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The Religious Dimension of Christmas Eve Folk Rituals in the Opoczno Region of Poland: Tradition and Modernity

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There are very few households in Poland where the twenty-fourth of December does not find the family celebrating the traditional Christmas Eve (*wigilia*), with a ceremonial vigil table covered with a white tablecloth, festive tableware, traditional dishes, and the blessed wafer (*opłatek*). On this evening the family and relatives sit by the Christmas tree, singing Christmas carols. Christmas Eve, with the old custom of abstaining from meat dishes at the vigil supper, is one of the special days among the annual folk rituals in many countries. It is also the central part of the celebration of Christmas. In Poland, this celebration acquired the characteristics of the phe-

nomenon of something holy, of the sacred; this is a phenomenon not found in other countries, and it has its unique and special place in the annual folk calendar. Folk tradition has equipped Christmas Eve with distinctive customs, rituals, and beliefs. According to the customs and procedures of this day, along with the religious elements there were also practices to ensure success in one's personal life, getting to know other people's destinies, magical acts designed to protect the family and household against nature's adversities and a whole range of practices related to health, life, fertility, and the weather (Kupisiński 1997: 67–69). In folk beliefs characteristic of this day, there occurs a unique blending of the sacred and of the secular, not only in the liturgy but also in the life of the faithful. Christmas Eve is marked by a variety of customs, rituals, and beliefs. The origins of some of them date back to ancient times, others have their roots in Slavic culture, and there are also customs and beliefs which have arisen from Christian traditions of other nations. The presence of these elements of different provenance on Christmas Eve is conditioned by their function and the meaning they had in past epochs and cultures. Throughout history, humans nurtured the cultural heritage of their forefathers and developed it at the same time, reflecting their own experiences and spiritual values. Christmas Eve is one of those days when tradition manages time, determines the day's activities, and outlines the steps to be taken.¹

In this short article, I concentrate on the customs, rituals, and beliefs of Christmas Eve practiced in the first half of the twentieth century in the Opoczno region, which lies in south-central Poland. I further focus on rituals of that region at the turn of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. I also attempt to identify how the Church incorporated the old customs and beliefs of the people into the festive atmosphere of the day, which marks the end of Advent and the beginning of the Christmas season. The article is based on data collected during my own ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the years 1980–1983, 1990–1993 and 2008–2010. It lasted a total of 290 days. Literature pertinent to the discussed subject was also used, which enabled a comparison of the older customs and rituals with the new ones.

1 Christmas Eve in the Polish Folk Tradition

The Christmas Eve Vigil has a unique place in the tradition and mentality of the Polish people. This

1 Kupisiński 1997: 56–58; See also: Z. Górnicki 1980: 60–62; Zdrożyńska 2000: 51.

day coincides with the winter solstice leading to the New Year, and opens the farming folk ritual calendar. In the customs and rituals of Christmas Eve, one can notice the remnants of former gardening and agricultural practices as well as traces of All Souls' Day elements, characteristic of the ancient Slavic ceremonies that marked the winter solstice. Despite the multitude of topics and contents, many of these relics of the past, after receiving a Christian interpretation, became integral parts of folk religiosity.²

According to popular beliefs, Christmas Eve is one of those days in which the renewal of humanity, indeed of the whole world takes place, and everything starts over from the beginning. This renewal occurs with the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Priests preaching during Advent parish retreats urged people to get ready to begin a new life. In folk culture, one can perceive the old beliefs about cyclical renewal of the cosmos interwoven with the Christian faith, but with the difference that in the liturgical renewal of time, a believer never returns to the same state, because he or she either develops spiritually on an upward spiral or even experiences an accelerated personal growth.³

A full participation in the Christmas celebrations required a thorough preparation, both internal and external. The internal, spiritual preparation was accomplished by religious practices, such as participation in the *roraty* – the morning Mass held daily during the Advent time; a retreat that ended with receiving the sacrament of reconciliation; fasting and other forms of mortification, e.g. giving up smoking and drinking alcohol; a ban on taking part in parties and weddings, etc. Meals were taken only twice a day: in the morning and in the evening, and sometimes people limited their diet to drinking water only. The meal was simple, consisting of sour rye soup (*żur*) with unpeeled potatoes (*skórzoki*) greased with oil, and with some dry bread; no meat was eaten. On Christmas Eve, people observed a strict fast throughout the whole day. Indeed, in the opinion of the inhabitants of the Opoczno region, the importance of the event – namely, the coming of the Son of God to earth, required spiritual preparation because the only way to welcome the Savior was to have a pure heart and conscience, and to live in harmony with one's family and the neighborhood (Ferenc 2000: 30–32; Smolińska 2004: 33). People also tried to experience the Christmas time in a sacred space. The interior of the house had to take on a festive appearance: people hung colorful decora-

tions (*pająki*) on the ceiling and spread multicolored napkins on tables and dressers. Additionally, juniper twigs were powdered with flour and located in different parts of the room (Kupisiński 1997: 58).

