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Introduction

It has already become a tradition in Polish ethnographic studies that for the IUAES Congress we publish a book presenting the work we have done over the last few years. We treat it as an opportunity to exchange our experiences with those of our colleagues from all over the world, and a way to start new projects together.

It is only natural that it is impossible to take into consideration all the conducted research, which is so diverse both from the point of view of subject–matter as well as methodology. However, the volumes published after 1989 — the symbolic date of the fall of the Berlin Wall — are proof of the great changes taking place in Poland, in Polish culture, in ethnography, ethnology and Polish anthropology. Although the following work does not correspond very closely to the theme of the Congress, as we have done relatively little in the area of relations between man and nature, it presents the main trends of our interests and the criteria governing the choice of subject areas. In other words, it discusses what is happening in our academic circle.

The communist economy and regime in Poland undoubtedly upheld the culture of the earlier industrial epoch. There were many reasons for this: extensive industrialization and the development of traditional industries, which now are perceived as being on the decline, the increase of small peasant farms, if not to say those that existed only to feed themselves, political isolation, and the embargo placed on the import of high technology by the USA and Western Europe.

As far as ideology and politics were concerned, this meant that people did not move easily, there were strong links with the workplace, privileges were expected, while giving up one's civil rights was the price one had to pay for a little stability.

The centralized system made it easier to uphold the traditional social structure. The doubts that were expressed concerning the loyalty of the peasants as allies of the working–class in their fight for socialism was compensated for by claiming the significance of folk culture for national culture, which was to be socialist in content and folk in form. In such a situation it seems natural that

the attention of ethnographers was centred on studying folk culture, traditional peasant culture, the culture of the masses in towns and in the countryside, the proletariat, in other words, the culture of the non-privileged classes.

It has to be admitted that in this traditional field of interests among ethnographers, there already appeared certain rifts in the 1970s as a result of an exchange of ideas and goods as well as the mobility of people which then started to increase. The subject of our research slowly began to change and this also applied to our attitude concerning the work we were doing. This was accompanied by extremely heated discussions, which was hardly surprising in the given situation, concerning ethnography as such and what ethnographers' area of research actually is. It was then defined in accordance with the social criterion (e. g. peasant or working-class culture). Under the influence of semiotics and psychoanalysis the subject of ethnography in the second half of the seventies began to be defined as archaic culture, as archaic thinking that was present, although not always visible, in contemporary culture. Disputes concerning the subject of research came to an end at the beginning of the 90s when the economic and political transformations brought about so many fundamental changes in culture, in the attitudes of people and their system of values. This was when we became witness to postmodernity entering Poland. The subject of research changed so very much that all the disputes that had been taking place so far became totally pointless. This also happened when we, reevaluating our philosophical and cognitive assumptions, also changed.

The first part of the book entitled 'What has happened to culture?' touches upon some of those changes. The authors are concerned with spiritual tradition and applying old elements, such as the Apocrypha, to the new cultural arrangement (Magdalena Zowczak); they stress reaction to otherness, to differences that are characterised by an important mechanism preventing too much order, introducing a certain dynamics to the system of culture (Andrzej Perzanowski); they point towards a discourse conducted between the government and the rest of society, and to the serious problems arising in this communication, which are a result of the sender and recipient of the communiqué using different premises of inference (Anna Malewska-Szałygin); they describe changes in the space of a tenement house as a result of its dwellers accepting, not necessarily consciously, postmodernity principles; and finally they analyse a group of women searching for their own identity in the new political conditions (Monika Baer), and reaching out for religious leadership (Agnieszka Kościańska). In all the above mentioned fields, except for the economic and political transformations, it is the idea of the globalization process that is favourable to these changes (Wojciech Burszta).

A much larger number of publications concern invented traditions and make up the second part of the work. It is devoted to research on identity that is mainly national, ethnic and religious, which for years has been an important area of research among Polish ethnographers. They dominate over the others as far as number is concerned, take in groups that are ethnically non-Polish and who live

outside Poland, as well as the Polish diaspora scattered throughout the world. They are undoubtedly an answer to the question concerning identity which is very much part of Central Europe and the former Soviet bloc countries after the disintegration of the USSR.

The works presented here are not actually about Poles. They concern groups from around Poland that historically made up the Commonwealth of Two Nations, i. e. Lithuania and Belarus (Łukasz Smyrski, Katarzyna Waszczyńska) or the Polish traditional area of research¹ which was Siberia and Central Asia (Jarosław Derlicki, Wojciech Lipiński). Only two texts are about Poland. One describes the re-emerging of the Jewish community in Poland after World War II (Kamila Dąbrowska), while the other discusses St Wojtech–Adalbert’s patronage as a feature mythologizing the cultural community of Europe (Róża Goduła).

In their research on contemporary culture, Polish ethnographers and ethnologists also work in many other areas, such as the anthropology of communication, consumption, violence, values, the cultural contexts of human rights, poverty and exclusion, religious symbolism, people’s attitude towards nature, visual anthropology, migrations, and the building of Internet communities. This research is accompanied by animated discussion on philosophical assumptions, on the role of the author in creating a text, on the theory of qualitative studies, understanding empiricism, and the limits of interpretation.

The contributors and editors of this volume feel that it will perform its informative role if there is reception from a larger group of ethnographers, who, interested in the results of the conducted research, will want to use the Internet addresses of the ethnographic institutions in Poland (see appendix).

Translated from the Polish by Aniela Korzeniowska

¹ It was Poles exiled to Siberia for their resistance to Tsarist Russia who very often studied the people of Siberia in the 19th century.

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