

## FAMILY RITES IN PODHALE<sup>1</sup>

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Traditional and contemporary rituals presented in the article, are examples of a specific type of functioning of families and rural communities in the context of the customs and rituals referring to the rites of previous generations. The transformations associated with the elimination and modification of old elements of rituals and introduced successively new customary formulas did not affect significantly on the basic scheme of scenario of celebrated phases of human life, which have manifested themselves through multiple verbal and non-verbal symbolism. Regardless of the style of contemporary family ceremonies, accumulating and imposing a specific rite of the created highland cultural phenomenon, it has still remained recognizable designatum, clearly emphasizing regional distinctiveness of Podhale, which is identical with the cultural identity of the inhabitants.

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Prezentowana w artykule tradycyjna i współczesna obrzędowość jest przykładem szczególnego rodzaju funkcjonowania rodziny i wspólnoty wiejskiej w kontekście zwyczajów i rytuałów nawiązujących do obyczajowości poprzednich pokoleń. Przeobrażenia związane z eliminacją i modyfikacją dawnych elementów obrzędowości, jak i wprowadzane sukcesywnie nowe formuły zwyczajowe, nie wpłynęły w sposób znaczący na podstawowy schemat scenariusza celebrowanych faz życia ludzkiego, uzewnętrznianych poprzez wieloraką symbolikę werbalną i niewerbalną. Niezależnie od stylistyki współczesnych ceremonii rodzinnych, nawarstwiającej się i nakładającej na specyficzny ryt wykreowanego fenomenu góralszczyzny, pozostał on nadal rozpoznawalnym desygnatem, podkreślającym wyraźnie odrębność regionalną Podhala, tożsamą z identyfikacją kulturą jego mieszkańców.

**Key words:** family rites, rituals, ceremonial forms, Podhale, highlanders, tradition, folk, wedding, funeral, identity.

<sup>1</sup> This text was written based on the article: Lehr 2000a, 305–347. The family rites described here have been reconstructed mainly on the basis of the materials gathered by the author during her field research conducted in a number of villages in the region of Skalne Podhale (at the south of Poland) between 1990 and 1994 (Archive I). The recollections of the locals (pertaining to the interwar period) were complemented by contemporary accounts verified by the facts known to the author from the experience. The image of traditional ceremonies was synthesized primarily on the basis of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographical monograph by L. Kamiński (1992) and the works of J. Kantor (1907) and A. Pach (1977).

## INTRODUCTION

Human life is a series of phases of ontological development, yet only three of these may be called the most representative designates of existence and, as such, are the subject of social and cultural celebration. Breakthrough events, especially birth and its opposite – death, as well as acts of cultural transformation of one's status, such as getting married, may be perceived as a representation of the works of nature. In cultures with folk characteristics<sup>2</sup> such turning points of life included in the broadly defined family rites were of equal concern to the family and to the social group which made the local community. The significance of such moments was related to the fact that they initiated a sequence of uncommon and unchangeable events: starting a family, the arrival (birth) or the departure (death) of a family member, bringing an end to the previous order of things. Such events were regarded as phases of social and cultural transformation. They were the necessary steps towards being accepted, introduced into a community or excluded from it. This claim may be evidenced by the existence of many different practices, customs, rites, ceremonies and formalities that developed over the years and by the related superstitions, the purpose of which was to ascertain the place of a given individual within the family hierarchy and on the social ladder.

Cultural actions constituting the setting of family rites were based on a well-defined scenario which was played out in space and time delineated by items of symbolical significance and by the exchange of gifts necessary for completing successive stages of the ceremony. Rites and formalities were crucial for restoring the tipped balance, unveiling the mystery of life and death and changing the status of an individual. Rites were the gateway enabling people to re-enter their social and cultural environment, taking the place that befitted their newly acquired status. They also readied people mentally for continuing with their everyday existence after one of the family members had passed away.

THE CONSTRUCTS OF TRADITIONAL<sup>3</sup> RITUAL AND CEREMONIAL FORMS*Radośniki*<sup>4</sup>

In the present article the author shall concentrate on the phenomenological aspect of rites and the structure of the associated customs, disregarding the details of beliefs related to the many magical prohibitions pertaining to pregnant women and unborn

<sup>2</sup> The term 'folk' is to be interpreted as an analytical indicator, presenting phenomena ascribed to and corresponding to a given group of people, in this case the inhabitants of the countryside.

<sup>3</sup> The terms 'tradition' and 'traditional' are used in relation to phenomena that could be observed in a given period of time (i.e. before World War II) and are not meant to express any positive or negative evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> This is a term denoting the religious act of christening and the feast that follows it. In the present article, the meaning of the term is extended and encompasses all rites and behaviour related to the birth of a child.

children. These have been described in a separate monograph (Lehr 2003, 151–164). The article shall briefly discuss only the set of superstitions related to the social and cultural status of an infant and a woman who is pregnant or has just given birth. Pregnancy and childbirth was considered a ‘special’ time when a woman was subject to spatial, temporal and functional isolation (Bystroń 1916, 12–17; Arch. I).

In folk magical practices, pregnancy was a time when a woman was in a very peculiar situation socially and culturally. She was considered ritually ‘unclean’, due to her intensified physicality and the overemphasized reproductive capacity. Since an unborn child was thought to belong to the ‘realm of the underworld’, it was believed that a woman bearing it had a potentially destructive influence (Kowalski 1998, 58). As noted by Anna Zadrożyńska, a pregnant woman was taboo, because she “was bearing the primal chaos and the supernaturalism of the underworld” (2000, 179), and any contact with her could result in a transition of the negative essence (Eliade 1993, 20). This is corroborated by a rich context of magical and symbolical references resulting from the mentioned mental ideations. The realm of actions taken in the successive stages of birth (pregnancy, lying-in, delivery) included both the time before a child was born (divination, predictions) and final ceremonies (christening, *wywód*). Each phase of the rite related to birth had its own prophylactic (neutralising and isolating) and receptive practices.

