OLD AGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY
ETHNOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

The analysis is based on the assumption that the cultural phenomenon of old age may be defined as a type of identity and placed in the category of cultural identity. The assumption is derived from premises that determined the ontological structure of traditional communities which constitute the context for the analysis. These include the specific domain of actions and social practices characteristic for local communities and included in the hermeneutic framework of culture. The sphere of behavioural and cognitive references reveals a change in the designated roles, functions and activities that construct the types of old age (mediational, contemplative and religious, ceremonial and ritual, customary, everyday). It also points to the transformations pertaining to the elders' functions within the community expressed through signs and symbols (verbal or non-verbal), the system of axionormative interactions that determined the status of an individual within a family, the type of participation (active or passive) in the existence of a given group, as well as self-esteem and the perception of reality in the final stage of life.

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Punktem wyjścia rozważań jest przyjęcie założenia, w którym pojęcie fenomenu starości – zjawiska kulturowego definiuję, jako rodzaj tożsamości oraz klasyfikuję je tym samym do kategorii tożsamości kulturowej. Podstawę stanowią przesłanki, określające strukturę ontologiczną ewoluującej wspólnoty tradycyjnej będącej kontekstem prezentacji. Należą do nich, charakteryzujące społeczność lokalną, specyficzna sfera działań i praktyk społecznych, mieszczących się w hermeneutycznych ramach kultury. Płaszczyzna behawioralno-kognitywnych odniesień ukazuje zmieniające się w czasie historycznym desygnowane role, funkcje, zajęcia kreujące rodzaje/typy starości (mediacyjny, kontemplacyjno-religijny, obrzędowo-rytualny, zwyczajowy, powszedni). Wskazuje również na przeobrażenia dotyczące funkcjonowania we wspólnocie uzewnętrzniane poprzez formułę symboliczności i znakowości (werbalnej i pozawerbalnej), system aksjonormatywnych interakcji ustanawiających status jednostki w rodzinie, rodzaj partycypacji w egzystencji grupy (aktywny lub pasywny), jak też samoocenę i percypowanie rzeczywistości w ostatniej fazie życia.

K e y   w o r d s: old age, cultural identity, identity-based options of old age, Polish villages
in the Carpathians, tradition, modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The considerations on the issues of identity in one's final stage of life presented below were inspired by the results of a phenomenological analysis of old age in village communities, which discussed this phenomenon in terms of culture and society. The analysis

presented various attitudes towards old age, as well as different forms of participation in local community life. The results prompted me to look at such activity through the prism of identity options adopted more or less consciously by individuals in the final stage of their lives. The present article is based on the assumption that, from the cultural and social point of view, the period of old age is equal in importance to the other stages of life. It formulates the thesis of the cultural character of this phenomenon, justifying the notion of perceiving old age from the perspective of cultural identity. This premise may be substantiated by the semiotic concept of culture adopted in the present analysis. Within this framework, culture is defined as an ideational reality (Burszta 1998, p. 48) or, more precisely, as a 'system of meaning' (Geertz 1973, p. 19) and constitutes the context for the mental and behavioural cultural identity of local communities.[1]

The life of every individual unfolds within a certain 'reality', which Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966/2011, p. 3) define as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition". The above sociological definition requires a brief clarification, because using it in the context of identity necessitates using a different semantics of the term, as well as a reformulation of its contents. The authors assume 'reality' (i.e. a "quality of phenomena") possesses independent being – a concept one may agree with – and perceive this term to be an abstract creation, and thus a type of a research construct or an abstracted model used for a specific academic purpose. They do not regard it as the rule that defines the nature of the phenomenon which involves interaction, activity consistent with the will of the individual though not always conscious. It is equally difficult to assume the existence of a single 'reality' *par excellence*, such as the "reality of everyday life" (1966/2011, p. 34). Thus, in the present article the term 'reality' shall be defined not as a "quality of phenomena" but as a category of the cultural and social phenomenon in itself. Reality constitutes the accumulation of all "realities of everyday live" that comprise the biography of an individual (or individuals) belonging to a given group (or community). The influence of reality in such an understanding of the term manifests itself in the long-term social and cultural process of becoming 'someone', i.e. developing an identity through interaction and creation between the sender and the recipient and between the recipient and the creator. Not all ideas are internalised by force of inertia. Those that are adapted by an individual at a given stage of life may be modified, consolidated or even discarded in later stages. Thus, the identity that emerges within the framework of reality is the result of a conscious or sometimes intuitive creativity displayed by the individual in question in various aspects of life. This process is accompanied by tension, drives, internal and external struggles (including contact with unexpected situations

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[1] I refer primarily to the results of my own research conducted in 2003–2005 in the villages of the Silesian Beskids and Podhale in the Carpathians. The research was a part of a larger project of the State Committee for Scientific Research (grant no. H01H 061 25). The present article is based on the publication summarising the results of the study (Lehr 2007) and an update added after the reseearch.

which inevitably occur in the permanent process of interaction). Such phenomena prove that a given individual is active or at least makes attempts of this kind, which leads to the readjustment or sometimes to an acceptable change in the *status quo*. The interaction that takes place in the course of the entire ontological development of an individual (old age being no exception) is clearly related to culture. The existence of individuals and their identity enclosed in semantically diverse areas of identification (family, group, regional community, ethnic group, national community) suggests that this phenomenon should be analysed with regard to the reciprocal cultural and social influence that takes place within a local community.