One could feel the festive atmosphere in the behavior of household members and neighborhood relations. Quarrels and strife were usually avoided and all work was undertaken willingly and with serenity. Even livestock was treated with respect. Informants of Opoczno region claimed that on Christmas Eve even animals “participated” in the joy of the birth of God's Child, so “you have to treat them well because Jesus was born in a stable, and they warmed Him with their breath” (Fischer 1934: 194). A special place in the room was occupied by the Christmas tree. Despite the difficult material conditions in which most families lived, people tried to decorate the tree as richly and beautifully as possible. Most of Christmas decorations were handmade. The green tree, so characteristic of Christmas, gave these holidays a solemn atmosphere, and symbolized the birth of life, brought to the world by the Savior, coming to the people at Christmas time.⁴ It has its origins in pre-Christian times, when life force, fertility, and immortality were attributed to trees. The tree incorporated into the Catholic liturgy took on a new, biblical meaning: in accordance with the account of Paradise in the *Book of Genesis*, God placed Adam and Eve in the midst of trees, distinguishing, in particular, “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Some of the respondents, justifying the custom of decorating the Christmas tree, refer to that biblical imagery. The fall of the First Parents, and its moral consequences, are represented by apples hanging from the Christmas tree.⁵ Furthermore, a Christmas tree also symbolizes the “new Adam” that is, Jesus Christ Himself, coming on the Christmas Eve to restore humanity's original happiness and to open the doors to eternal paradise for everybody. The tree of the Cross has become a symbol of victory and life to all who believe in Christ, and the versatility of Christ's mission was expressed by hanging on the Christmas tree two hemispheres made of colorful wafers, symbolizing the whole world, with a cradle hanging next to them. Lighting candles on the Christmas tree and the custom of burning lights on that night are, according to some ethnographers, a remnant of the old cult of the dead. Today, in the memory of the inhabitants of the Opoczno region, people still keep the Christian interpretation of this custom, where the lights symbolize the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who became

2 Ogrodowska 2000: 247–249; Fischer 1925: 134.

3 Salij 1972: 1537; Ferenc 2000: 14.

4 Nadolski 1991: 103; Kolberg 1885: 72.

5 Zimoń 1983: 245; Wierusz Kowalski 1956: 190.

“the true Light that illuminates every man, coming into this world” (John 1:9).⁶

Before the Christmas Eve supper, farmers used to place a bundle of straw in the corner of the room. Straw was also scattered throughout the room, so that it was placed not only on the floor and on the Christmas table, but also hung from beams because the room was supposed to remind those present of the stable where Jesus was born. Then farmers would count the straw retained on beams and in the cracks of the walls, trying to predict how much corn or wheat would be reaped during the upcoming year. Extraordinary properties were attributed to that straw. The farmer would throw it onto the fields, while saying the words: “Go, bundles, onto the field, because there is nothing in the barn.” People made straw braids and used them to bind fruit trees to ensure a good harvest and provide protection against hares during the winter. Housewives would put bunches of the “Christmas straw” into nests of hens and geese, to enhance hatching of chicks. One can reasonably assume that these customs relate to pre-Christian times.⁷ During Christmas Eve, magical powers were also attributed even to the litter swept from the floor in the room. On the second day of Christmas, farmers carried this to the field and scattered it with the words: “Thistle, thistle, St. Stephen told you to go away.”

Hay was spread on the Christmas table and covered with a linen tablecloth. Only then would the loaf of bread along with the wafer (*opłatek*) be placed on it. The table became a kind of “home altar” because of the blessed wafer which itself symbolized Christ. For supper, people dressed in formal clothes. The male head of the family started with the Sign of the Cross, saying the words “God bless us in the field, at home, and in the barn,” and all the members of the family recited the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary” prayers. They did not forget about the dead either; by praying the “Angel of the Lord” and “Eternal Rest” for these souls they expressed the hope that the dead would get to heaven and live in eternal happiness. One place was left vacant at the table “because sometimes an unexpected visitor came, and on the Christmas Eve, every person must be welcomed.”⁸

6 Błońska 1976: 870; Klinger 1926: 53–55.

7 Kupisiński 1997: 62. Comp. Zadrożyńska 2002: 64–66; Klimaszewska 1981: 134.

8 Kupisiński 1997: 63; 2007: 256–259.

2 Christmas Eve Today

Being the most festive night of the year, Christmas Eve is for the people of the Opoczno region family-oriented and full of demonstrations of human warmth; it is a time of meeting with relatives and singing carols, a moment of rest from the daily routine, and a time of joy. But does the traditional atmosphere of Christmas Eve, outlined in the previous section of the article, still exist? How do people in the Opoczno region spend Christmas today? What is left of the tradition passed down over generations, cultivated in families and communities?

In recent decades, the village folk culture has changed significantly, indeed permanently. Young people can learn the way in which the Christmas Eve has been celebrated only from the stories of the elderly or from books and articles. Today, the so-called “festive mood” is often effectively created outside family homes – namely, in storefronts and restaurants. The commercialized symbols of the Christmas holidays have become colored lights and images of Santa Claus, the old man in a red and white outfit, carrying a sack with presents on his back, and a music box playing joyful melodies. Decorations and the background music “assault” us from all sides; they become obsessive and almost aggressive. In supermarkets they appear at the beginning of November, just after All Souls’ Day, and they persistently accompany customers until the end of January. They create the need to possess a variety of material things which, as it later turns out, are not at all necessary for improving the holiday experience.

