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Foreign homeland. Folklore and national attitudes of ethnic minorities

*Zagraniczna ojczyzna. Folklor a postawy
narodowe mniejszości etnicznych*

Research subject

The article presents the ways in which folklore is used in the process of reification of the concepts of 'nation' and 'foreign homeland' in the activities of organisations aiming at reinforcing the sense of national identity in ethnic minorities. The matter is discussed using the example of social processes observable within the ethnic minorities of Teschen Silesians from the Trans-Olza region and Touts inhabiting the Serbian region of Banat, and associated with constructing the sense of belonging to a nation. The work is empirically based on ethnographic studies conducted in ethnically diverse communities in Trans-Olza (the Czech Republic) and Ostojićevo (the Republic of Serbia), which have – according to the political declarations of the individuals in question – a Polish national minority. Broadly speaking, what these groups have in common is their place of origin, namely Teschen Silesia, the reasons for becoming separated from "their" country following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, as well as features that set them apart from the majority, such as their heritage language (the Teschen dialect) and their religious denomination (the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession).

I have been conducting field research among members of the mentioned minorities for over fifteen years, which has allowed me to observe the similarities and differences apparent in the relations between language, culture and ethnic and national identity. Interviews, participant observation and analysis of media information drew my attention to how folklore affects collective identity in the context of defining differences and delineating boundaries between communities. My study of social and cultural processes among Teschen Silesians from Trans-Olza began in 2001. Issues related to the sense of national identity in the context of folklore was also the subject of my most recent field research, conducted in May and June 2022, which encompassed overt, structured interviews with members of minority communities aged 17–25, and focus group interviews among the students of the J. Słowacki Polish Middle School in Český Těšín. My research among the descendants of people from Wisła living in Ostojićevo has continued since 2008; my latest research visit to Banat was in October 2022. Research work included direct and participant observation, interviews with informants, as well as the analysis of secondary material and media discourse.

Categories, not collectives

The analysis presented below is based on a constructivist theoretical foundation that rejects the axiom of the permanent existence of social groups. In this respect, I follow Rogers Brubaker's and Katherine Verdery's concepts in which groups are conditional, fluid constructs and the sense of identity ought to be regarded as a "changeable product of collective action", rather than a stable root of community building (Calhoun 1991: 59, see Brubaker 1996: 20). In this context, the ethnic group, the nation, and the ethnic or national minority are not substantial forms that may be defined or described in terms of collective entities capable of coherent, deliberate, collective action. These terms designate institutional (not substantial) groups, practical social categories (not collectives), and contingent events (not entities) (Brubaker 1995: 108–118, 2002: 167–170). These terms point to certain outlooks, sets of views and beliefs, rather than demographic facts. In the light of these assumptions, ethnic groups, nations, and ethnic or national minorities should not be conceptualised as "things" or "organisms", but presented in dynamic relations and described in terms that express distinctiveness and processuality. Consequently, these categories cannot be ascribed to specific groups in a top-down, authoritative, irreversible fashion, since they may be used interchangeably in reference to the same individuals, depending on the discourse in which they are situated and the relations in which they are presented. A good example of such a relational approach to defining status – sometimes ethnic, sometimes national – is found in the groups of Trans-Olzans and Touts, which are described (or define themselves) as either ethnic or national groups, depending on the given discourse (institutional or colloquial).

The category of ethnicity is constituted in social relations between individuals who see one another as culturally different; with some cultural differences being perceived as important and socially significant in the creation of boundaries between “us” and “others”. Fredrik Barth distinguished two orders that give rise to the cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies: the order of overt signals or signs, i.e. the distinguishing features that people exhibit to present their identity to others (e.g. attire, language, appearance of houses, lifestyle), and the order of basic values, or the standards of morality and excellence that are used to evaluate the results of people’s actions (Barth 2004: 14). Ethnicity, or rather *ethnicisation*, is a political, social and cultural process that is changeable and processual in nature. It is not permanent or immutable (Brubaker 2002: 167–168). The concept of an ethnic minority, in turn, refers to groups that are smaller than the remainder of the population within a society and are not politically dominant. The key feature associated with that category is maintaining individuality, often in spite of the actions of the state authorities aimed at a complete integration in terms of culture, politics and economy (Eriksen 2002: 122–124).