At least until the 1950s, the ethos of the local group and its community-like nature were determined by the lack of changes in the psychological and behavioural resources of the cultural inventory included in the social and cultural structure that organised the existence of all villagers. The community – a distinguishing feature of a local group – was defined by the conscious sense of belonging somewhere in terms of society and culture (collective identity), constructed and reproduced through interaction which recreated the rites and procedures that strengthened the common identity of a given group. The values, experiences and interpretations encoded in the shared language, knowledge and memory created a 'cultural sense' and a representation of the world, in the words of Jan Assmann (2011, pp. 124–125). The symbolic world of meanings included in the structure of symbols and the symbolic function of the ethos of the community regulated people's lives according to the order of the world, by means of the medium of cultural memory (rituals, customs and procedures) in two aspects. The first aspect pertains to the reality of everyday existence, governed and formed by the feeling of community; the second is related to festive occasions, when the identity of 'common knowledge' is ceremonially communicated and passed down to the next generation (Assmann 2011, p. 124).

The above principles adapted by rural communities are made visible by the cultural scenario of life in a village from an individual's birth to their death. It used to be determined by the cyclical nature of human life emphasised by the canon of traditional celebrations observed in local communities – similar to the annual rites connected with agriculture, religion and other celebrations related to the passing of seasons. Regardless of the ideas indicating cultural integration, the rhythm of life also provided the community with indicators of social and cultural stratification determined by the age group. The roles and functions assumed, adapted or acquired by given individuals defined their place within social hierarchy, giving them suitable status. The process of cultural transmission and enculturation, which consolidated the rules of existence together with axionormative concepts perpetuated the basic elements of the 'life scenario', despite the changes in world-view governed by the laws of the evolution of civilisations. The most important changes in identity pertaining to the status of the elderly in rural areas and the perception of old age occurred in the second half of the

20th century. Hence, the cultural inventory of traditional concepts remains the point of reference for the presentation of the created individual identities and the determiners of collective identity that additionally define them.

OLD AGE IN MEDIATION

Each individual that exists within the structure of social and cultural references is entangled in a net of interrelations. Old people are no exception to this rule; the community and the elderly are permanently in a situation of waiting and acting, taking and receiving – which creates the state of 'being'. In traditional culture, the spectrum of such relations encompassed special semantic interactions of semiotic nature included in the rich repertoire of symbols in rural mentality.

Within the framework of traditional rural world-view, the progressing involution related to old age formed the basis for a creative notional interpretation, which gave old age its symbolic significance through stigmatisation. This fact contrasts with the rural communities' understanding of old age as a natural and inevitable part of life. In metaphysical terms, it presented the elderly with a peculiar type of identity motivated by categories of transcendence that enabled the existence of homeless, lonely or poor individuals. Consolidated in oral tradition, this image acted as a kind of safety measure justifying the hidden fears and anxieties associated with the final and not always happy stage of life.

An old person headed towards the end of existence is perceived through the prism of biological and cultural deconstruction. Due to their physical condition, the elderly are treated as individuals with mediatory qualities. The symbolically suspended dichotomy related to basic life functions (sexuality, cultural gender) moved an elderly person away from the real world and into the realm of meanings beyond the human domain (Kowalski 1998, p. 530). The quality of acting as an intermediary between the world of the living and that of the dead ascribed to and characteristic for the elderly situated them 'betwixt' two realms with dissimilar cultural connotations: life and death. It also granted them abilities which bordered on the supernatural. Due to this imagined capacity any elderly person gained the privileged position of a liaison with the afterlife and a welcome presence in certain circumstances. On the other hand, however, the hybrid-like nature of the elderly connected with their undergoing a phase of change and transition threatened to disturb the natural order. Thus the functions old people could play in a rural community were limited through a number of prohibitions.

The extraordinary nature of old age, the period of transcendence, finds confirmation in folk eschatological motifs (the motif of God as an Old Man)[2] and Christian

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[2] This motif, included in many folk stories, is related to the journeys of Christ in the guise of an old man, who rewarded people for promising to feed and lodge the pauper every week by giving them

beliefs contaminated with Pagan elements (the motif of an old man – a guardian deity, an ancestor).[3] The notional significance of these beliefs is reflected by actual relations with the village beggar, a *persona* who remains in the 'foreign', unknown sphere: beyond the borders of the village and outside of the local community, consolidating the metaphysical archetype of an old person (Lehr 2011, pp. 315–319). Physically and psychologically stigmatised, paupers were also considered to be religious characters, in the words of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1958, pp. 272). The peculiar identity associated with this persona allowed the *dziad* to be present during the rites of passage and justified granting him certain functions in ritual ceremonies and in situations which required a magical reversal of reality. Beggars participated in funeral rites from the ablutions, through the dressing of the deceased, the vigil, prayers and songs until the wake. Due to his connection with the next world, a *dziad* was chosen to act as godfather if the family had been losing infants; he prayed over the child brought from the church after christening. A pair of paupers could be the godparents of an illegitimate child or stand in for the parents of one of the newlyweds. The village *dziad* perceived as a spiritual guide led the bride and groom along with the entire procession through the border phase of the wedding ritual within the space of the *sacrofanum,* i.e. on the way from the church to the wedding home, through wedding gates with numerous symbolic meanings.[4] A female beggar appeared in other culturally significant elements of a traditional wedding ceremony (e.g. during the rite of *rozpleciny*, the unbraiding of the bride's hair), as an impersonation of 'passage', the bride's temporary transition into a different world (Grochowski 2009, pp. 67–92). Irrespective of the source that created such a persona, the identity of a *dziad* or a beggar, imposed on the

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light (Benedyktowicz 1992, p. 130). Members of rural communities are still influenced by this tale and consider it authentic, as evidenced by the numerous statements about the custom of accommodating elderly beggars being practiced despite poverty and hunger. Paupers were fed even if the dish they got was the only food in the house and had been prepared for children (Lehr 2007, pp. 108–109).