For young people, the most characteristic feature associated with Christmas Eve and the Christmas season is the Christmas tree. Yet only a few people know the symbolism of the tree and are aware of the historical reasons for its presence in the house during the holiday season. Gradually, the custom of using homemade tree decoration is disappearing in the Opoczno region. Children do not make colorful chains; young people do not prepare small white stars or the main star, the gold one, which used to be placed at the top of the tree. Candles have been replaced by electric lights and colorful apples were replaced by glass ball ornaments. The Christmas tree is decorated mostly with accessories purchased in the store. Today, the basic connotation that a Christmas tree evokes among children and adolescents is presents. The media always represent Christmas trees as colorfully decorated trees, under which there should necessarily be a huge number of gifts. Furthermore, today people increasingly refer to the Christmas holidays using the secular term *Gwiazdka* (“little star”). For centuries the Christmas Eve supper was

initiated at the moment of the appearance of the first star in the sky. Nowadays, most often, seeing the first star is regarded as a sign to exchange gifts.

Nevertheless, many traditions associated with the celebration of Christmas Eve are still cultivated. Breaking and sharing the wafer (*opłatek*) and offering best wishes to each other, as well as placing hay under the Christmas tablecloth and putting a loaf of bread on it, are the traditional elements without which most of the inhabitants of the Opoczno region cannot even imagine Christmas Eve. The preparation of twelve dishes was once the mandatory custom in all households, but today some families have departed from this tradition. The reason may be the fact that at present we spend Christmas Eve in much smaller groups than in the past. Only immediate family members are present at the table, and we usually visit extended family on Christmas Day or on the day of the Feast of St. Stephen, December 26. The sharp increase in the level of migration of the inhabitants of the Opoczno region to large Polish cities and abroad, in order to get an education or find a well-paying job, also determines the fact that often children or grandchildren cannot visit their loved ones for Christmas due to the distance and the high cost of travel.

Until recently, the habit of sending Christmas cards to friends or family members who lived in other parts of the country, or abroad, was very popular. Today, in the era of mobile phones and the Internet, short messages sent from mobile phones and the so-called e-cards delivered via the Internet have begun to be very popular. Furthermore, the special atmosphere of Christmas Eve is often interrupted by the sounds of “cells” informing people about the arrival of new messages, whose contents frequently have little to do with truly heartfelt wishes. Such wishes are sent to a wide group of friends and acquaintances, or even colleagues. In the past few years there has been a renewed turn towards more traditional ways of extending wishes, but the younger generation, who use the Internet and cell phones more frequently, will certainly continue to use these, more convenient, forms of communication.

Another modern element that has permanently changed the way Christmas Eve is now celebrated is the TV set. It is hard to point to the origin of the “respect” which Poles now have for this medium. But the fact is that television viewing displaces the need to talk with the loved ones and even causes “aversion” to the traditional collective singing of Christmas carols in the festive atmosphere that has been shared with family members and friends.

Since the Catholic Church now emphasizes that Advent is the time of joyful waiting for the com-

ing of Jesus, the old ascetic practices, once cultivated during the time of Advent and on Christmas Eve, are now disappearing. Organizing dance parties during Advent was formerly considered almost to be a sinful act by the inhabitants of the Opoczno region; today it has become a common practice, and as such it is increasingly accepted by the younger generation. The strict fasting is no longer required on Christmas Eve, and meals with meat can be eaten. Indeed, the obligation of fasting on Christmas Eve by members of the Catholic Church was officially abolished in 1983. Nonetheless, the Polish episcopate upheld the Christmas Eve fast by the corresponding decree until 2003. Nowadays, the fasting is only recommended by local pastors. Respondents remarked that this decision may bring about the slow decay of old folk traditions. In addition, the fasting also had a great impact on the personal, spiritual preparation for the event, so important for a Christian celebration of that day. Interestingly, a large part of the population of Opoczno region declared that they still preserve the tradition of their ancestors by cooking and eating only meatless dishes during Christmas Eve.

To summarize, many Christmas traditions have remained only in the memories of elderly people. New homes or apartments are not quite appropriate for keeping such practices as the bringing of sheaves or hay into the room. Nonetheless, the strongest impact on the way of spending Christmas Eve was made by the mass media that have consistently promoted a new, “cosmopolitan” lifestyle. Although today the external form of spending Christmas Eve has changed and old customs are disappearing, Christmas Eve is still a tradition deeply rooted in the culture and in the hearts of inhabitants of the Opoczno region, indeed all Poles. Moreover, the most migration of people from the Opoczno region to larger Polish cities and abroad has also influenced the process of disappearance of old traditions and customs. Paradoxically, the customs and rituals that have not been assimilated into the liturgy of the Church disappear more rapidly in the shifting cultural context caused by globalization.

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