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Lower Silesian Costume: Transposition of Prewar Heritage Within Folkloristic and Regional Frameworks

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Abstract

Viewed as "correct and authentic" by some, yet criticized as ugly and inconsistent with the Polish imaginary of folk culture by others, the Lower Silesian costume is a simplified and unified version of the pre-World War II regional dress of the Karkonosze Mountains. It was popularized in Lower Silesia after the war to fill the folkloric void caused by the almost complete population exchange. Currently, it is used by professional and amateur folk groups.

I analyze the phenomenon of the Lower Silesian costume through its cultural biography. As presented in this article, it is divided into three chronological parts: before World War II, when the costume was worn by the German inhabitants of the region and local enthusiasts in a spirit of romanticized nationalism; after the war, when it was (re)introduced as an element of institutionally created folklore and propaganda Polishness of the region; and today, when the costume is perceived as full of contradictions. I conclude the analysis by proposing the concept of cultural transposition, which is the relocation of cultural elements or phenomena into new socio-political frameworks, leading to their (not necessarily harmonious) mutation.

Keywords: Lower Silesia; folklore; regional costume; "Recovered Territories"; anthropology of contradictions; cultural transposition

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The focus of this article is the so-called Lower Silesian costume. I refer to it as "so-called" because the term designates an artificially constructed form of regional attire, inspired by prewar versions of local regional dress. Prior to World War II, when Lower Silesia was part of Germany, no single, unified "Lower Silesian" costume existed – there were diverse local forms and patterns. Furthermore, the area now known as Lower Silesia was historically part of the broader Silesian region, with Breslau as its capital, which means that the administrative borders were different than today.

The focus of my research is not on the costume's appearance or its ethnographic "authenticity". Rather, its cultural biography gives me an opportunity to analyze and describe the institutional creation of regional heritage in rural areas in postwar Lower Silesia – heritage which was related to folk culture – and the response to it in popular narrations. My interest extends to the contexts in which the costume was employed, as well as the discourses it navigated and continues to navigate – formulated both from above by politicians or "authorities" and from below by its users.

What is particularly interesting is that the costume was worn by both prewar and postwar inhabitants of the region, that is, within different social, cultural and political frameworks and with different emotions surrounding it. After World War II, Lower Silesia – like other regions in the current western and northern Polish territories, known as the "Recovered Territories" – was transferred from Germany to Poland. This border shift, sanctioned by the decisions of the Allied leaders, resulted in mass migrations. Prewar Lower Silesians were forced to leave their homeland, taking their regional costumes with them.[1]

The postwar settlers, comprising heterogeneous and often antagonistic groups,[2] underwent a process of cultural homogenization, driven by propaganda narratives which aimed at justifying the loss of Poland's eastern territories and the ensuing forced migrations. Central to these narratives was the assertion of a return to Poland's purportedly natural, medieval borders. In the newly annexed territories – where, according to a propaganda slogan, "even the stones spoke Polish" – traces of Polishness were actively sought after centuries of what postwar policies described as "German occupation".[3]

Scholars of various disciplines were enlisted to "restore Polishness", as it was called. Just three years after the war, in 1948, a two-volume work was published, emphasizing the Slavic character of Lower Silesia's natural and cultural landscape (Sosnowski, Suchocki, & Barciński, 1948; Sosnowski, Suchocki, & Bednorz, 1948). One of the chapters mentions the Lower Silesian costume, which is portrayed as proof of the Polishness of folk culture in the annexed territory (Brzeska & Stelmachowska, 1948). Despite the changing narratives

1 The regional costumes were used in new places of settlement, mainly in West Germany, where the prewar Silesians cultivated their customs after the war.

2 Postwar settlers coming from various provinces of prewar Poland, as well as from Siberia, Bosnia, France, Belgium, and Germany, were a diverse group in terms of their national/ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. For selected sources on migration to postwar Lower Silesia, see Giedrys-Woźny (2021).