This being said, it is not ‘ethnic group’, but ‘nation’ that constitutes the key category in contemporary political thought, as its realisation is achieved through the practical use of the said category in political discourse and activity. The reification and naturalisation of the category of nation is a social process characteristic for nationalism understood as a “heterogeneous set of nation-oriented idioms, practices and possibilities that are continuously available or ‘endemic’ for modern cultural and political life” (Brubaker 1996: 10, 18–19; Berger, Luckmann 1983). Katheryne Verdery defines nation as the symbol of and grounds for classifications, the meaning of which – as with all symbols – is ambiguous and may be used in different ways by different actors. This, in turn allows different people to be mobilised around the concept, as each of these individuals is convinced that they all understand it in the same way (Verdery 1993: 38). Characteristic for nationalism is its approach to statehood, which is based on the “demand” that ethnic boundaries do not cut across political ones (Gellner 2006: 1).

National minority, in turn (as a dynamic, relational concept directly related to the category of ‘nation’), is a political stance delineated by professing affiliation with another nation, demanding state recognition for this distinct identity, and asserting it as the basis for certain cultural or political rights (Brubaker 1996: 6). The point of reference for national minorities are their foreign homelands, which ought to be understood not as the countries which the members of the minority or their ancestors once inhabited, but the image thereof shaped by the cultural and political elites using a specific institutional discourse. It is also a dynamic political stance that implies the existence of shared nationhood across state borders and citizenship, and upholds the idea that this nationhood should be protected (Brubaker 1996: 66–67). The categories of nationality and national minority are the axes of social classification used by the institutions of the modern nation-state in processes of homogenising their citizens through discourse and political activity, presenting an image of shared tradition, culture, history and language (Hobsbawm 1990: 16–40;

Verdery 1993: 37–38). It is only in the actions of the modern state and the state system that the mentioned categories are materialised, thus making the group as a social construct become objective reality and be perceived as something natural that has existed “since time immemorial” (Gellner 2006: 55; Berger, Luckman 1983: 146–150).

An anthropologist studying social relations on the level of everyday life, including the processes of group formation and their interconnections, as well as the emergence of identity, acquires data through prolonged research, which allows them to apply in their analysis the perspective of the individuals under scrutiny. Thus, the research strategy adopted in the present article involves an emic perspective, which takes into account how the studied communities organise their views and concepts, and create social rules. This makes it possible to attempt to explain the logical and empirical systems of members of a given cultural group based on their own definitions of various phenomena (Harris 1976).

National attitudes and folklore

The process that may be used as the starting point for the analysis of the creation of national attitudes through the use of folklore in the reification of social constructs into social reality is the development of relations between the institutions of the nation-state and the citizens thereof. Following the social anthropologist and sociologist Andreas Wimmer, I understand *nation-building* as the process of shaping and maintaining political ties between the citizens and the nation-state; ties which transcend ethnic divisions in order to integrate the majority and the ethnic minorities into an inclusive system of power (Wimmer 2018: 2–7). According to Wimmer, identification with a nation goes hand in hand with political integration. This strengthening of ties is achieved through the system of power and the aid of organisations (e.g. voluntary associations, professional groups, parties), which foster the emergence of alliances between the citizens and the authorities, and facilitate the distribution of financial resources that the state shares with its citizens (Wimmer 2018: 23–44). The process of *nation-building* is also closely connected with the relations between the minorities and their foreign homelands, whose actions are aimed at legitimising the status of the minority as belonging to their nation, albeit beyond the borders of that given state. In a sense, persons declaring to belong to a minority group become “a field of differentiated and competitive positions or stances adopted by different organizations, parties, movements, or individual entrepreneurs” who each seek to “represent” the minority to the state or to the outside world, to monopolise the legitimate representation of the group (Brubaker 1995: 112–114).¹

The present article calls attention to the activity of institutions and organisations working for the Polish minority on behalf of its foreign homeland. They certainly use

¹ There are institutions supporting Poles abroad, as well as associations of people who identify as belonging to the Polish nation. See <https://www.gov.pl/web/polonia/organizacje-polonijne2>.

folklore as an instrument in their endeavours conducted under the auspices of the nation-state and aimed at strengthening the minority's bonds with Poland, and leading to the reification of the category of 'nation' in social perception. This task is feasible owing to the features of folklore, such as recurrence, consistency and conventionality, which allow for the reproduction of perceptions about the world that perpetuate a particular image of it and influence reality (Kajfosz 2013). The inclusion criterion for categorising texts found in social circulation as folklore is the degree to which their content matches the perspectives, beliefs and action strategies common among the members of a given linguistic and cultural community. If the texts' contents are accepted and, most importantly, shared and emulated by the members of that community in terms of reproducing structures of meaning, then these texts are conventional and consistent in nature, which makes them classifiable as folklore (Kajfosz 2011: 54–55). Thus, what is referred here by the term 'folklore' is a conventional text, recurrent and reproduced in the process of communication on the level of *langue*, or the linguistic and cultural model functioning in a given environment (Bogatyrev, Jakobson 1980: 4–5), a fixed "sign-and-symbol plane" (Sulima 2005: 576)², the functioning of which is conditioned by preventive censorship.