One example of the marginalisation of a pregnant – ‘unclean’ – woman are the numerous prohibitions and limitations of spatial nature, which were to prevent any childbirth complication from happening. Thus, a woman was forbidden to cross balks, walk over fences or objects such as thills or chains. Prohibitions also applied to some types of work, mostly to tying sheafs of corn or making ropes, which – as it was believed – could cause the umbilical cord to twist around the foetus. Meeting a pregnant woman on the road was considered a bad omen. Each time a pregnant woman left the house (i.e. the place that isolated her from all negative influences and from the rest of the community), she was obliged to perform certain actions of magical significance (e.g. spit thrice to one side).

The functional and social isolation of a pregnant woman meant also that she could not act as godmother (Lehr 2000a, 306). It was believed that allowing a pregnant woman to perform this function would cause the newly-christened infant to develop a goitre<sup>5</sup> or even die. In such cases, the death of a newborn child was explained by mutual exclusion – the unborn baby, being in a stage of ‘not-yet-existence’, had the power to destroy a life that has just begun (Kowalski 1998, 59; Wasilewski 1989, 90).

Sympathetic magic, including contagial, inceptional and religious practices were used, more or less successfully, to make up for the lack of prenatal prophylactics or

<sup>5</sup> A swelling of the thyroid gland (thyromegaly) that may be caused e.g. by iodine deficiency, which used to be common in mountain regions (Bogusławski 1982, 135). Due to some visual similarities to pregnancy, goitre was assumed to be a manifestation of the magical influence of a pregnant woman – who transferred her unusual state to the newly-christened infant.

knowledge regarding the physiology of pregnancy. Women giving birth at home could, however, count on the help of a midwife. Until the 1950s this role was assumed by one of the women in the village, called *babica* (Arch. I). Her knowledge was considered to be a combination of inborn (not acquired) skills and her understanding of magical practices. She was the one to preside over the ritual of childbirth, ensuring its successful outcome.

Village women, used to hard physical labour, usually gave birth relatively quickly. In the cases of complication during labour, the *babica* asked the husband to take part in the process or even told the woman to sit in her husband's lap. Such actions seem to refer to the so-called *couvade*, i.e. the act of a man acknowledging a child as his, although Jan Stanisław Bystron (1916, 19) claims that this act does not sufficiently comply with the definition of a rite. Other magical practices thought to facilitate the delivery included a motif known from the Greek myth about Alcmena, namely a forbiddance of tying and closing, also enforced during wedding ceremonies (Lehr 2003, 152–153). Sometimes the pregnant woman was laid on the ground – *humii positio* – which was to resemble the act of the first birth performed by Mother Earth (Eliade 1974, 143–144). As noted by Piotr Kowalski, this act was imitated not only to hasten the delivery, but also to enable the baby to cross the boundary between the underworld and the realm of the living (1998, 636) and to ensure the protection and goodwill of the 'Great Mother' (Eliade 1974, 144).

After the labour was over and the placenta taken care of, the *babica* bathed the baby and wrapped it in a piece of cloth.<sup>6</sup> She first handed the child to its father, then to its mother and other members of the family. The gesture of taking a newborn from the hands of the *babica* was tantamount to the act of accepting the baby as a new family member.<sup>7</sup> The first bath also had a ritual significance. Very often the water in which the baby was put contained some milk, a pinch of salt, herbs and consecrated coins. These items were to grant the baby a beautiful countenance and strong bones, ensure a magical protection and secure its future wealth. The water that had come in contact with the body of 'one which has come from the underworld' was considered unhealthy for people and crops. It had to be thrown out rearward, between the legs, in a remote spot. A baby 'born with the caul' was believed to be lucky, therefore the piece of membrane was dried and kept in a chest.

The undetermined status of the newborn and the fact the baby lacked a definite place within the cultural and social space (its 'intermediary' status) posed all sorts of threats. For this reason, before the proper religious ceremony was performed, it was forbidden to hang the swaddling-cloths outside of the house. The newborn was never

<sup>6</sup> It was a piece of a shirt belonging to the baby's father. It was believed that using a man's shirt as the first piece of clothing for the child would create a magical bond between the baby and its father.

<sup>7</sup> The symbolic meaning of this gesture is rather clear. Such acts of acceptance were powerful and significant, as evidenced by the fact that they allowed the *babica* to obviate any potential conflicts caused by the arrival of an unwanted child.

taken out and guarded at all times, for fear of it being abducted by *dziwożony* (wild woman). Sometimes the infant was swaddled in old rags in order to mislead the evil spirits. Mothers also protected their babies by putting various apotropaic items (e.g. consecrated plants or devotional articles) near them. Neither the mother nor the baby could receive visitors, to prevent strangers from accidentally hexing them. Another manifestation of such fears is the fact that the bed of the woman who has just given birth was separated from the rest of the house by a curtain made of a bed sheet. This symbolic barrier isolating the mother and the baby, sheltering them from the outside world was supposed to protect them both during the time of the cultural transition and social transformation. For the baby this period ended when it was christened, for the mother – when the ceremony of *wywód* (churcing) was performed.

Baptism played the role of a church ceremony and an initiation rite, accepting the child into the religious and social community and nullifying all potential danger. The ritual of welcoming the baby into the family which followed the christening was of equal importance.