3 The figure of the German colonizer frequently appears in Polish scholarly works on the region, even on the folk costume (see e.g. Bazielich, 1988, p. 24).

that, over the years, revealed the artificiality of postwar propaganda and corrected the history of the region "rewritten" after World War II, the Lower Silesian costume remained in use, intrinsically linked to Lower Silesian regional identity.

The folk costume of Lower Silesia has never been a subject of intensive research. Before World War II, German ethnologists and folklorists typically classified it as part of the broader category of "East German costumes" and treated it rather superficially compared to the costumes of central Germany. I have not encountered any German-language publications devoted exclusively to Lower Silesian dress. Interestingly, the work titled *Die niederschlesischen Volkstrachten* [Lower Silesian Costumes] (Steller, 1938) actually describes Sorbian garments, raising questions about prewar regional divisions of Silesia – an issue that, unfortunately, lies beyond the scope of the present article.

In the first decade after World War II, the Lower Silesian costume was incorporated into the propaganda narrative of Poland's return to its "natural borders" and presented as evidence of Polish historical presence in the region. The key publication from this period is Tadeusz Seweryn's 1950 monograph (part of the series *Atlas polskich strojów ludowych* [Atlas of Polish Folk Costumes]), which is examined in more detail below. In the following decades, mentions of the costume were brief and sporadic. Barbara Bazielich, a researcher specializing in Silesian folk costumes, touches upon the Lower Silesian costume in relation to her broader studies on Silesian traditional dress (Bazielich, 1988). Although one of her next studies is devoted to "traditional Lower Silesian costume" (Bazielich, 1993), it provides only a preliminary overview, focusing mainly on descriptions of its individual elements. Comprehensive publications on Polish folk dress, in turn, tend to reiterate the limited findings presented by Bazielich and Seweryn.

The fragmentary descriptions of nineteenth-century folk dress from this region reflect a traditional approach to costume studies, which often emphasizes the material artifact as a static form. However, in recent years, this perspective has shifted. An important milestone in this transformation was the publication of *Folk Dress as a Cultural Phenomenon* (Brzezińska & Tymochowicz, 2013). In her contribution to this extensive volume, Anna Weronika Brzezińska argues that analyzing folk dress "only in the framework of material culture seems unsatisfactory" (Brzezińska, 2013, p. 15), advocating instead for its interpretation beyond material criteria – as a cultural phenomenon that addresses more social issues (Brzezińska, 2013, p. 16).

In the case of the Lower Silesian folk costume, this approach opens up unexplored areas of inquiry, such as contemporary variations of the costume and, most importantly, its perception by users and the emotions it evokes. Like the editors of the volume *Folk Dress* mentioned above, I consider the Lower Silesian costume a cultural phenomenon, a form of dissonant heritage (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) related to cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), and an element of discourse to be deconstructed and interpreted (Foucault, 1972). The adopted research perspective, which moves from specific details (the Lower Silesian costume) to broader contexts, provides insights into the processes

of institutionalizing folk culture in the so-called Recovered Territories and the conscious or unconscious acts of heritage-making.

Following Laurajane Smith, I approach heritage as a process that, while encompassing the material domain, is fundamentally intangible. Heritage, including folk costumes, is undoubtedly a social construct, although it has undergone necessary essentialization in the identity-building process (Meyer & van de Port, 2018). My research demonstrates that the Lower Silesian costume has become a significant – though ambiguous and often criticized – element of post-migrant Lower Silesian identity. Interestingly, while the need for a folk or folk-inspired costume is an undisputed aspect of the self-identification of contemporary rural communities, the concept of the Lower Silesian costume specifically provokes controversy and ambiguous emotions.

Emotions are a crucial dimension as they significantly influence the ways in which heritage is experienced, interpreted, and utilized (Smith, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the context of dissonant heritage, which evokes differing interpretations among varied groups of stakeholders (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Emotions shape both personal and collective relationships with the past. In the case of the Lower Silesian costume, emotions often amplify the complexity of its perception, revealing its contested and multifaceted character.

