

PhD dissertation summary

The experience of sacred images in the Polish countryside culture in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ethnological perspective

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The experience of sacred pictures has its subjective and unique dimension. It is founded on values that are shared by community, and based on culturally conditioned ways of constructing the sensory and religious reality. The main problem discussed in this dissertation is the 19th and early 20th centuries' villagers' experience of sacred images: their evaluation and the attitude towards them. The concept of image is treated here as a category of culture, i.e. the characteristic of the image is a function of socially formed beliefs on this subject and connected practices.

The documentation used consist primarily of ethnographic sources from the 19th and the early 20th century. In addition to ethnographic literature, the results of fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015 and in 2019 were used in this study.

Two approaches have been used for the analysis of the folk type experience of sacred images. The first approach is synchronous. It focuses on the analysis of the system of values shared by social actors (inspired by the Jerzy Kmita's theory of culture, especially his postulate to take into account the humanistic coefficient in the interpretation). Therefore, the fundamental question posed to the cited sources concerns the values expressed by the holy image from the perspective of rural cultural entities from the 19th and the early 20th century. The second approach diachronic, which allows taking into account the sequence and time dimension of the studied phenomena. This diachronic viewpoint creates an opportunity to hypothetically recognize the unique components of culture woven into the structures of the *longue durée*.

The dissertation consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, the theoretical framework was defined in order to sketch the social background of the image and the categories used to interpret it. The idea was to invoke such tools or research categories that would allow for an emic

analysis, i.e. a description of ideas about the meaning expressed by a holy image. These included findings on the ontology of image in the mythical worldview and the way of “interpreting” sensory data in the folk type culture. An important issue are theoretical findings in the field of aesthetic meanings gave the possibility of reaching the ideological values. In relation to the discussed cultural context, the ethnological term of miraculus sensitivity and the related category of thantological sensitivity, were found to be important. In my opinion, they are crucial in studies on the pattern defining the experience of sacred images as cultural phenomena.

The second chapter focused on ethno-aesthetic issues. This part of the work discussed problems related to the visual layer of the image, which is particularly “suspicious” of link with sacred sphere (i.e. the most desirable values). I explored the issue of iconographic schematization and ornamentation. In accordance to statements about the high valorization of miraculous images in the folk type culture, I tried to identify the visual “pattern” on sacred (miraculous) images. In order to fulfill their cultural function, holy pictures must complete culturally “defined” requirements, i.e. meet the conditions set by the community established iconographic canon. In the discussed context, paintings that do not follow this “recipe” are considered “heretical” or even demonic. This reveals the high importance of the visual layer of the image.

The next two chapters examined the attitudes towards images and the values expressed by pictures in ritual experience. The third chapter analyzed the beliefs revealed by using the images during two types of cultic practices, distinguished by their kinetic dimension, namely the ritual of processional bowing of the pheretron and the celebration of encirclement of the fields with banners. In both cases, the ritual context of presence of images and the diachronic understanding of conditions of these customs were taken into account. In the case of the processional bowing of the pheretron, the possible influence of the baroque etiquette was considered. Furthermore, the creative transformation of the baroque gesture in accordance with needs and system of values prevailing among the ritual participants, was included. In the case of the celebration of encirclement of the fields with banners, the problem of the numinous meaning embodied by the banner was raised, as well as its possible historical background dating back to pre-Christian times.

The fourth chapter explored image-related practices that seem to border on cult activities. The purpose was to investigate the possibility of separating the sacred from the image or ways

of “reformulating” its holiness. In the section on the practice of sacred flogging I focused on the diachronic conditions of image manipulation practices, which could have had a crucial impact on the form of gesture. The selection of manipulation practices would be based on the archaic principle of appropriateness of punishment to a specific offense. The idea was to answer the question whether from the point of view of social actors, the manipulations were socially permitted activities or, on the contrary, deviant, sacrilegious activities. In another section I discussed the issue of the practice of excluding or marginalizing images (burning, burying, floating them) in accordance with social norms, as well as the beliefs related to these activities, which operated in parallel with the ban on destroying images of saints. The information recorded both in source texts and in contemporary custom related to the “burial” of images show striking analogies to funeral rituals. It seems that convictions within these two spheres can also be considered parallel.

The last section of the fourth chapter considered the hypothetical relationships between beliefs related to the ritual of separation (getting rid of) images and beliefs accompanying funeral practices. It seems that the connection between these two areas could have originated in the transformations taking place within funeral rituals, which influenced the way the cult of images was formed on archaic Slavic communities.