The national census of 2021: "I'm putting in: Polish" (*Wpisuję polską*)

One example of the state reification of the category of nationality are national censuses which Benedict Anderson describes as one of the instruments of power reinforcing colonial ideology and policy (Anderson 2006: 164–170). At present, politicians use this instrument to consolidate the hegemony of the nation-state and to legitimise the status of the dominant group. The end of the First World War, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the collapse of the multi-ethnic Habsburg monarchy led to the restructuring of the political order in Europe, which brought a strong nationalisation of the political space in the region (Brubaker 1995: 108). In 1920, the region of Teschen Silesia was split in two by the state border between Poland and Czechoslovakia, which meant that many native Polish inhabitants with a Polish national identity living on the left bank of the Olza river were left on the Czechoslovak side of the border and were dubbed a national minority in Czechoslovakia (Labocha 2016: 159). According to the census of 1921, the Czechoslovakian Teschen Silesia (including the Frýdek county) was inhabited by 177 626 Czechs, 69 360 Poles and 23 005 Germans, including individuals of Silesian nationality.³ The native Polish population was spread over the territory of two counties: Okres Český Těšín and Okres Fryštát (today this

2 All citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article.

3 The final census conducted in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1910 noted 139 016 individuals of Polish nationality, whereas the first Czechoslovak census from 1921 had only 69 360. The reasons for this discrepancy lie in the different criteria of categorisation. Austrian census makers focused on the language

region is called the Trans-Olza); in the Frýdek county the Czechs were the majority, even though the other inhabitants of the region included not only the ethnic Poles from Teschen Silesia, but also Polish labour migrants, originating mostly from Galicia, and a German minority (Gąsior 2020: 142–143).

In the inter-war period, the autochthonous population of Czechoslovak Silesia still considered Poland the homeland with which they identified and felt emotionally connected (Szymeczek 2007: 158–159). However, the Czechoslovak government's efforts to integrate the acquired area with the rest of the country and its national policy (including industrialisation and the influx of workforce from other regions of Czechoslovakia to man the mines and foundries, the weakening of Polish-language education, the nationalisation of arable land) led to changes in national identity that resulted in assimilation processes. After the Second World War, the communist regime suppressed all expressions of nationalism and limited the national life of Poles, despite the efforts of Polish organisations, such as the Polish Cultural and Educational Union and the Polish Youth Association. Resentment towards Poland gradually grew, especially after the forces of the Warsaw Pact entered Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Szymeczek 2007: 159–161). Furthermore, the ethnic structure of the Trans-Olza began to change, as was apparent in the figures recorded in successive censuses: in 1950, the number of people that declared Polish nationality was 59 005; in 1961, it was 58 867; in 1970, 56 075; in 1980, only 51 586 (https://www.polonica.cz/Files/File/Wizja_2035_tekst.pdf). The image of Poland did not improve after 1989, and over time the inhabitants of the Trans-Olza became convinced that they had been left to their own devices and that their foreign homeland did not care for them at all. In the most recent census, conducted in 2021, the number of people in the Moravian-Silesian region declaring only Polish identity was 18 378, whereas in 2011 that number amounted to 26 553 (<https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/narodnost>). This decline in numbers, apparent in each successive census, is largely explained with assimilation processes and migration, as well as the tendency to refuse all nationality declarations altogether (Bizoń et al. 2015: 7–11).

Analyses of the discourse of the Trans-Olza ethnic identity lead to the conclusion that the youth is increasingly less likely to consider its affiliation with the Polish national group. As noted by Józef Szymeczek, who has studied social and cultural processes in the Trans-Olza region, “young Poles in Trans-Olza have problems with defining their own identity; the reply they typically give is: ‘I am neither Polish, nor Czech, I am *tu stela* [from here]’. Poles in Trans-Olza feel no connection to the Polish state” (Szymeczek 2007: 161). Thus, Szymeczek hypothesises that the sense of Polish national identity is losing its validity in favour of the Trans-Olza ethnic identity, the determinants

of everyday communication, whereas the Czechoslovak ones, on the category of nationality defined on the basis of ethnic identity (Gąsior 2020: 131).

of which are: the use of dialect (speaking *po naszymu* – “in our own tongue”) not only in casual relations, but increasingly often also in official contexts (instead of the Polish language), as well as overt declarations of belonging to a local, not a national group. Similar observations were made by Janina Labocha, a researcher studying the linguistic borderlands between Czech and Polish. She demonstrated that the contemporary discourse of the trans-Olza youth is characterised by a lack of sentiment to their Polish roots or the Polish language, recognition of the local dialect as belonging to both the Polish and the Czech language, and a stronger sense of kinship to Czechs from the region than to Poles from Poland, as well as greater interest in Czech culture, cheering for Czech sports teams, etc. (Labocha 2016: 162).