The mother of the baby was not present at the christening. Her isolation lasted for six weeks and ended with the *wywód*, perceived by the local community as a purifying rite.<sup>8</sup> Until it was performed, the woman had to adhere to various spatial, temporal, social and religious restrictions which were justified by the negative valorisation of empty vessels<sup>9</sup> and the belief in 'biological defilement' (Wasilewski 1989, 157–158). The mother of a newborn was e.g. forbidden to leave the house after nightfall or step on arable land. It was believed that breaking any of these restrictions would result in a hail-storm, cause the ground to become barren or leave the woman vulnerable to abduction by supernatural beings (Lehr 2003, 161). The mentioned prohibitions confirm that the 'state' the woman was in was regarded as destructive to the environment. It was ended by means of a purification rite performed by a priest in the space of the *sacrum*.

For reasons discussed above, at the ceremony of christening the mother of the baby was represented by godparents (*krzesnoojcowie*), usually chosen from among closest relatives. On the day of the christening, before the whole party went out to church, the godparents brought gifts (food, money) for their godson or goddaughter. Every infant was also given a present of symbolic significance – the so-called christening cloth.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The clergy dis-acknowledges this interpretation saying that the religious ceremony was intended only as a blessing, and not as an act of ritual purification (Kowalewski 1960, 414).

<sup>9</sup> It might be added that childbirth was believed not only to make a woman 'empty' but also (e.g. among the highlanders of Silesia) to rid her of her soul, which was transferred to the body of the baby. Evidence for this belief may be found in the fact that after childbirth women were fed chicken or pigeon broth to give them the magical means of acquiring a soul (Moszyński 1967, 554).

<sup>10</sup> Consecrated at the christening, the cloth became a sacred item. It remained with a person from their cradle to the grave. It was used for sowing a shirt for the wedding or some other part of personal underwear. Upon a person's death, this item was buried with them.

After a shared prayer, the godparents and the whole family went to church. The baby was carried there by the *babica* or another woman who was requested to do so. In the vestibule of the church she handed it to the godfather (if the baby was a boy) or the godmother (if it was a girl). During the entire ritual the participants observed the infant, trying to infer its character and future traits from its behaviour. After the christening the baby was placed on the steps of the altar – the *babica* picked it up and carried home. She did not hand it directly to the mother, but laid the infant behind the threshold, informing the members of the household of the ritual transformation of the baby: *wzieli my złe, a przynosimy dobre* ('we took away evil and brought back good'; Arch. I). The metamorphosis that provided the baby with protection against the forces of evil was also the means of introducing it to the family community. The religious ceremony was finalised by a repast in the family home. If the parents of the infant were rich, they invited their guests to an inn.

The christening of children conceived out of wedlock was less ceremonial in nature. They were baptised on a weekday (usually Saturday) and the priest did not don the formal liturgical vestments prescribed by the Church canon. The godparents were relatives from the mother's side. According to family tales, as late as in the interwar period the priest demanded that the only people suitable to act as godparents for an illegitimate child were a beggar and a gypsy. An infant born out of wedlock was labelled a bastard (*bęsio*), whereas its mother was only allowed to hear Mass standing in the vestibule of the church. Subjecting the mother and the child to social scorn was supposed to eliminate the effects of the highlanders' liberal morals – frowned upon by the Church but culturally incorporated into the process of growing up.<sup>11</sup>

### The wedding

This rite was related to a change in the legal situation of an individual, but mostly in their social and cultural status. The significance of the wedding was determined by the transformation of the 'state' of a person during which the act of validating factual changes and shifts within the community was expressed through symbolic means (Maj 1986, 5). Therefore the traditional wedding was a kind of a performance or, in the words of Cezaria Baudouin de Courtenay Ehrenkreutz Jędrzejewiczowa, "a product of folk dramatic arts" (2005, 212). The act called for a special celebration and the participation of the inhabitants of the village – who would act as witnesses to the change and the

<sup>11</sup> The subject of sexual liberty among the youth of Podhale was described by A. Kowalska-Lewicka (1967, 225–241; 1971, 23–35) and also by R. Tomicki, who considered this aspect of customs and ethics in the context of models, norms and values (1977, 43–72). The analysis of the author's own research (2007–2009) on illegitimate children among the highlanders from Beskid Śląski confirms that the local customs used to allow some liberal behaviour which in other regions was regarded immoral. It may be concluded that the unwritten customary law is very peculiar and based on certain social, cultural and environmental circumstances characteristic for mountain regions (Arch. II).

establishing of new relations between 'kin' and 'aliens'. The rites and the ritual actions accompanying the act of tying a marriage bond formed the stages of a long wedding ceremony. The most important parties – namely the bride and groom – were just passive spectators of the rite built around them and for their benefit. The basic phases of a traditional wedding ritual<sup>12</sup> are: 1) a social visit (*dowiady*); 2) preparing a financial marriage agreement (*nomówny*); 3) betrothal (*związany*);<sup>13</sup> 4) preparing the wedding ceremony; 5) the blessing; 6) taking the marriage vows; 7) the coifing ceremony (*cepin*); 8) the move.

In village communities, the act of marrying someone was preceded by many customary actions, including the so-called *dowiady*, which have a contemporary equivalent in the form of *podłazy*.<sup>14</sup> All activities related to each stage of the rite and its ceremonies were accompanied by the exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and the groom. This enabled the bride to 'enter' a group of 'strangers' who signalled their willingness to accept her. As Arnold van Gennep points out, nuptials, which had a more or less important economic significance, always included a series of rites (2006, 129–130).

