecdotes) and not yet “folklorised” (i.e. verbal tales and family customs, holiday celebration meals or landscape).

The third goal of the research was to consider an application of such an approach to culture reception which is different from hitherto applied. Thus, the study did not concern cultural knowledge, memory or cultural competences; neither has the notion of ‘awareness’ been exploited, which is often used in analyses of methods and level of participation in culture, or the term ‘cultural practices’ which has been used for some time now, as despite the impression that in this case it may be about behaviour treated bodily and physically, the studies of those ‘practices’ most often focus on the mental sphere, as they follow the ‘academic’ cognitive schema criticised so severely by Pierre Bourdieu, and thus they fit into the traditional humanistic paradigm, which is currently being contested universally. Instead, a much more promising category of ‘experience’ was applied, which is becoming more and more popular in contemporary humanities, and which – by encompassing a broader spectrum of human perceptions than just mental ones, allows hoping for a major change in the paradigms of such disciplines as anthropology, cultural studies, and even sociology.

The project had also the fourth objective, namely exploratory one, for the analysis was focused not only on mere ‘reality’, but also on methods of studying the latter. Making use of extensive application of the existing analytic tools and methods specific of a given domain, i.e. using them only for supplying subsequent descriptions of reality seems to be a rather dull task, which is also risky, especially if the reality (as the hitherto applicable paradigm) is in the process of fundamental change. Verifying and perfecting the existing terms, tools and methods, i.e. combining the substantive approach with the methodological one has to be equally important. Thus, the fourth objective, namely the exploratory one, related chiefly to an intention of testing analytic efficiency of the appliances used by the humanities in confrontation with a new perspective of the studied reality. It was chiefly about going beyond a narrowly understood ‘interpretation’ and ‘understanding’ of cultural meanings (which is traditionally the focus of anti-positivist oriented ‘spirit science’) and about supplementing the over-spiritualized and cognitivism-oriented perspective (most often referred to as knowledge, competence or taste) with the accompanying sphere of sensual and somatic components, as it seems that only all those testimonies together make up a holistic perception of culture.

The present volume, in which the results of studies on experiencing local cultural heritage by the inhabitants of selected localities are summarised, includes the following articles: the Introduction and theoretical considerations of the category of experience in contemporary humanities by Izabella Bukraba-Rylska (“Experiencing Local Culture – Goals and Conclusions” [*Doświadczenie kultury – propozycje teoretyczne*]) are followed by a sumptuous article by Maria Wieruszewska (“The Rural Cultural Landscape in Visual Perception” [*Krajobraz kulturowy wsi w percepcji wizualnej*])). The first part thereof is dedicated to the problem of space, as it is studied by the humanities. Thus, attention is paid to ocularcentrism – privileged in the European culture but also conditioned by evolution; the second part is a discussion of conclusions from analyses conducted during the study. In the Author’s opinion, particular attention should be dedicated to mental maps which order the local space according to ‘familiarized’ places – the favourite places of respondents, as well as those better to be avoided.

The next article written by Konrad Burdyka (“Group Games and Activities as an Element of the Cultural Heritage of Rural Poland” [*Gry i zabawy ruchowe jako element dziedzictwa kulturowego polskiej wsi*]) contains a discussion of problems which are rarely studied by cultural heritage researchers, namely the issue of traditional group games, featuring those played by children. It is worth to underline that the Author uses not only the data obtained from field studies, but also reconstructs theoretical and historic backgrounds, thus reminding completely forgotten studies by earlier generations of researchers, chiefly ethnologists who dealt with those issues. This attempt is valuable not only due to the observations which can be referred to contemporary analyses, but also from the point of view of the continuity of ‘historical’ reflection, which in the Polish sociology has for over a century been superseded and substituted by ‘logical’ continuity involving the absorption of fashionable trends from abroad rather than continuation of domestic research traditions.

In the subsequent chapter Izabella Bukraba-Rylska (“Local Culture in Experience” [*Kultura w doświadczeniu*]) discusses the results of a field study concerning broadly understood cultural heritage while drawing attention to local differences and a process of tradition dynamics, which helps divide the tradition dynamics process of each locality under study into specific stages. According to theoretical assumptions presented in Chapter 1, the Author seeks to demonstrate the need to study experience as not only the cognitive phenomenon, but also as emotional as well as behavioural one. To this end, on one hand she reminds the concepts which are constantly remaining alive in the sociological *limbus* (such as e.g. an inspiring essay by George Simmel on the sociology of the senses) – the concepts developed by classical academics who have previously raised the problem of not only ideative,

but also material an biological conditioning of social and cultural phenomena, and on the other hand she refers to current trends in the humanities, where analyses tend to treat socio-cultural reality in the category of multi-sensory perceptions.