Activists from Trans-Olza are perfectly aware that only clear statements of Polish national identity will give them a leg to stand on, and allow members of the minority to exercise their rights. What is meant here is the scope of activities defined by the act on the rights of national minorities passed by the Czech parliament on 10 July 2001. These rights include the right to use their own language, especially when writing their names and surnames, marking the names of localities, streets, public administration buildings, and in official communication and in court; to receive education in their native tongue in schools and kindergartens; to develop their native culture and cultivate tradition; and to publish press titles and broadcast radio and television programs in the language of the minority.⁴ Government policy towards minorities is shaped largely by the results of censuses; a fact of which not all the interested parties are aware. One institution that raises awareness of the consequences of nationality declarations is the Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic, a civic association that coordinates the activities of other Polish organisations in the country (33 in total) and represents the Polish community before the majority of the society, state organs, local authorities and the media. The Congress of Poles led the campaign of *Wpisuję polską* (I’m putting in: Polish), encouraging people to declare their nationality as Polish in the 2021 census conducted in the Czech Republic (<https://www.polonica.cz/SpisLudnosci2021/>).

The instruments employed in that campaign included the option to generate a personalised online banner on the Congress of Poles website, by adding certain elements to a pre-prepared background – such as one’s name, surname, or the name of one’s group, one’s profession or function, and one’s photograph. In addition, one had to choose from one of the suggested slogans justifying the choice of Polish nationality in the census form. The options were: *Jeżech tu stela* (“I am from here”), *Warto tu żyć* (“It’s worth it, living here”), *Liczymy się* (“We matter”), *Jeżech twardy Polok* (“I’m a stalwart Pole”), *Jestem Ślązakiem* (“I am a Silesian”), *Dogadam się, domluvim se* (“We can get along”, repeated in Polish and in Czech), *Mój dom, Zaolzie* (“My home,

4 The Act on Rights of Members of National Minorities of 10 July 2001 (Zákon č. 273/2001 Sb. o právech příslušníků národnostních menšin a o změně některých zákonů).



Fig. 1. A personalised banner from the *Wpisuję polską* campaign. Acquired from: <https://www.polonica.cz/Wygeneruj-swoj-baner/>.

the Trans-Olza”), *Jestem Polakiem* (“I am Polish”), *Robiym we werku* (“I work at the factory [Třiniec Iron and Steel Works]”), *Mówiym po naszymu* (“We speak our own tongue”), *Jako obywatel Księstwa Cieszyńskiego* (“As a citizen of the Duchy of Teschen”). These steps resulted in the generating of an electronic banner that constituted a given person’s or group’s declaration of being a part of the Polish minority, concluding with the statement: *Wpisuję polską* (“I’m putting in: Polish”) and the hashtag #jezechpolok (<https://www.polonica.cz/Wygeneruj-swoj-baner/>). The personalised banners were published on the Congress of Poles website and could be shared on social media.

The provided choice of slogans giving justification for opting to identify with the Polish minority is interesting and hardly accidental, as it constitutes an expression of views, opinions and perception that members of the local community use to self-identify in opposition to the majority group. These include the use of dialect, bilingualism (command of Polish and Czech), being *tu stela* (“from here”), attachment to the region, historical awareness – all of which are features that characterise the autochthonous inhabitants of the Trans-Olza region (Szymeczek 2007). The identification of features important in inter-ethnic relations and using it as the basis for systems of classification into “us” and “others” serves to organise the social world and create cognitive maps. Establishing boundaries between “Poles” and “others” is closely connected to external circumstances, including the numerical predominance of some groups over others, and the influence of various centres of power. In the case of the texts under scrutiny – which were, to a degree, an element of a political campaign – it should also be noted that these were standardised utterances, repeatable and understandable to all potential recipients of the message, and approved by them. Therefore, they may be considered an element of the communication habitus (Kajfosz 2013: 107), whose aesthetic and cognitive features are reproduced by the natives, who accept them and identify with them. This hypothesis finds corroboration in numerous statements made

by my interlocutors who define themselves as *stela* (originating "from here"), who manifest a strong local identity, and are linguistically and culturally distinct from both Czechs and Poles living on the Polish side of the border:

I'm putting in "Polish" nationality, but if there was a box for Trans-Olza nationality, I would put in that. Homeland for me is the Trans-Olza, not even the entire Teschen Silesia, because you need only to cross over to Cieszyn or to Kaczyce and things are already different. Here, Czech is more natural to use in a shop than Polish (...). Here we say "I'm going to Poland", even if this means going across the bridge to Cieszyn (male, aged 25).