The so-called *dowiady* were in fact a social visit paid to the parents of a girl by the prospective groom. Thus, the young man tried to assess his chances of getting her hand in marriage. If he was received kindly, he arranged for a matchmaker to bring some vodka to the girl's parents – doing this was an official indication of his serious plans for the young lady. Successful negotiations ended with setting a date for an official discussion of financial issues (*nomówny*). After a contract was drawn it was time for the betrothal ceremony (*związany*) – the final act confirming the marriage agreement.<sup>15</sup>

*Nomówny* were not only a manifestation of the accumulated tension and emotion, but also a kind of a game the rules of which were determined by the current village etiquette. The spectacle played out in the house of the bride, in the presence of the

<sup>12</sup> This list does not include one stage of the wedding ritual mentioned only in older, i.e. 19<sup>th</sup>-century, accounts. It was called *zdawiny* (the surrendering of the bride) and involved transferring the wedding rod (a symbol of the bride) to the side of the groom. This ceremony used to be one of the most important elements of a traditional wedding, along with the bedding (*pokładziny*) which took place after the church ceremony (Zawistowicz-Kintopfowa 1929, 20–53).

<sup>13</sup> The name *związany* ('the tying-up') derives itself from the act of tying together the hands of the bride and the groom held over bread and cheese. It should be added that the scarf used in this ceremony was brought by the future groom, who was also obliged to put a coin in its folds. The items symbolised wealth; a meaning confirmed by the words spoken by the master of ceremonies performing the rite (Kamiński 1992, 101).

<sup>14</sup> A custom of visiting the household of a prospective bride after the Christmas Midnight Mass.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the ceremony was performed even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicates that social consent and recognition had a performative and binding force. In distant past, before marriage became a sacrament (in the 16<sup>th</sup> century after the Council of Trent), acquiring a legal religious form necessary for its validity, completing the rite of *związany* was tantamount to going through a wedding ceremony (Zawistowicz-Kintopfowa 1929; Sobczak 2000).



girl, her parents and the party coming to 'bargain' – i.e. the bachelor with his mother, his married friends, married ladies, the vogt and the sworn witnesses. The aim of the visit was stated indirectly as 'related to the purchase of a promised sheep (or heifer)'. This scene, following the convention of a financial transaction, reveals two significant aspects of social protocol: the objectification of the bride and the end of her relations with her lover, who usually was her future husband. The bargaining process – as such was the character of the talks – may point to the cultural relic of a marriage through purchase, but some scholars see it as a customary ritual of 'paying for one's footing' that was a part of all initiation rites (Maj 1986, 60).<sup>16</sup> The simulated act of haggling forced a change in the relations between the couple. It put an end to their informal, yet socially acceptable relationship, which could only continue if legally sanctioned by a wedding ceremony. The young couple had to return to an initial stage so that their bond could be transformed in accordance with a culturally and socially conditioned rite. The necessary metamorphosis put the future bride and groom 'outside' of any group, in a social limbo. This state continued until they were wed by means of a ceremony sanctioned by the Church, or, strictly speaking, until the ritual of coifing the bride was completed, inducting the couple into their new social roles.

The process of concluding a formal marriage contract of financial nature culminated with the betrothal ceremony. This rite initiated the next stage of a wedding ritual, i.e. the banns and the wedding preparations.

Weddings were traditionally organised in the period of Carnival, which was the most suitable time for enjoying a day of leisure without having to attend to any heavy agricultural works. The preparations for the ceremony focused on the most basic: accumulating the food and alcohol for the feast, hiring musicians, fashioning the wedding rods and flower bouquets, choosing bridesmaids and groomsmen, whose task was to don special festive attire and invite guests for the wedding. The guests, in turn, expressed their thanks for the invitation by presenting the groomsmen with a bottle of vodka and, upon their arrival to the wedding feast, had to bring some gift to the newlyweds (usually food, such as sausage, meat or butter) (Kamiński 1992, 102–103; Gąsienicówna 1979, 185). In the interwar period the husband-to-be was responsible for buying silver or silver-plated wedding rings, whereas the future bride had to sow or purchase a so-called 'wedding shirt' for her betrothed<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> See: the monograph by K. Zawistowicz-Kintopfowa, in which the author exposes the functions of the elements indicating that the rite is a financial transaction, customarily finalised by the so-called *litkup*, i.e. drinking alcohol to seal an agreement or promise regardless of its details (1929, 13). This tradition has survived to the present day; it is practiced in many different contexts by members of various social groups, professional communities, etc.

<sup>17</sup> The wedding shirt was an important element of the traditional rite, as a gift from the future bride. A married man wore this shirt only during most important holidays or family occasions; he was also buried in it – this custom was practiced in the interwar period and sporadically up to the 1990s (Arch. I).





The bride and bridegroom driving in old-fashioned cart (*fasiąg*), Podhale region 1918–1939; author unknown (Archives of The Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Kraków).

The entire wedding ceremony was accompanied by music, some stages also involved dancing. A crucial role was played by the members of the two wedding factions representing the side of the bride and of the groom. These teams comprised bridesmaids, groomsmen and one or two couples acting as masters of the ceremony. They were the coordinators of the ongoing performance, initiating the successive stages of the wedding rite. In accordance with the traditional roles, they created the wording of the public act of social and cultural transformation of the young couple. The masters of the ceremony had a part to play in all crucial stages of the rite. They delivered a ceremonial speech of religious and lecturing nature before the young couple received a blessing from their parents, they led the bride and groom to the church (the bride went in accompanied by groomsmen and the mistresses of the ceremony; the groom was surrounded by bridesmaids and masters of the ceremony). The mistresses of the ceremony also presided over the final rite of coifing the bride. The wedding factions made up the core of the wedding cortege led by groomsmen (so-called *pytace*) riding on horseback. The songs intoned by the wedding factions were meant to interpret

the situational context for each stage of the rite. The teams were also responsible for escorting the young couple and their retinue safely (in the magical sense) between the different locations (household, church, household), since the cultural valorisation of the road was ambiguous. To ensure protection, sometimes the *pytace* were preceded by a beggar – a mediatory figure who, coming to no harm himself, enabled the *dramatis personae* to move safely and reach their destination (Arch. I).