[3] The assumption about the original supernatural perception of the person of an itinerant old man derived from the image of the ancestor finds corroboration in the villagers' behaviour towards the poor described in relevant literature. Such customs, referring to the cult of ancestors, include e.g. the so-called 'God's dinners'. This tradition was practiced in the 19th and 20th century and involved elements of traditional Pagan rituals intertwined with the celebrations of the so-called All Souls Day. Remnants of manist beliefs are also apparent in the rituals performed at Christmas Eve – such as verbally inviting *dziad* (an old man, a pauper) to the table, leaving an empty seat and an additional plate on the table. The semantic connection between the concept of a *dziad* and the spirit of a dead ancestor finds another confirmation in the name of a guardian daemon called *ubożę* or *dziad* and in its imagined form – a straw puppet – which had its place in traditional wedding rituals (Lehr 2011, pp. 315–316). It is no accident that the rituals performed on All Souls Day and for New Year include the person of a *dziad*. In the latter rites *dziad* appears as one of the characters carol singers impersonate (Grochowski 2009, pp. 74–82; Lehr 2011, p. 319).

[4] A detailed description of the symbolic interpretation of wedding gates and the characters of the so-called *dziady* that stand next to them may be found in Anna Brzozowska-Krajka's publication (2000); see also: Grochowski (2009, pp. 68–74).

poorest members of the community and assumed by them out of necessity allowed elderly people who were homeless or lived alone to not only exist, but also (due to their characteristic status) to temporarily participate in local community life.

In folk beliefs, the negative evaluation of old age, mostly related to women, was mainly formed on the basis of physiological determiners. The loss of the ability to reproduce was a clear indicator of an adverse magical influence that hindered vegetation. This fact finds confirmation in the numerous prohibitions which used to be imposed on elderly women. They were not allowed to perform certain actions of initiatory nature (e.g. the sowing of seeds, planting) or even be present at them. It is no accident that during the celebrations of the last three days of the carnival the so-called *tańce na urodzaj* (dances for good harvest) central to the rituals and intended to magically secure the robustness of linen and hemp plants were performed by married women, but only those who had not yet entered the period of menopause (Ogrodowska 2001, pp. 220–221). The hybrid-like nature of old age manifested in the unfavourable perception of women was also indicated by the practice of accusing some of them of witchcraft, i.e. casting evil spells to harm the community,[5] or treating old women as the impersonation of ill luck or a bad omen. Views reminiscent of the belief in the elders' negative influence of the surroundings were still expressed by some village dwellers in the 1980s and the 1990s. They stated that the arrival of an elderly woman on Christmas Eve is a bad omen which portends misfortune in the coming year. Meeting an old woman on the road on New Year's Day had similar connotations (Lehr 2007, p. 115). The perception of old age presented here constitutes one of the cultural options of identity, in this case imposed, expressing the traditional world-view of the community resulting from a syncretic (magical-cum-religious) perception of reality.

CONTEMPLATIVE AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF OLD AGE

Aging individuals experiencing growing physical and intellectual degradation often resulting in alienation, frequently search for something that would support their further existence. Such support may be provided by their retaining a certain function, e.g. within the family or being a part of a group of similarly aged people who share a common interest, or by any other activity which would counteract stagnation and resignation.

The need to maintain and revive the weakening ties to the world is corroborated by Lech Witwicki (2005, p. 150) who analyses Erik H. Erikson's framework of human existence. Such ties are reinforced by memory and attempts at initiating actual contact or deeper relations of transcendental nature. Referring to memories is characteristic for the elderly, to the extent that in the final stages of life memory begins to dominate

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[5] It may also be added that in many beliefs regarding the supernatiral domain, personified female dae-monic beings had the form of an old woman (e.g. *południce*, *dziwożony*, *boginki*).

over reality. This phenomenon is caused by overabundance of free time, detachment from family, world-weariness and sometimes by the attitude of the younger generations who expect the older person to be a 'custodian of memory' and a depositary of cultural heritage. Living in the past, i.e. dwelling on the days gone by and talking to shadows, is characterised by mythologisation. The inner world an elderly person constructs on the basis of memories is not only idealised, but internal and closed. It enables the person to regain an illusory identity through the contents included in the faded or figmental images of memory, which provide the elderly with the will to live. Engaging in such illusions of existence results in severing all ties with reality or combining it with imaginary fragments of life to create an existence verging on a waking dream. Such cases are rare in rural communities and occur mostly among the terminally ill who have no contact with their loved ones.