The Trans-Olza is the people, because even though they don't know one another, they always speak *po naszymu* ("in our tongue"). I am annoyed by those *Polocy* (Poles) who, the more they say Poland, the more money they want, but cannot put a sentence together in Polish. I'm putting in "Polish", but if it were possible, I would put myself down as being of the "Trans-Olza nation" (female, aged 24).

The statements of my respondents testify to the conventional nature of the slogans proposed by the Congress of Poles, which reflect the reproducibility and consistency of views of the segment of society at which that campaign was directed. Reproducing texts on the level of specific forms and structures of meaning points to how established they are in the collective consciousness of the target group. Thus, they may be regarded as texts of folklore, revealing world-views, reproducible and accepted by members of the Trans-Olza community. A similar use of folklore as means of persuasion could also be observed in the short videos promoting the slogan *Wpisuję polską*, appearing on the Congress of Poles website and distributed through the YouTube channel. Let us examine one of these videos, which follows the convention of a fairytale, despite clearly referring to the present-day situation in the borderlands. Elements of the folk tale genre, including its formulaic nature, composition and directly addressing the audience, were used to construct a promotional video encouraging the viewers to put in Polish as their nationality in the upcoming census. The characters appearing in the video are a grandfather and a granddaughter playing a round of chess, during which the grandfather begins his tale:

I will now tell you a story about a small land. It is a land of exceptional beauty. Much of it is covered in mountains, there are dense forests and rivers... The people who live there seem happy, because everyone is doing what they know how to do, what they enjoy and what they want. The people of that land are very attached to their territory, to tradition – they respect and cultivate it. Interestingly, they speak different languages. But it's not like in the Biblical Tower of Babel. Every person speaks how they please, and yet nearly everyone can understand one another (www.facebook.com/kongres.polakow/videos/474414843596483/).

Following the dialogue between the grandfather and the granddaughter, the viewer is to be left with the impression that putting in Polish nationality in the census form will

help preserve the beauty of that fairytale land which is “here, at home”. The features associated with the Trans-Olza region (as every viewer will realise this is the land in question), such as the beauty of the mountainous landscape, freedom, attachment to the land and to tradition, as well as linguistic diversity all from the stereotypical image of the “little homeland” of the Trans-Olza.

The aim of the campaign under scrutiny was to convince its recipients that the views and attitudes they represented, as well as the phrases they used – intimately known, clearly legible and approved of among the autochthonous residents of the Trans-Olza – are an indicator of belonging to the Polish national community. Thus, “localness” was equated with “Polishness”. As noted by Jan Kajfosz, a cultural anthropologist studying the communities in the borderlands of Teschen Silesia, a text that is replicated in many variants may have causative powers, while folklore – as a specific example of a colloquial text – is contingent on the authorities that create ideas, shape identities and model a particular perception of the world (Kajfosz 2013: 110). The power of folklore used in media messages therefore had tangible effects in the form of the legitimisation of the Polish minority inhabiting the Moravian-Silesian region. Contemporary expert in folklore studies Janina Hajduk-Nijakowska draws attention to the significant connections between the texts in oral circulation to the ones circulating in the media. As a result of this dialogic quality, relations functioning in oral circulation and presenting a colloquial interpretation of reality based on a certain world-view penetrate into mass circulation (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2011: 25). In the analysed case, folklore not only became an interpretative clue in the process of acquiring and deciphering the contents of the media campaign *Wpisuję polská*, but also – though the transmission of models of thinking, perceiving and interpreting the world – legitimised such social constructs as the nation, the Polish minority, and the foreign homeland, paving the way to them being regarded as facts. The relations into which the people of the Trans-Olza enter with their “reified” foreign homeland are not one-dimensional or constant, but complex and dynamic. On the one hand they distance themselves from Poland and Poles, not least because of their unfulfilled expectations regarding their foreign homeland, which did not offer care and support when they had been left to their own devices, abandoned and lost (Labocha 2016: 160). On the other hand, the Trans-Olza ethnic identity becomes the point of reference for defining the image of national minority within the institutional discourse created for the purpose of the national census.

The Touts – from an ethnic group to a national minority

Another example of the reification of the category of “national minority” is the foundation of the Nationality Council of the Polish National Minority in Serbia (*Nacionalni savet poljske nacionalne manjine*). It was established on the initiative of the Touts, who are the descendants of 19th-century labour migrants from Wisła in Teschen Silesia.

The Touts' ancestors came to the region of Banat in the first half of the 19th century seeking work as saltpetre makers; it was a migration within the borders of the Habsburg monarchy to which both these regions belonged (Szczypka 2010). When new political borders were set following the First World War, the village of Tisza Szent Miklós in Banat (presently Ostojićevo), where the migrants from the Beskid region had settled, became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (in 1929 renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), and after the Second World War – a part of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Today, Ostojićevo is a village in the Republic of Serbia and serves as the headquarters for the Council of the Polish National Minority.