Finally, another point of theoretical reference is cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), which can establish relationships between individuals and the region. Postwar inhabitants of Lower Silesia became successors to German legacy. The concept of cultural succession, introduced by Robert Traba, pertains to post-migration spaces such as the territories incorporated into Poland after World War II. Its core idea is "the interactive process of building the collective identity of a given place based on a trialogue between the existing tangible heritage, family memory, and the changing notions of successive generations" (Traba & Kąkolewski, 2018/2023). Cultural succession constitutes an open field of dialogue, akin to the idea of culture as a space for communication described by Moritz Csáky (2013). One of the research questions I have addressed is the extent to which the postwar Lower Silesian costume fulfilled – and continues to fulfill – the role of a transcultural connector, bridging the heterochronic and binational dimensions of local heritage.

In my research on this costume, I draw upon a diverse range of sources. In pursuit of prewar narratives, I turn to German ethnographic works (Helm, 1932; Steller, 1938; von Oertzen, 1932) and press publications ("Der Wanderer im Riesengebirge" [The Wanderer in the Karkonosze Mountains], among others). To reconstruct discourses and practices related to the costume in the postwar decades, I utilize archival materials from the State Archives in Wrocław (Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu), the Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych), and the National Digital Archives (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe), as well as private collections, including commemorative books of folk and amateur groups. A significant part of my empirical material comprises qualitative interviews (structured and unstructured) with folk group members, conducted systematically in nearly all districts of Lower Silesia from 2013 to 2017 as part of the Ważka

Foundation's projects,[4] and currently, since 2022, alongside observation and participant observation during local, regional, and national ceremonies and festivals such as *dożynki* (harvest festivals). Apart from this, I conduct interviews with individuals employed in folk costume sewing workshops (the majority of them via the Internet, because the sewing workshops are based mainly in central and southern Poland) and with group leaders. I also analyze press articles and materials posted online, including on social media platforms.

As presented here, the cultural biography of the costume is divided into three parts, organized chronologically. The first section describes the prewar history of the costume, which I sometimes refer to using the German term *Tracht*. The second section deals with the postwar (re)introduction of the costume and the period of its functioning within the contexts of institutionalized and centralized folklore during the Polish People's Republic. In the third section, I examine the current contexts in which the costume is worn, primarily by informal folk groups in rural areas. In each section, I analyze the contexts in which the costume appears, in relation to processes taking place in politics, society, or culture, and I ultimately propose the concept of cultural transposition.

Tracht: Nationalized and Romanticized Folklore

In the urbanized region of Lower Silesia, folk costumes quickly disappeared. Ethnographers indicate the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century as the primary period of their usage (Bazielich, 1993; Golla, 2013; Rostworowska, 2001). Their disappearance first became evident in the lowland areas of the region, while in the mountain areas, including the Karkonosze and Owl Mountains, elements of women's traditional dress persisted until the twentieth century. Like in other regions, the costume now referred to as "Lower Silesian" exhibited numerous local variations. The principal components of women's dress included a skirt, blouse, jacket, apron, a chest-crossed scarf, and a richly adorned bonnet, which varied in design and served as the primary adornment, a social status symbol, and a symbol of wealth. Men's dress comprised headgear (be it a peaked cap, top hat, or hat), shirt, vest, jacket, woolen outer garment, trousers, and often high footwear. Despite its apparent association with rural populations, particularly in postwar Poland and at the time of the vibrant regionalist and ethnographic movements of the early twentieth century, Lower Silesian dress had an urban character, aligning with the eighteenth-century European fashion standards. This is evidenced not only by the cut but also by the high-quality fabrics and accessories produced in workshops and manufactories, such as Lower Silesian lace or chain watches (Piskorz-Branekova, n.d.).