On the way back from the church the wedding cortege was stopped by makeshift gates built by the inhabitants of the village. At each gate the newlyweds were awaited by a group of men dressed as a Gypsy family (they were sometimes referred to as *dziady*), who only opened the gateway if presented with a gift (alcohol, money, food). The various semantic interpretations of this custom suggest that the aim of passing the gates was to buy one's footing in the local community (if one of the newlyweds was from another village), symbolically overcome all difficulties and problems that could arise in the future life of the couple and ensure numerous offspring (Arch. I).

The construction of wedding gates and the spectacles played out in front of them could also be perceived as a sign of the cultural category of 'rites of passage' (*les rites de passage*), thus placing them among customs with a non-ludic purpose. They were a boundary separating the unfamiliar from the familiar space. The wedding vow excluded the bride from the group of maidens (pre-liminal stage), but she had not yet entered the married state (post-liminal stage) by going through the culminating rite of the wedding – i.e. the coifing. The ambiguous status of the bride and the crossing of boundaries, which attracted demonic beings, obliged the inhabitants of the village to perform a series of symbolic and magical activities involving the prescribed items necessary for allowing the bride a safe passage (Brzozowska-Krajka 1996, 5–7).

The act of welcoming the newlyweds (the so-called *witawka*) performed by the parents who waited for the cortege and musicians communicated their acceptance of the new 'state' of the young couple. The symbolic gifts (bread, salt) presented by the mother represented the wish that the young couple live a prosperous life. Similar significance was attached to the bundle of straw customarily thrown at the feet of the newlyweds.

Late in the evening, after the wedding feast, there came the time for the coifing of the bride. Due to its symbolic nature, this rite may be considered a separate entity. It constituted the culmination of the wedding day, though the party continued after it was over. The ceremony belonged to the familiar *imago mundi* that used actions, gestures and symbols to express the publicly witnessed transformation of the bride's status. In traditional communities it was this ceremony that *de facto* changed the status of the bride, allowing her to enter the group of married women. The successive stages of the rite were initiated by context-appropriate songs.

The signal for the start of the coifing was given by groomsmen, who 'kidnapped' the bride. This element of the rite – delaying the moment of social and cultural metamorphosis – was not only a time of fun. The groomsmen only agreed to surrender



Wedding guests with bridal couple, Ząb Village 1934; author unknown; the owner of photography: A. Słodyczka (Archives of the Ethnology Section, Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków).

the bride to the mistress of the ceremony if she 'paid ransom', which was tantamount to allowing the girl to be accepted into the group of married women. Men were not present at the rite of the coifing, which started with the so-called *rozpleciny* – the oldest mistress of the ceremony unbraided the bride's hair (braids were a symbol of maidenhood), sometimes cutting or trimming it, and wrapped the bride's head a kerchief in a form of bonnet (Kamiński 1992, 109–110; Zborowski 1932, 77). After this crucial rite was completed, all wedding guests presented the bride with money, throwing it onto the plate placed in her lap. During the next stage, the groom had to buy his wife out from the hands of the groomsmen and the mistresses of the ceremony. If the bride was to live in her husband's house, the wedding ended with a ceremonial move.

### The funeral

Rituals comprising the funeral ceremony were always to a great extent filled with magic. Their nature was determined by the folk system of beliefs, stemming not as much from a fear of death (it was regarded as a part of the natural order of things), but from the unease that the soul of the dead family member might return in one guise or another.

It was believed that a person's demise was portended by various prophetic signs and dreams. These so-called 'announcements' took the form of seemingly unprovoked occurrences. Some animals were thought not only to be particularly attuned to the

supernatural, but also to be able to see death, therefore any unnatural or unwarranted behaviour on their part was deemed an omen (e.g. a howling dog, a crowing hen, a mole digging under the threshold) (Lehr 1995, 28–29).

The behaviour of a family faced with the imminent death of one of its members followed a very specific model defined by local customs. It was an in-between time, a time of expecting a forthcoming change in the family structure. The entire household was told to be quiet and a priest was summoned to administer the *viaticum* to the dying person. The family lit a large candle whose flame was believed to repel evil spirits and also – as a symbol of God's fire – to light the way for the soul about to leave the body. If the agony was taking much time, a little bell was rang and the dying person was placed on the ground, on a pile of straw covered with a sheet (Lehr 1995, 31). Putting the dying family member on the floor was undoubtedly an act of magical significance, symbolising the entombment that was soon to come. The downward movement and the fact of acting in advance were believed to precipitate the process of departing this world (Fischer 1921, 74; 80). Magical significance was ascribed not only to the action itself, but also to the items placed beneath the body – straw or haulm. The smooth structure of straw with no knots – which symbolised the connection between the body and the soul – facilitated the separation of the two (Fischer 1921, 76; 79). It was also customary to wake the livestock and bees, to prevent them from passing away along with the dying family member. This tradition was continued until early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially if it was the householder who was about to die.