Coming to the southern reaches of the Habsburg empire, the settlers from Wisła did not have a highly developed sense of national identity, as evidenced by the fact that they adopted the ethnonym "Tout" as the name of their group. The term comes from the Hungarian *Tóth*, used in reference to newcomers from Upper Hungary (Slovakia). It should be noted that the categories for community-building used at the time of that migration were religious denomination and place of origin, since in the early 19th century the concept of "nationality" had not been firmly rooted among the peasants of Teschen Silesia (Kajfosz 2012: 4). The limited contacts the migrants had with their compatriots in Wisła meant that the self-identification of the Wisła community in Banat remained independent from the Silesian sense of identity, which began to change after the Springtime of Nations and gravitated towards identification based on nationality, including Polish. The first few generations of settlers from Wisła were classified in censuses as "Slovak", which was how the members of that community saw themselves, which – as they themselves admitted – resulted from the linguistic and denominational proximity. In time, as descendants of ethnically diverse couples reached adulthood, more of them began to define their nationality as Yugoslavian, and then Serbian, or often left the question of nationality unanswered or declared regional identity (Drljača 2011: 71–72; Marcol 2012: 153–156). Official data regarding the number of individuals declaring Polish nationality in censuses are now difficult to obtain, as the percentage was very low; it is also impossible to verify whether anyone in the Čoka commune has declared Polish nationality (the results of the census conducted in Serbia on 1–31 October 2022 are not yet known at this point in time). According to the information provided in 2019 on the website of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Belgrade, the estimated number of "persons of Polish origin" residing in Ostojićevo is 150. Interesting data may be found in the yearbook reports of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, to which the parish in Ostojićevo (established by the migrants from Wisła and their descendants) officially belongs. In 1964 the reports mention 350 members of the congregation; and 322 in 1985 (Drljača 2009: 12–13; Drljača 2011: 73). The cantor of the Evangelical Church in Ostojićevo, with whom I spoke in 2019, mentioned that 120 individuals paid church taxes. However, there can be no doubt that individuals identifying as

“Touts” have constantly been subjected to the influence of the “majority” (the Catholic Hungarians, the Orthodox Serbians, and even the Evangelicals from Upper Hungary), which made the group particularly vulnerable to processes of assimilation.

Since 2007, which is when intense official contacts between the communities in Wisła and Ostojićevo resumed after a hiatus of several decades, the Polish Embassy in Belgrade has established an area of influence, institutions and non-government organisations have worked on behalf of the Polish minority, and academic research has been conducted among the Wisła community in Ostojićevo. All these factors brought about a process of transformation of identity, from ethnic-based (Tout) to national (Polish) (Marcol 2020: 110–121). The emergence of new cultural memory among the Touts is associated with their acceptance of the Polish symbolic universe referring to the nation and the appearance of new emblems (e.g. “Polish” folk costumes, the repertoire presented on stage by “Polish” children’s groups), and still requires active work towards the affirmation of “Polishness”. Many of these processes are grounded in ethnic self-identification, based not only on religious denomination (the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession) and ancestry, but also on heritage language – the Wisła dialect – in which folklore was transmitted. The new national identity is shaped on the perceived continuity between communicative memory, passed down the generations in conversations conducted in dialect, and cultural memory, preserved in the system of national symbols (Marcol 2020: 233–279).

The traditional folklore of the Touts was used in nation-building activities by the Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy from Kielce. In 2014, the organisation carried out a project entitled *WISŁA, powrót do źródła. Wzmocnienie i aktywizacja środowisk polskich w Serbii* (WISŁA, the return to origins. Invigorating and activating Polish communities in Serbia), financed by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project involved representatives of the Foundation travelling to Ostojićevo to meet selected members of the “Polish minority” in order to conduct workshops aimed at stimulating the local community in terms of economy and culture. At the second stage of the project, selected individuals (the leaders of the minority group) were invited for a study trip to Kielce and a sightseeing excursion to Krakow and Warsaw. The visit to Poland also included sessions with experts, in order to develop a strategy for the *Kulturno umetničko društvo „Wisła Ostoićevo”* association (Cultural and Artistic Society “Wisła Ostoićevo”; hereinafter: KUD Wisła).⁵ The directions for the association’s development were agreed upon; these covered e.g. enlisting the cooperation of Polish and international NGOs, achieving financial independence for the association, teaching the Polish language and – most interestingly for the present analysis – striving to cultivate Polish tradition. This “Polish” tradition to be cultivated by the association was defined