A more popular type of a chosen identity involves an intensification of religious practices. In the period of old age religious devotion may become one of the stimulators of life, a dominant model. In eschatology, old age was regarded as the period close to the end of existence which senior believers should use to put their spiritual matters in order, undergo an internal transformation and purification before crossing the permanent barrier of death. This time of quieting down and moving away from earthly troubles was elicited by the need to leave the world with a clean conscience. This was not the only reason for adapting such a lifestyle in the period of old age. In many cases it became a necessity brought about by hostile relations within the family. Some elderly people who were estranged from their families (as a result of losing their former functions mostly due to a seemingly unfair division of financial assets between children), had no living family members or developed an abrasive personality (negative character features may become more pronounced in old age) started to feel excluded and experience an existential vacuum. This void could not always be filled by everyday activities – the Church, belonging to the realm of the *sacrum*, might become a space of intimacy in transcendental terms. Faith would then turn into a life-giving force. A focus on religiosity (understood as identifying with a given set of values, norms, ideological concepts) intensified in the period of pivotal changes in the life of an individual or a community, prompts purposeful devotion to complement and strengthen the feeling of identity. This is done through performing individual or communal rituals which sacralise the values considered indispensable for the existence of a given individual or group. This thesis is corroborated by researchers specialising in various fields. Hans Johannis Mol, a sociologist of religion and theologist who analyses identity in religious contexts concludes that identity – the most significant of human needs – is reinforced by religion. Religion even 'sacralises' identity through objectivisation, commitment and myth. It may also restore lost identity by upholding values that are important to individuals; enable the order to be maintained, especially in a world of constant changes in meaning, evaluation and orientation (Wargacki

2011, pp. 303–307). Anthropologist and expert on culture Clifford Geertz arrives at a similar conclusion when analysing religion and its significance for individuals. He also observes that the strength of religion lies in the social values it upholds. Geertz does not identify religion directly with identity, but states that religion or any form of faith is an attempt (hidden, directly experienced) to preserve general meanings significant for individuals, enabling them to interpret their experiences or plan their future behaviour on this basis (Geertz 1973, pp. 152, 156).

The abovementioned 'assets' of religion related to the issue of identity so significant to the elderly, may also explain the excessive religious zeal displayed by many elders. Interest in the spiritual is more than just an 'examination of conscience' in the face of approaching death. Neither can it be deemed a result of rejection or a form of escape from a conflicted family, problems and the changing world of values. Apart from faith, the sources of excessive religiosity include the drive to find oneself in a new identity – that of a senior member of the community. Thus, it is a method for identifying one's way of life in the final stage, a life among other individuals sharing a similar set of values. This is corroborated by active participation in the religious life of the community (e.g. attending daily Masses or pilgrimages, entering religious organisations and fraternities, attempts at revitalising forgotten religious traditions[6]) observed in the case of many elders. Such activities are also a manifestation of the search for actual relations with people who would understand the problems of an ageing person, not only of the need for transcendental experiences. In modern times, spiritual nourishment is also provided by radio transmissions of Mass or by religious radio stations (such as Radio Maryja), whose target audience includes the elderly, as well as by religious periodicals.

Irrespective of whether religious identity is, or is not ascribed to the attitude of an elder having too great a respect for religion, it is a fact that aspects of religious life are a source of self-confidence and spiritual and existential stability to the elderly. This makes them experience a feeling of 'being someone' in the right place – such indicators are constitutive elements of a created and consolidated identity.

THE IDENTITY OF OLD AGE IN FESTIVE TIME AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Elders' participation in the ritual life of the family and the community is rarely accentuated and sometimes utterly disregarded by researchers dealing with culture. However, a cultural analysis of old age in the context of identity (particularly cultural identity) with an emphasis on this aspect indicates that it may give meaning to the life of the elderly.

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[6] Such traditions include the peregrination of a 'holy card' with the Holy Family practiced in the Advent, restored in the Silesian Beskids (Istebna). This type of public manifestations of piety serves also to strengthen ties with other members of the community. Every time the 'wandering card' is transferred to a new house, after a communal prayer the host family invites the other community members to a meal. The conversation that ensues is usually unrelated to the nature of the meeting (Lehr 2007, p. 188).

Traditional rituals and ceremonies (annual or related to family life) significant for rural communities and marked in the world of culture by 'extraordinary celebrations' include clearly defined functions or leading roles which were assigned to the elderly. They emphasised the authority and were a sign of respect for their competence and knowledge accumulated for generations. The roles assumed in festive celebrations gave the senior members of the community a temporary but periodic cultural identity.

Members of the older generation not only performed their ritual functions, but also ensured that the entire ceremony is conducted properly. Their duties included completing the rituals according to the customary law binding in the given community and pertaining to religion and magical practices. The elderly participated actively in ceremonies related to the rites of passage, making use of their knowledge and experience. In the words of Anna Zadrożyńska (2000), they were the 'celebrants of rituals'. The people with significant functions in family rites were: the village midwife, the matchmaker, the elders that played the role of advisors, experts and teachers of folklore during a wedding ceremony. Old people were also entrusted with the task of preparing the body of the deceased for burial and engaging in practices related to space 'contaminated' with death. In funeral rites, the elderly ensured that all necessary items were placed in the coffin, all proper parting formulas said and non-verbal messages transmitted. The leading part in initiatory rites (e.g. ploughing, sowing) in farming and agriculture was entrusted to the eldest man in the family. In the cycle of annual celebrations the family senior initiated Christmas festivities (Lehr 2007, pp. 199–207). All symbolic gestures, such as kissing the mother-earth, making the sing of the cross, casting the first handful of grain or reciting a prayer, had to be done by the householder or the lady of the house, i.e. the eldest member of the family. The same was true of the rite of consecrating the horse and carriage the first time they went to work in the field that year. The Feast of Senior Shepherds (*święto bacowskie*) that celebrates the period of driving sheep up to the mountain grasslands was always opened by the eldest and most esteemed *baca* (senior shepherd) who invoked a prayer and performed a dance called *łowięziok* (Lehr 2007, p. 104).