After the death has been pronounced, the person keeping watch at the deathbed woke the other family members. It was believed that the souls of a sleeping person wandered about, and could meet the soul of the departed or be taken by it to the underworld. The folk doctrine associated the presence of a dead body (traditionally the funeral was organised three days after the death) with eeriness and danger, prompting the family to behave in a certain manner. The deceased had to be carefully prepared to their final journey. It was believed that before the burial the soul of the departed was watching the family closely, therefore great pains were taken to provide the deceased with proper attire and necessary items (walking stick, glasses, pipe, fiddle, rosary). Additionally, objects of religious and magical significance (e.g. images of the saints) were placed in the coffin, along with apotropaic items which could be of use in the underworld (money and herbs).<sup>18</sup> Coins were placed on the eyelids of the deceased, as it was believed that if the eyes of the dead were not fully shut, they might spy the next victim. Another item put in the coffin was the so-called christening cloth – unless it

<sup>18</sup> The herbs placed in the coffin included southernwood (*Artemisia abrotanum* L.), with which the soul of the departed was supposed to drive away the devil or, in a different version, the dog of S. Gierczuska, who offered souls lodgings for the night. Sometimes the coffin was also fitted with campanula flowers which had been consecrated on the feast of the Assumption of Mary (Lehr 2000b, 33–34).

had been used to sew a wedding shirt or an underskirt. In such cases the deceased was dressed in this piece of clothing.

Before the funeral, other villagers visited the homestead of the deceased, to keep watch over the body, pray and say their goodbyes. Some highlanders recall that in one-room houses the body of a *gaździna* (lady of the household) was laid in the *komora*,<sup>19</sup> whereas the remains of a *gazda* (householder) were placed on the threshing-floor in the barn. This custom emphasised the functions the deceased used to perform.

The personal belongings of the deceased, i.e. items which came in contact with the body (underwear, bedding, straw mattress) were usually burnt, along with the planks that supported the body and later the coffin. On the one hand, such behaviour can be perceived as a magical action aimed at destroying all trace of deceased's presence and their belongings, which prevented the soul from returning. Due to the symbolic meaning of fire, the act of burning has the features of a rite. Through their destructive power, flames neutralised and purified all objects that had come in contact with the deceased. On the other hand, obliterating such items had a rational justification of medical nature – preventing the living from contracting the same disease that killed their family member.

Before the funeral rites were complete, the 'in-between' state of the deceased posed an irrational danger to the community. This threat was signalled in many different ways – e.g. the carpenter making the coffin had to leave the shavings under a stone in a frequently visited spot.<sup>20</sup> The sight informed the villagers that someone had died, obliging them to pray for the soul of the deceased.

Before the body left the house for its final journey, the relatives carrying the coffin bid farewell to the house and the family in the deceased's stead by lowering the casket thrice over each threshold they passed and saying the words: *stay with God*. The doorway had a special symbolic significance recognisable within the realm of ideas as the boundary between the *orbis interior* and *orbis exterior*, an ontologically uncertain space. As such, it often featured in ritual activities (Kowalski 1998, 480–481; Bystroń 1980, 224). In the case of funeral rites, the threshold played the role of the starting point of the departure, emphasising the fact that the deceased was in an intermediary stage and indicating the direction of the change. Placing the coffin on the threshold feet first confirmed the status of the departed, but also created a new cultural situation. Carried out of the house, the deceased was not only leaving a certain space – it was a rite of exclusion, performed by placing the body in contact with a 'transforming' item such as the threshold. In a magical sense, the deceased stopped being a part of the world of the living, heading towards the underworld, to which they did not yet belong.

<sup>19</sup> A storage area for keeping food and dishes, which sometimes functioned as a bedroom for senior family members or young girls.

<sup>20</sup> On various other signs informing of death and their evolution see: Lehr 2000b, 65–82.



A symbolic farewell to the family and the household was a means of protection against the return of the spirit of the person who had died. Magical preventive measures of this kind also included upturning the stools the coffin used to rest on. Upsetting the order of the house was believed to disorient the soul that decided to return in spite of the parting ritual, and also to obviate further deaths in the family.

The coffin was usually transported by cart or by sleigh in winter. The funeral procession moved in a certain order (the immediate family in front, then other relatives and the inhabitants of the village), headed by a family member with a good singing voice or, more often, by a professional mourner who knew many context-appropriate songs; sometimes it was the sacristan. The priest waited for the procession in front of the church or halfway there. Church bells were rung as the coffin was transported from the church to the cemetery, where the ceremony of the last farewell was performed.<sup>21</sup>

Suicidal death, discrepant with religious doctrine, was visibly stigmatised and called for a different set of rites and behaviour. The funeral of a suicide did not involve a mass celebrated by the coffin; the body was buried outside the cemetery walls, in unconsecrated ground. Sanctions also applied to burials of babies who died before they could be christened. They were interred in the most remote corner of the cemetery.

Funeral rites ended with a humble meal in the house of the deceased. The invited guests included the family and the coffin-bearers, even if they were not relatives. This meal was referred to as *pogrzebowiny* (funeral banquet) and its completion meant the return to normality. There was no custom of wearing mourning-dress, though for some time after the demise of a family member it was deemed inappropriate to attend parties. There was, however, no prohibition of immediate remarriage in the case of young widowers with small children or widows that needed help with running the household. The memory of the deceased was cherished during the so-called *Boże obiady* (God's dinners, a custom practiced until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and on All Souls Day, still celebrated today (Kowalska-Lewicka 1995, 48–49).

#### THE FORM OF CONTEMPORARY FAMILY CEREMONIES

The social and cultural system defining people's lifestyle is unstable and influenced by many external factors which bring changes in mentality. It is therefore no surprise that prescribed behaviour, ritual practices and rites have also been revalued, changed or modified. They left a trace in the form of some elements of tradition included into the new forms which are more in line with contemporary reality, yet what is practiced

<sup>21</sup> The sound of the bells are to be interpreted as a signal informing of a funeral ceremony and obliging anyone who hears it to say a prayer for the souls of the dead. In terms of magical thinking, the ringing of the bell – similarly to all loud noises – was supposed to ward off evil spirits and demons. It was believed that this sound also signalled the soul which came to the funeral that it was time to leave (Lehr 1995, 38).

can no longer be called rituals *sensu stricto*. These are ceremonies evoking the culture of the past by keeping some parts of the structure of traditional rites. The form is more important than the content, which is still there, carried by its former momentum, but has lost much of its social and cultural significance for the individual. The only exception here is the oldest generation which still adheres to tradition, as evidenced by the lyrics of a highlander song: *trzymojcie się ludzie, starodawnyk casów* ('hold on, people, to the olden days'; Arch. I).