5 *Kulturno umetničko društvo „Wisła Ostoićevo”* was established by Touts in 2008, to “engage in amateur art, the cultivation of tradition, and the continuation of the cultural heritage of Poles” (according to the KUD Wisła Ostojićevo Statute).

by the foundation members as rituals, folk songs and tales, or – more generally – the folklore of the ethnic group passed down in inter-generational transmission. Family tales were often mentioned by Touts themselves, who stressed the importance of inter-generational communication in preserving the sense of community:

What I know, these songs, they were all taught to me by my grandmother. I remembered everything. I know a lot. My grandmother and I were at home. My Dad had five sisters, and he was the only son. And then these sisters all married, and Dad stayed home with grandmother. And grandmother taught all of us, since we were little, both how to pray and how to sing, so that's how I remember it. And all the grandchildren came to her, there were thirteen of us. Thirteen grandchildren, my grandmother had (female, aged 76).⁶

There can be no doubt that, due to the work of the non-government organisation, traditional folklore – which is a part of the Touts' communicative memory as a familiar, reproducible and accepted system of meanings and symbols as well as world-views – was “transplanted” onto the system of national symbols which had thitherto been alien and incomprehensible. Thus, in the experience of the Tout community, the familial dimension of transmissions of memory was connotationally equated with the national dimension of the “foreign homeland”, which resulted in its reification, familiarisation and positive valuation; it may even be argued that the “foreign homeland” became an object of desire. The imagery related to the “foreign homeland” began to be based on the poetics of folklore, which has not only provided aesthetic experiences, but – through the reproducibility of models and formulas – shapes the world-view, transmits patterns of thinking and validates strategies of legitimation (Lyotard 1984: 18–22). Due to the efforts of the organisation working for the benefit of the “Polish minority in Ostojičevu”, traditional folklore which had thitherto not been associated with any imagined community (and was simply a part of the Touts' cultural behaviour as a clear and obvious element of their own culture) has become an indicator of the emerging Polish nationality.

The foundation also motivated the eldest generation to gather old folk songs, recall the rituals, and write down the texts they could still remember, as well as to meet with each other and sing together. These initiatives led to the creation of hand-written songbooks and notebooks containing information about rituals, which were then used not only in spontaneous performances, but also in stage shows by the second Polish association in Ostojičevu – *KUD Višljani iz Ostojičeva*, established in 2015.

Changes therefore occurred not only the manner folklore texts were perceived, but also in the purposes of their transmission, as they began to function in the form of folklorism presented during festivals and other celebrations, during which the status of the Polish minority in its local environment was legitimised in relation to the

⁶ The testimony was spoken in dialect; here translated to standard English (translator's note).

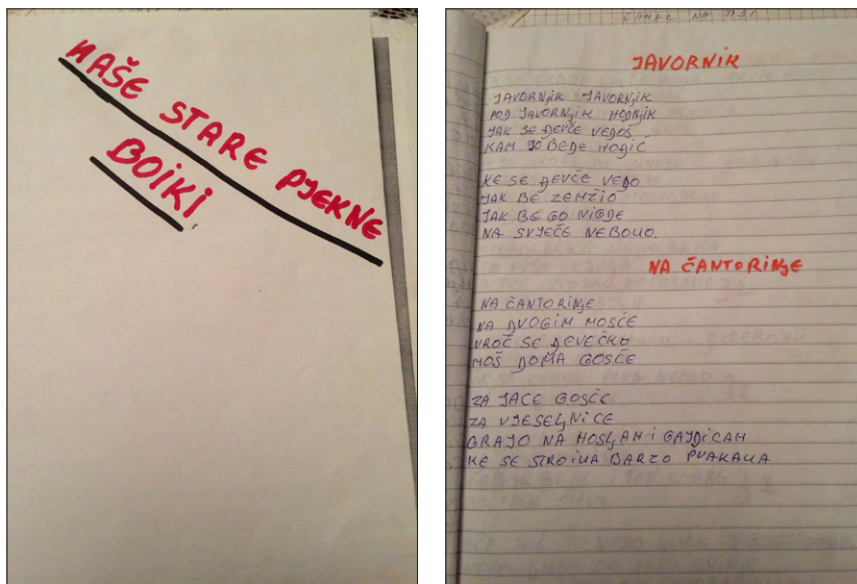


Fig. 2, 3. Pages from a handwritten Taut songbook, in which songs used in inter-generational transmission are written down from memory; Ostojićevo (Banat, Serbia) (2019). Photo by K. Marcol.