The elders' participation in the life of a traditional community was also observed in everyday customs, practices, services and other activities. The functions imposed on the elderly by the community (e.g. a senior shepherd acting as a *guślarz*, a conjurer) or assumed by their own choice and valued by the inhabitants of the village constituted a part of everyday existence which also emphasised the identity of the people who performed those roles. The activities entrusted to senior villagers included magical practices of protecting the fields against natural disasters (performed by an *ujec*), healing (performed by *znachorka-zielarka* – i.e. a medicine woman, a herbalist; or by a *naprawiacz* – a bone-setter), leading the funeral procession or spinning tales (the culture-making function performed by a *gawędziarz*, i.e. storyteller). The people performing these tasks were respected by the community, as evidenced by their privileged position.

SEMIOTIC DESIGNATES OF OLD AGE

Physical changes indicating that the biologically natural process of ageing has begun were not *de facto* treated as a cultural designate of old age. Nonetheless, visible symptoms of involution did move a person to a different level of the socio-cultural structure and the family. The change in identity was signalled by verbal and non-verbal 'signs of old age' which stimulated adherence to a different set of rules appropriate for the elderly. The rules pertained to certain attitudes, clothing (especially the colours of the festive attire, but also of everyday clothes) and other signals of identity.

The behavioural code

Within the axionormative system, model attitudes determined by the age of an individual were expressed – on the level of community life – by verbal communication or, more precisely, the rural etiquette. The forms of address defined the age, gender and level of kinship or acquaintance. Senior members of the community used to be addressed by the pronoun *oni* (third person plural; the so-called custom of *trojenie* – tripling the interlocutor) or *wy* (second person plural; *dwojenie* – doubling the interlocutor), with the term *matka* (grandmother) added if the interlocutor was an older woman and did not belong to the same age group as the speaker. Such forms were a sign of respect. Fixed social norms were applied to the seating of family members during mealtime and during various family ceremonies. A hierarchised seating order, according to gender and age group, was also applied at church gatherings. Within the traditional social and cultural structure, elderly members of the community had the right to discipline behaviour that did not conform to the order established for generations. As the executors of this order, elders were even obliged to condemn attitudes that transgress against the norms, values and principles of moral, ethical and customary coexistence. This could be done by a number of means: from ridicule and reproof to corporal punishment and even expulsion. Naturally, members of the older generation were also expected to comply with certain customary regulations and serve as an example for the youth. As a result of the relations adapted in rural communities, elders who deviated from the social norms were not subject to open criticism or public evaluation. However, opinions on their misbehaviour were publicly presented through various elements of folklore (sayings, songs, tunes, etc.) – the only form of cultural expression that was not restricted. Old age compelled individuals to act according to the imagined concept of the identity of a person nearing the end of their life. Characteristics associated with the 'ideal' of an elder included: earnestness, modesty, empathy, piety, moderation in drinking and in sexual life. Senior members of the community that did not always conform to the rules set for people of their age were ostracised and ridiculed, often in very inelegant or even vulgar words. This may be exemplified by marriage tales[7] revealing details of sexual life

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[7] This issue is discussed in the context of culture in a publication by Dobrosława Wężowicz-Ziółkowska (1991).

in relationships where one of the spouses was significantly older. Age differences between husband and wife were not uncommon in rural communities that favour financial stability over emotional sensations.

Clothing

Clothing and the symbols it may include are types of semiotic signs. Perception or, as Rudolf Arhneim called it, 'visual thinking' reveals much information encoded in a person's clothing (Arnheim 1969; Dant 1999, p. 85). Costume could communicate the wearer's gender, age, profession, career, marital status, social status and religion[8] and identify them as members of a particular group. In modern times traditional canons of attire (everyday and festive) have been replaced with many styles inspired by trends of various provenances. Thus, the message conveyed by clothing may be misleading. This is a result of dress code rules being disregarded or gradually abandoned. More and more often attire becomes a form of camouflage or social mimicry that enables people to conceal and not express their identity. Clothing, as a text of culture which used to provide general information about a given individual, remains a cultural message, yet its silent language very often communicates contradictory data.

In the semiotic interpretation of clothing, especially in the case of traditional attire in which age differences are very pronounced, old age (understood as the continuation of maturity that, for women, began with the ritual of *oczepiny*[9]) could be communicated through gradual changes in elements of clothing, manner of wearing certain items and the colour palette.[10] Traditionally, older people dressed in ever darker colours to symbolise the fading of their vital functions. Scholars explain the elders' preference for muted tones with the statement that this choice resulted from an unwritten law which reserved bright hues for the young and single. Bright colours were intended as a kind of lure that was to attract potential partners (Gross 1981, pp. 174–175).