Rationalisation of approach is most evident in the customs related to birth. The surviving practices have been devoid of many activities of magical significance and some of the rites pertaining to the woman giving birth. This change was brought about by the steady improvement in the level of education and the development of a network of medical institutions, which made the profession of the village midwife (the *babica*) redundant. The custom of isolating pregnant women has mostly been abandoned, although they are still not asked to be godmothers and advised to avoid stressful situations. The ritual bathing of the newborn is also a thing of the past, so the related magical practices have been discontinued. The names given to children have also been subject to change. Fashionable names have replaced local ones and those related to saints. Christening is no longer an individual family ceremony, but a social occasion. The ritual involves not only godparents, but also the father and the mother of the baby – this has naturally eliminated the customs related to welcoming the infant onto the family. The modern ceremony combines the religious liturgy with ritual purification, which used to be a separate rite and is now considered a form of a blessing. Due to the changes in the form of the religious ceremony, the long period of isolation from the birth to the ritual purification (*wywód*) has been done away with, along with all related prohibitions of magical significance.

Customs have also changed with regard to the gifts presented by the godparents. Giving something to one's godchild is still a form of social obligation, yet the items no longer have the significance of a cultural act, but seem very specific and material. Instead of the traditional *christening cloth* the infant receives an expensive layette. It is also customary to place a large amount of money into the child's pillowcase.

The differences in christening ritual relating to the legitimacy of the children, although still emphasised by some priest until the 1950s, have now disappeared.

The wedding rites have also undergone some transformations. The wedding ceremony is now attended only by invited guests, and therefore has become a type of a show for the remaining villagers – the spectators and not participants or witnesses. Modifications are particularly visible in the additions made to certain stages of the rite, which are now more ludic than symbolical or ritual in character (e.g. the construction of wedding gates). Changes were introduced to the form of some phases of traditional rites – they now combine elements of 'urban' and 'village' culture. For example, the custom of handing written wedding invitations to the guests has been incorporated



into the traditional ritual of *pytanie* (inviting); the roles of master and mistress of the ceremony are no longer performed by strangers, but by the godparents of the couple; the newlyweds are sometimes welcomed not by the mother, but by the cook responsible for preparing the wedding feast.<sup>22</sup>

New ritual items introduced after the Second World War include: the wedding bouquet, the engagement ring and gold-plated rings. The fact that village couples sometimes decided not to wear traditional folk attire to their wedding was partly a consequence of the high price of such clothing, and partly a matter of preferences (adhering to city fashions elevated one's status in the village). The improvement in the financial situation of the highlanders at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a widespread return to wearing traditional costumes<sup>23</sup> for weddings. Such attire was donned not only by the bride and groom, but also by the entire wedding procession and even some older guests.

A comparative analysis of the structure of a wedding rite reveals that *podłazy* have become obsolete and the custom of *nomówiny* has only survived in the form of the parents' official consent to the decision taken by the young couple. This change was mainly brought about by two factors: an increase in financial independence of young people and a weakening of parental authority. In most cases, however, youngsters make sure that the relationship they are about to enter is not against their parents' wishes, even if it means abandoning their own plans.

Some traditional customs related to what should take place before the young couple leaves for the church have survived, albeit with various changes. The speech delivered by the master of the ceremony before the parents' blessing, the so-called *wypytywiny*, has become very elaborate – a true display of oratory skill of the master of the ceremony or one of the *pytace*. It should also be noted that in the 1990s highlanders tried (with more or less success) to reintroduce previously abandoned customs, even though some of the 'returning' rites were introduced in an incorrect order or point in time (Arch. I). Such traditions include the custom of the young couple kissing a loaf of bread after the master of the ceremony has made his speech. Originally this was done after the church ceremony and the greeting of the newlyweds – moreover what was kissed was not the loaf, but the four corners of the table the loaf was placed on. It was important to move around the table clockwise (Kamiński 1992, 107). This element of tradition, remaining in sharp contrast with the *ceperski* ('outsider') dress of the bride and the fact that weddings are organised in the main hall of the fire station,

<sup>22</sup> In the 1960s there appeared a custom of greeting the newlyweds with a wedding cake instead of bread and salt, but it was quickly abandoned. A *novum* that did become popular is placing two glasses next to the loaf of bread, one filled with water and one with vodka. Predictions about the future tendencies of the bride and the groom are made depending on which glass they choose (Arch. I).

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary inhabitants of Skalne Podhale also don traditional attire for christening ceremonies, funerals and celebrations connected with religious or state holidays.

may not be a manifestation of obtrusive folklorisation of life, but of authentic folklore brought back from oblivion. It might point to a growing need for accentuating one's local identity through emphasising similar customs, even ones which had been forgotten and are difficult to reconstruct. Such behaviour aims not as much at clinging to tradition or ancestral culture, but at creating new customs of the culture that does not seem to meet all expectations. This phenomenon is clearly visible in rural areas, where 'outsider' culture has started to prevail over local customs. More conservative families try to incorporate some elements of tradition into their modern lifestyle, maintaining a fine balance. For example, the first day of the wedding is celebrated approximately according to traditional models, including the custom of gift giving (e.g. the wedding shirt presented to the groom), traditional songs, music and highlander dances. Highlander melodies, sometimes even the oldest ones, are played as the bride and groom leave the house, arrive at the wedding reception and begin the rite of the coifing. The complicated steps for highlander dances, however, are remembered only by the older householders and ladies or those of the youth who had joined folk bands or learnt to dance during special courses. The second day of the wedding, the so-called *poprawiny* (*drużbiarsko gościna*) is dedicated to a 'city-style' celebration, with guests in modern apparel dance to disco music.