Serbian majority and other minorities (e.g. Hungarian or Slovak). Thus, texts of folklore shifted from communicative to cultural memory, whose construction is largely dependent on institutions and the authorities. Aleida Assmann notes that although institutions and organs themselves (e.g. nation-states) do not “have” memory, they still “create” it in a top-down process, in which they use signs and symbols of memory, texts, images, rites and practices. Institutionally created collective memory leaves no room for spontaneity or ambiguity, since it is deliberately constituted and symbolically constructed (Assmann 2013: 48). The transmission of this type of collective memory is usually associated with positive emotions and aesthetic sensations, which affect how one shapes the image of the world, and are conducive to a positive valuation of the messages transmitted. Perceptions of the Touts’ past in the context of a national community are created during official celebrations in the embassy, or during festivals, which evoke aesthetic-sacral sensations, resulting in the transfer of rank from social practice (a performance of a singing group) to a presented image of the past (connected to the history of the Polish nation). Thus, the positive connotation with the Polish nation grants the performance the status of truth witnessed, while folklore acquires a “national affiliation” (Kajfosz 2013: 101).

Jan Kajfosz regards transformations that take place in the perception of folklore, as well as its modality and intent of transmission as a natural phenomenon, since it is always a response to current social needs, and the result of the influence of “power”, understood as a “network of overt and tacit (unmaterialised or unrecognised) coercion

distributed over many centres” (Kajfosz 2013: 98). In the case of the Touts, changes in folklore are indubitably associated with a chance for an increase in the status of that ethnic group within social hierarchy, which is achieved through re-defining local identity into that based in the category of the (Polish) nation. Although the concept of a “nation” implies an oversimplification of the individual sense of identity, which is often complex and difficult to define, it has substantial advantages – it is socially approved, does not require any additional explanation and allows one to clearly define their identity in relation to others that use the same categories. National identity is rooted in everyday life, in routine, unreflective activities, and as such is commonplace and reinforced by habits (Billig 2008: 15–16). As one of the descendants of the Wisła migrants in Ostojićevo, the new identity gives them a sense of security in a world where nations are the dominant category defining social bonds (Marcol 2020: 294).

Conclusions

The analysis of the nation-building function of folklore reveals how reproducible structures of meaning may potentially influence social reality, including people’s choices and the decisions they make regarding declarations of nationality. Although, from an academic perspective, efforts toward the reification of the categories of ‘national minority’ and ‘foreign homeland’ are regarded as persuasive action serving, among other things, to authorise political programmes, in popular perception they function as objectivised and natural entities in relation to which one needs to declare their view. As Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann observe, “reification exists in the consciousness of the man in the street and, indeed, the latter presence is more practically significant” (Berger, Luckmann 1967: 90). At the basis of the objectivity of the social world lie the collective communication practices during which knowledge about reality is transmitted, views and values are expressed and people’s relations with the world and society are established (which is what folklore actually means) (Bartmiński 1990). Folklore thus appears to be both a condition and a cause of the reification of the category of ‘national minority’ and ‘foreign homeland’.

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Summary

The article aims to present the relationship between folklore and the formation of national attitudes in members of ethnic minorities. The issue is considered on the example of two ethnic groups: Silesians from the Trans-Olza (Czech Republic) and Touts living in the region of Serbian Banat (Republic of Serbia). Folklore is presented from an anthropological perspective, as communication practices of specific communities, which manifest what the communicative community considers important in terms of content and form of communication, as well as what it regards as axiologically acceptable. Performing their world-forming function, texts of folklore

have an impact not only on shaping cognitive habits, but also on forming collective memory or directing social moods. In the case of minority groups, it is inspiring to observe the nation-forming function of folklore, as well as the influence of folklore texts on defining the boundaries of an ethnic group.

Keywords: folklore, national minority, nation-building, identity

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu ukazanie zależności pomiędzy folklorem a kształtowaniem postaw narodowych członków mniejszości etnicznych. Problematyka ta będzie rozpatrywana na przykładzie dwu grup etnicznych: Ślązaków z Zaolzia (Republika Czeska) oraz Toutów zamieszkujących serbski Banat (Republika Serbii). Folklor jest tutaj ujmowany z perspektywy antropologicznej, jako praktyki komunikacyjne określonych społeczności, w których przejawia się to, co wspólnota komunikatywna uważa za istotne pod względem treści i formy przekazu, jak również to, co uznaje za aksjologicznie akceptowalne. Teksty folkloru, pełniąc funkcję światotwórczą, mają wpływ nie tylko na kształtowanie przyzwyczajeń poznawczych, ale też na formowanie pamięci zbiorowej czy ukierunkowanie nastrojów społecznych. W przypadku grup mniejszościowych inspirująca jest obserwacja narodotwórczej funkcji folkloru, jak również wpływu tekstów folkloru na określanie granic grupy etnicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: folklor, mniejszość narodowa, budowanie narodu, tożsamość

Translated by K. Michałowicz