The process of ageing was also revealed in a gradual elimination of ornaments and colourful embroidered elements on men's shirts. Young men wore shirts with bright red motifs, whereas older ones chose darker colours (brown or black). In female attire, age as an aspect of cultural identity was reflected in the manner of tying the headscarf.

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[8] Differences in folk attire accentuating religious affiliation could be found e.g. in Wisła and Brenna (Cieszyn Silesia) where the richer dress (called the Cieszyn or Wallachian attire) worn by protestants set them apart from the modestly dressed Catholics. In villages of the Silesian Beskids the attire of both these religious groups (the so-called highlander dress) was the same (Lehr 2009, p. 54).

[9] The basic element of the ritual involved covering the hair of a new bride with a headscarf. In early mediaeval period headdress was a very clear symbol, singling out women who were married, elderly or past the proper age for marriage (Trawkowski 1985, p. 94). In rural communities, *oczepiny* were the most important element of a wedding ceremony, performed after the rituals in the church had been completed. The bride was symbolically included into the group of married women when the mistress of the ceremony removed her wreath and replaced it with a headscarf (in Podhale) or a cap and a headscarf (Silesian Beskids). The details of the rite varied from region to region.

[10] For more information on non-verbal communication, including clothing, see: Lehr 2007, pp. 78–101.

Younger married ladies tied their scarves at the back of the head (*na klepocz*), while elderly ones (usually the ones that had grandchildren) tied the know below the chin (*pod kark*). At a certain age women ceased wearing bodices and moved on to looser upper garments called *serdaki*. Clothing or those garments that had been worn by the elderly for the longest period were uniformly associated with old age, as indicated by the statement of one of the interlocutors: *young ones did not like to go out with the scarf tied in the front, because that made them look like old hags* (Lehr 2007, p. 81).

Other distinguishing features

Visual determinants of age included the hairstyle. Certain female hairstyles were a symbol of their marital status. A bride plated her hair in a single braid and tied it in a bun on the nape of their neck. From her wedding day onwards, she would continue to wear this same hairstyle for the rest of her life. Currently the hairstyle is characteristic of the elderly and the traditionalist. There are women who cut their hair or even colour them to hide greyness. Greying hair did not use to raise negative associations, but was considered a sign of age identified with respect. Women who follow the changing fashion and decide to conceal their age are sometimes the target of mockery, such as: *she is happy that she's still young, but actually death is already circling her* (Lehr 2007, p. 91).

Male hairstyles underwent greater changes than female ones. In mid-19th century old householders from Podhale not only wore their hair log, but also braided the strands or tied them in knots at the shoulder (Bystroń 1947, p. 211). Until the 1930s shoulder-length hair were worn by the elderly. After the Second World War the fashion for short hair spread to all age groups (Lehr 2007, p. 91).

The visual and non-verbal determiners of age were not meant as stigmatising symbols. To the contrary – it may even be claimed that they ennobled the elderly as people who deserved respect due to the number of winters they had seen, the skills, knowledge and wisdom they had acquired. In the hierarchy of the local community, such distinguishing features became the basis for a cultural classification of individuals to a given age group, related to certain rights, obligations and privileges, which were accepted by the community and inherited from the past generations. They normalised the relations between individuals belonging to different age groups, maintaining the social order; they defined the identity and status of an elder within the social and cultural structure of traditional rural communities.

THE IDENTITY OF THE POST-FIGURATIVE GENERATION IN VIEW OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES

The changes in the social and cultural structure of communities and in the world-view of the elderly that took place after the Second World War initiated and determined the course of the gradual process of re-evaluating traditional concepts. They forced

the elderly to reflect upon their age in the context of place and auto-identification in the new reality.

The type of identity that used to be the most public and consciously experienced by an individual (especially in the period of old age) is the social and cultural status of a householder. Within the social and cultural framework of a traditional community, the position of a householder was associated with authority, privileges and prestige. Most importantly, a householder had the right to own land, distribute it and manage all works performed on the farm. The economic aspect was a significant determiner of social identity, which was also linked to power and its cultural designates. As Jan Stanisław Bystroń (1947, p. 203) observes, the development of authoritarian geron-tocracy in the 19th and early 20th century was a result of the dominant determinant of the phenomenon of old age based on the authority and skill connected with age and community-oriented. The traditionalism of elders and their reluctance for any changes was a burden to the younger generations that were economically dependent on their seniors. The elderly, in turn, feared that the disruption of the hierarchised social and cultural structure would make them lose the status and prestige tradition-ally associated with old age. Isolated examples of such attitude could be observed even in the latter half of the 20th century, especially in the domain of family relations. The conflicts pertained to financial matters, mostly to the division of land, livestock and other movables among the householder's progeny (usually very numerous). Such assets could be promised to a given child on the occasion of their marriage, while *de facto* remaining the property of the head of the family (Lehr 2007, p. 342). Issues of property were formally finalised only by the parent's last will, written by a notary by the elder's deathbed. Usually the married children were given the same land they had been working on for many years, to which they did not protest – for fear of being disinherited.[11] Some householders transferred the property rights earlier, having guaranteed the right of life-estate for themselves. In folk common law this was a form of security for the elderly who were no longer fit for physical work, a guarantee of financial independence. However, the transition from householder to life tenant was considered a step down the social ladder. For the elderly, the act of giving away their land was tantamount to losing their identity associated both with status and with *ojcowizna* (patrimony), regardless of how they were treated by their families.[12]

The changes in agricultural policy introduced in the 1970s (the law from 1968 and successive amendments from 1971 and 1974) enabled the farmers who were unable to work due to old age or disability to receive regular income[13] (pension, disability

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[11] The issue of conflicts between generations over the distribution of land and the obligations related to life tenancy is discussed in detail e.g. by Barbara Tryfan (1971) and Brunon Synak (1974).