In the Conclusion Izabella Bukraba-Rylska summarises the most important results of the studies and suggests major reorientation of social sciences and the humanities. While doing this, she invokes calls, which are heard more and more clearly, to revise the main assumptions of anti-positivist switch rooted in the nineteenth century; she also invokes the accompanying postulates to formulate a neo-naturalistic theory, which would not only be interdisciplinary in spirit, but also inter-branch, and which would be permeated with genuine consilience (proposed by Edward Wilson who was fascinated with ‘the Ionian enchantment’) of the neo-naturalistic theory.

The Conclusion is followed by Bibliography and Annex, which includes a description of localities subject to the study (prepared based on materials collected during a recce and the most important research tools used during the field study (instructions concerning interviews, script of a group interview and a questionnaire). The Summaries part includes three articles in English, which offer a concise description of the study results obtained by each of the three Authors.

The inquiry into the way local cultural heritage is present in the experience of rural inhabitants has resulted in a few conclusions featuring a various degree of generality. First of all, it turned out that the phrase ‘cultural heritage’ – although promoted by institutions and used in academic circles, has not yet been taken in by small local communities, for which the terms ‘culture’, ‘tradition’ or ‘folklore’ are still the most popular.

Secondly, the attitude of the respondents to their ‘heritage’ featured a considerable inclusiveness, as for them the term encompassed all elements familiar to them and used within the community, even if those elements originated actually from other regions of Poland, or from popular or foreign culture. What is significant, however, the acknowledgment of such non-homogenous traditions hardly ever made them feel lost or disoriented. Just on the contrary: their self-identities were strong (‘we’re from here’, ‘we’re locals’) and they did not perceive their identity as doubtful, incomplete or fluid, although theoreticians of post-modernity regard that as a rule in today’s world.

Thirdly, the shape of local heritage looked differently in each locality: in Białowieża, where there is no canon formed or described by academics, culture encompassed numerous and – which is equally important – variable elements (places, situations, people, anecdotes); the Czarnia population concentrated on the rich contents of the Kurpie folklore, which is still an integral element of everyday life and which is practised out of natural needs rather than as a mere re-enactment, or

for commercial or entertainment reasons; Krobia was a case of heritage which has already been codified and strongly institutionalized, although unfortunately poorer in terms of quantity – the respondents concentrated their attention on selected elements of biskupiański folklore (costumes, dances, instruments), which were cherished within the framework of specific institutions, and so it bore some features of fakelorum; and finally the Prażmów community was only trying to reconstruct local resources while not limiting themselves to traditional manifestations of ‘folk culture’, but including elements of everyday life recorded in the memories of the locals, which allows a hope that here the cultural heritage is going to be both varied and alive as well as it is not going to undergo fakelorum too easily.

Fourthly, it turned out that local heritage is perceived by the local population chiefly by bodily sensations, especially those related with physical effort which accompanies the manufacturing of specific items or performing specific tasks (dancing, playing the instruments, singing). The respondents talked a lot about being tired, about complexity of tasks and a risk of injury, they described the construction of a musical instrument or elements of a folk costume with every detail and with high degree of professionalism, while considerably less attention was paid to their own emotional (doing something is ‘joyful’ and ‘moving’) and aesthetic sensations (the costumes are ‘beautiful’, the choir sings ‘marvellously’) – in both cases the terms were scarce and stereotypical. There were no comments, however, concerning the meaning of concrete items, symbolic sense of actions or values represented by them.

That last observation justifies formulating a certain more general question: does culture really have to have ‘meanings’ (most often described in abstract terms), is it perhaps not true that culture functions – especially currently – chiefly as empty signifiers, as simply material objects which are experienced mostly by senses, while the accompanying feelings originate from the fact that people engaged in reproducing thereof spend time together physically, and not from the fact that they experience some sublime values? To allow a positive answer would lead to challenging the understanding of culture as ideative sphere, which can boil down to well-realized concepts. Instead, culture would become a concrete and physical reality, which is experienced by multiple senses and which shows its ‘meanings’ in the form of intelligibilities, as well as sensual and physiological qualities, according to the suggestion of Mark Johnson, who thinks that all ‘meanings’ originate from our ‘gut reactions to the world’. Should such approach to socio-cultural reality have any chances to be accepted, it would mean that the egocephalocentrism paradigm must finally be rejected by the humanities and substituted by noscorpocircularism proposed in this book. Such a reorientation would be a step towards a shift to neo-naturalistic, neo-materialistic and neo-essentialistic approach, which is being called for more and more frequently today.