The construction of the wedding gates is a custom still practiced. In the 1950s in some villages (e.g. Ząb) the gates were a demonstration of the artistic skill and creativity of the craftsmen (Arch. I). Some even featured effigies symbolising the newlyweds, complete with items referring to their respective professions. The people standing in front of the gates addressed the newlyweds delivering witty and sometimes mordant speeches (so-called *dekrety* – 'decrees'), for the sake of entertaining the villagers. The custom of paying ransom for passing the gate has lost its ritual meaning of a public display of acceptance.

The rite that still plays the central role during a wedding ceremony is the coifing of the bride. Its form has been modified – since the 1950s the unbraiding of the bride's hair (*rozpleciny*) has been limited to a change of headdress – the bride's garland is publicly replaced with a kerchief, a symbol of married state. The traditional meaning and significance is no longer clear to all – the ceremony is mostly regarded as an entertaining part of the wedding; a lesson of history for the youngsters, an experience for the bride and groom, a reminder of the past for the older guests. The customary limitations for performing this ceremony (remarriage, being in mourning) still apply, although pregnancy of the bride is no longer seen as an obstacle. The survival and continuation of the custom of coifing the bride resulted from its financial aspect. The organisation of a wedding has always been a very costly affair; therefore the presents and money given to the bride at the end of the coifing rite still provide some recompense for the expenses the family incurred. Such gifts are no longer a form of paying for the right to participate in the wedding, and have more material than cultural value.

The least changes can be observed in funeral rites. They represent a complex system of beliefs, symbols and gestures and still have the significant magical and religious function of securing a peaceful rest for the deceased and ritually excluding them from the community. The older generation still upholds the belief in various signs and prophetic behaviour of household animals.

The customs related to preparing the dying person for his or her final journey (lighting the large candle, praying, keeping watch, practices hastening the death) have been abandoned not only due to a change in lifestyle, but also by the fact that more and more people – village inhabitants being no exception – do not die at home, but in hospital wards. This has made old practices redundant, yet it ought to be noted that once the body is brought home, it is subjected to some funerary rites of magical nature. Although the time the body of the deceased remains in the house has been shortened to one day, families still perform all customary activities (joint prayer, bidding farewell to the dead).

The excluding rites are still performed and adhered to. The deceased is buried with religious items and objects of everyday use, sometimes also with herbs. The funeral is followed by a banquet, perceived more as a family gathering than an occasion to remember or honour the member who passed away. It is becoming increasingly popular to have the meal in a restaurant.

After the World War II the doctrine of the Catholic Church concerning burials of suicides and the organisation of funeral ceremonies have become less strict. It is now permitted to inter suicides on the cemetery with the priest present, but there is no mass celebrated by the coffin; more tolerant priests sometimes allow it to be placed in the vestibule of the church.

The custom of making an outward display of mourning by wearing black clothing was most probably popularised in rural areas before the World War II. The length of the period for wearing black was determined by social norms and dependent on the degree of kinship between the mourner and the deceased.

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The family ceremonies in contemporary Podhale lack the basic integrative function they used to perform. Rites no longer act as a plain of social communication, as their symbolic value and power has weakened. Rituals and ceremonies ceased to be perceived as a means of initiation, passage and exclusion. However, they still contain discernible traces of tradition, which belong to the legacy of the past generations, regardless of the label they are given. A *casus* of the living presence of fossilised elements of tradition and sometimes cultural relics, they are representative of the culture of Podhale, regionally associated with the group of Carpathian highlanders. Their characteristic ideational reality created concepts and values of cultural, magical and religious significance and

with unique and idiosyncratic artistic expression of the celebrations. Modified by time and the changing views of the highlanders, their rites remain an example of a specific mental aspect of previous epoch. The fact that these customs survived and are still practiced resulted from both external and internal factors. The former ones include a strong sense of tradition cultivated in those highlanders that now live in the USA. Emigrants from Podhale used their local customs as means of retaining their identity in a culturally diverse country. Recordings of family celebrations, including weddings, are often sent to relatives living abroad. In a sense, this forces the highlanders that stayed in their homeland to uphold some elements of folklore, not to disappoint the American side of the family. Moreover, wedding customs are a type of performance and do draw the tourists' attention. For this reason, they may be perceived purely as a commercial undertaking that brings financial profits. Tradition *sensu largo* belongs to the past. Nonetheless, the fossilisation or reintroduction of some elements of ancestral culture is a matter of choice made by individuals or members of a given community, who accept these customs as their own and deem them worthy of continuation. The fact that highlanders still identify with their local culture proves that, despite all changes in lifestyle and world-view, tradition is highly valued. Established as regional identity, at first indicated and to some extent imposed on the highlanders by the elite who saw the *differentia specifica* of highlander culture, tradition was later used by inhabitant of mountain regions to display they customs and elevate them, especially the wedding rituals, to the level of representative symbols of cultural and ethnic identity of Podhale highlanders, and to promote the region.

#### ARCHIVE MATERIALS

- Archive I – Author's own material used in the present work.  
 Arch. II – Author's compilation entitled *Przemiany obyczajowości wiejskiej* (Transformations of the mores in rural areas) completed within the framework of planned fieldwork assignment no. II. 156 (Archives of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warszawa).

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