[12] For more detailed information on the situation of elderly life tenants see: Lehr 2007, pp. 241–247, 342–344).

[13] The lump sum of the pension or disability payment was determined by the amount of land, productivity level, debts and the state of farm buildings (Tryfan 1977, p. 34).

payment) as well as other social benefits in return for selling their land to the state or transferring the ownership free of charge to their successors. The law guaranteed them the right to utilise their living quarters and farmhouses free of charge, as well as a plot of 0.7 acres of arable land. Such regulations with regard to land were also binding for life tenants, if the land was a part of their life-estate or was used by the life tenant (Borsowa, Perestaj, Szymańska 1986, pp. 709–710, 777–778). The decision to change one's identity from householder to pensioner was never easy, but guaranteed stable income and allowed elders to keep a portion of their land, thus enabling them to keep an illusory identity of a householder. Some elders who in their youth did additional work in state institutions were granted employee pension and with it the identity of an old-age pensioner, without resigning their status of a life tenant. This position was related to minimal comforts but was nonetheless valued by the members of the older generation.

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE IDENTITY OF ELDERS

The changes in the world-view of the younger members of rural communities observable after the Second World War triggered a gradual shift that was difficult to accept by the elderly. The changes pertained mostly to the elders' participation in community life and to their place in inter-generational relations. They necessitated a redefinition of the elders' auto-identification, which had for generations been constant and guaranteed the unchanging authority of an elder within the family and the community. The new ideas did not alter the place old people had in the system of cultural references, despite the successive elimination of traditional roles and functions, the gradual disappearance of verbal and extra-verbal semiotic determinants of age and the modifications in rituals. However, the social and cultural repercussions that resulted in semantic transformations in the image of village life (common actions and opinions) triggered a process which was difficult to accept for the elderly. It involved the loosening of interpersonal relations, the gradual disappearance of multi-generational families, the limitation of the elders' right to chastise and discipline the progressive youth and a growing intellectual gap between the generations.

In the latter half of the 20th century, especially after 1980, social and cultural changes became more rapid. Bolstered by the mediatisation of existence which spread to infiltrate the domain of private life, the changes influenced mostly the identity *status quo* of the elderly. Many people, especially the oldest members of the community, found it impossible to accept or understand the new order based on different rules and creating a different reality. Their life space identified mentally and physically with the existence of the local community became narrower. Similarly, the relations between neighbours started to dissolve. They used to constitute the pillar connecting all generations; now they only connect the elderly. Factors with a detrimental influence on the feeling of community also include the gradual abandonment of local celebrations.

Annual customs are no longer practiced, with the possible exception of the harvest festival (*dożynki*), still organised by folk singers and dancers that assumed the role of keepers of the cultural heritage. The elderly remained in the defensive, nurturing basic axionormative ideas that used to govern their former lives and upholding the cherished, if changing, culture they called tradition.[14] These forms have been a manifestation of the need for self-realisation. This need is displayed by the elderly who assume the function of ambassadors of local culture: performers or consultants in folk bands, experts on traditional customs taking part in television or radio programmes, masters of traditional crafts (lace, embroidery) or folk art (sculpture, painting, literature). It is also fulfilled by their active participation in the *topoi* of social and cultural reality and in the realm of private life. The elderly enter dialectal-speech contests, prepare traditional dishes, do not resign their membership in folk bands and organise exhibitions of works of traditional material culture in their own houses.

In my personal opinion, the choice of an active lifestyle stems from the elders' immanent need to maintain the plane of cultural interpersonal relations and cooperation, to preserve a fragment of reality that is familiar and cherished by the elderly, as it defines their identity. By undertaking such actions the elderly nurture their subjectivity and the autonomy (local, regional) they find themselves in. For many of them, being culturally active is comparable to a kind of inexplicable yet noticeable local patriotism, commitment aimed at protecting the cultural heritage of their ancestors. The elderly submit to the new lifestyles adapted in rural areas, but at the same time strive to preserve the memory and the legacy of the past generations, maintaining the identity they had created and modified for commercial purposes.

The indicators of old age incorporated into traditional dress may still be observed during religious celebrations and family ceremonies held in Podhale. The inhabitants of the Silesian Beskids rarely choose to wear folk attire, except on major holidays or for the harvest festival. Traditional forms of everyday clothing, which also used to be different for members of various age groups (old age signified by dark and muted colours), were replaced by city fashions. A similar process could be observed in the case of hairstyles. Even older women abandoned their usual styles for shorter haircuts and started visiting the hairdresser's. Elderly women now prefer to dress in lighter (but not too bright) colours, wear trousers and sometimes – in the case of younger pensioners – even put on some make-up. This indicates that a new identity of an older woman is being created in rural communities – an image of an uninhibited and active elderly lady free from the fetters of traditionalism.

[14] The definition and scope of the term 'tradition' is still a matter of discussion. The doubts pertain to the content and the origins of certain customs considered to have been 'invented' and not developed (see: Kroh 1999). As Janusz Barański observes, this discussion seems futile in the context of this term being applied in the categories and the dimension of the life of an individual/group which emerges in a definite reality and which creates, maintains, recreates and consumes tradition. Such a reality is, after all, the individual's universe and identity, which define the scope of tradition (2012, p. 277).

In the last thirty years the commune authorities have displayed a growing inter-
est in the problems of the elderly. This concern is manifested in various initiatives
aimed at senior members of the community, which are a public expression of respect
towards the elderly as valuable and cherished individuals. Such initiatives include
jubilee ceremonies for the 80th or 90th birthday of senior citizens, annual celebrations
organised on Grandmother's and Grandfather's Day, Senior's Day festivals, Christmas
meetings for old-age pensioners (Lehr 2007, pp. 231–240). The most ambitious project
implemented in the Silesian Beskids so far was the initiative organised by reverend
Alfred Staniek and Maria Kujawa to improve the intellectual capabilities of old age
pensioners facilitating further personal development, enabling the elderly to function
in the new reality and participate in the challenges the elderly have to face. In 2012,
the International Year of Geriatrics, the local authorities of administrative district
Istebna and the Commune Cultural Centre cooperated to open the Istebna University
of the Third Age. The inauguration of the academic year, held in the Cultural Centre,
included a lecture by doctor Marcin Pecold on the problems of aging, the ceremony
of handing in sixty student identity cards and the nomination of honorary members
of the University. The new academic institution organises courses of foreign languages,
Information Technologies, singing, artistic weaving and painting, as well as recreational
activities: nordic walking, aqua aerobic, yoga and postural gymnastics. The plans also
include the creation of a Seniors' Club by the Istebna University of the Third Age.
The university is a chance for the 'young' pensioners to acquire a new type of cultural
identity – a subjectively oriented ipseity of a modern 21st century person.

CONCLUSION

Old age analysed in cultural terms is an image which may be presented as a multidi-
mensional and complex context of experiencing life, which includes passive or active
social and cultural relations or interactions. The most comprehensive image of old age
is presented by the past indicating the presence of visual designates, the content of
verbalised formulas and models of behaviour. Modernity provides an identity paradigm
abstracted from traditional frameworks, but still consistent with the perception of
old age as a distinctive period in l ife, now devoid of metaphysical connotations and
characterised with less distinctively emphasised symbolic significance. The accentuated
cultural autonomy of old age, limited to various forms of cultural and social activity
remains in constant conflict with the religiosity that increases at this stage of life.

Old age is the period of accumulation of the events and experiences that took
place in the life of a given individual; it is a kind of cultural competence indicative
of a certain segment of existential reality. A retrospective view on old age – the phase
of life leading to an ultimate goal – brings many conclusions. First of all, it must be
remembered that the most important needs of an elderly person include having a sense
of their own identity confirmed and accepted by social and cultural interactions. Sec-

ondly, the analysis brings a reflective view on oneself which allows a person to complete the difficult process of reshaping the existing identity (renouncing the former status, authority or prestigious function) into a new one which would allow the individual to harmoniously coexist with the community. The circumstances of modern life offer many opportunities for self-realisation, making elders aware that identity is not constant. Acquiring a new one does not discredit the individual who faces the final stage of their life, and may even lead to a more satisfactory existence. Another conclusion was formulated in the form of a synthetic list showing the most significant changes in the perception of old age in rural areas that have taken place in the course of the century. The identity determinants included may be divided into three categories:

– 'traditional' culture (before the Second World War) – old age as cultural identity (determinants: functions, ritual roles; designates: symbols, signs, behavioural code), the subjectivity and objectivity of an elder, the identity of a householder, the non-existent boundary of a social age, old age as a cultural category, based primarily on cultural age

– 'modern' culture (from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s) – old age as cultural and social identity (determinants: functions, ritual roles, professional career; designates: the limit of age), the subjectivity and objectivity of an elder, the identity of a householder, life tenant, pensioner, religious identity, old age as a social category and a type of changeable cultural identity, based primarily on social age

– the culture of 'modern reality' (after the 1980s) – old age as a social identity (determinants: professional career, designates: social age), the subjectivity and objectivity of an elder, the identity of a pensioner, religious identity, old age as a social category with a restored modified cultural aspect, based primarily on social age.

The analysis of the issues of old age in rural communities perceived through the prism of the changing ethos of the community with the entire set of cultural and social aspects confirms that it is justified to regard this phenomenon in terms of cultural identity. This does not deprecate the social importance and nature of the functioning of individuals within a hierarchised local structure, but is a significant complement to the cultural image of old age.

As one final remark, it is perhaps justified to ask whether old age may still be called a type of cultural identity, given all social and cultural changes that eradicated the semiotic determinants of old age (signs, symbols, roles, functions and world-views) and contributed to the emergence of the new category of social age based on different criteria. Nonetheless, the answer to this question is yes. After all, the changes do not result in the elimination of the abovementioned distinguishing marks, but of their metamorphosis and adjustment to modern reality. It may even be assumed that some equivalents of these distinguishing marks will always be present, since identity is linked to the system of meaning. The identity of elderly people may take many forms, and even in the final stage of life shows defining features in the context of culture. These features are characteristic of the times a given individual is living in, thus giving old age – as a concept and as a phenomenon – the status of a cultural identity.

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