4 The main projects concerning folk culture and heritage in Lower Silesia were: *Prze-twórcy ludowi* [Folk Re-Creators], *Zespoły ludowe – laboratorium etnograficzne* [Folk Ensembles – Ethnographic Laboratory], and *Dożynki 2016* [Harvest Festival 2016].

Most costumes in the collections of ethnographic museums date from the period of their usage in the nineteenth century but were most likely gathered in the twentieth century, amidst the flourishing of ethnographic movements. This era witnessed a heightened interest in traditional dress, particularly in the Karkonosze region, which became a settlement area for intellectuals and artists (Łaborewicz & Wiater, 2011; Wiater, 2020). Like the Polish Tatra Mountains and Zakopane, the Silesian mountain areas with Schreiberhau (present-day Szklarska Poręba) as a central town were associated both with the beauty of nature and with the local inhabitants – "folks", who, within the stream of romantic nationalism, were perceived as an unspoiled emanation of the nation, at that time: the German nation. The regional costume became an element of the debate on the nationality of Silesia, stimulated both at the beginning and in the second half of the twentieth century (Brzeska & Stelmachowska, 1948; Steller, 1938).

In prewar Schreiberhau, local activists and folklorists, along with enthusiasts of regional attire (*Trachtenleuten*), organized various folk festivals which served as an opportunity to wear and display traditional costumes. Among these events were costume festivals (*Trachtenfesten*), St. John's bonfires, lit on the shortest night of the year, and so-called spinning evenings, which, in addition to showcasing attire, also revived vanishing crafts (Berendt & Michalska, 2011).

Numerous visual materials from that period have been preserved, primarily photographs.[5] These images depict people who are celebrating: young and old, women, men, and children – all dressed in costumes of a recognizably similar character, yet varying in details, materials, and the cut of their caps. Groups of revelers sit at communal tables or walk in processions, including wedding ones, through the streets and fields of Schreiberhau. Elżbieta Berendt, former director of the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław, describes one photograph that disrupts our "cultural comfort", foretelling the end of Lower Silesian folk culture in its prewar form. It depicts an elderly couple dressed in traditional attire standing at the threshold of their home, seemingly about to leave it. This image is featured on the cover of a publication issued by the National Museum in Wrocław, where they gaze at arriving new settlers (Berendt et al., 2009).

Postwar Re-Introduction: "Re-Polonized" and Institutionalized Folklore

The first Polish publication devoted to the Lower Silesian costume – and one of the two monographs on the topic – was *Strój dolno-śląski: Pogórze* [Lower Silesian Folk Costume: Foothill Region], written by the prominent prewar ethnographer Tadeusz Seweryn. It was published in 1950 as the second in the newly established series *Atlas polskich strojów ludowych*. The aim of the series, initiated by Józef Gajek,[6] like in other ethnographic endeavors of the time, was to map the diverse folk costumes, highlighting their distinct traits.

5 Other interesting material includes the collection of graphics *Schesisches Bergvolk* [Silesian Highlanders] by Erich Fuchs.

6 Józef Gajek (1907–1987) was an ethnographer who held several academic positions across Poland: in L'viv (today in Ukraine) (1938–1939), Lublin (1947–1951), Poznań (1951–1953), Wrocław (1953–1958). Gajek's

Searching for the genealogy of the Lower Silesian costume, Seweryn refers to two medieval sources: the Lubin Codex from 1353 and the Wrocław Codex from 1451 "with medieval miniatures from the life of Polish and German society in Silesia" (Seweryn, 1950, p. 28). From the first of these, Seweryn deduces that "the oldest images of the Lower Silesian costume are also the oldest materials for [the history of] folk costume in Poland" (Seweryn, 1950, p. 5), taking the clothes of peasants presented in medieval illustrations as the prototype of the Lower Silesian costume.

The deep historical roots of the costume both permit and justify its usage by postwar Poles, aligning with the postwar policy of searching for Polish traces in the Recovered Territories. Seweryn frequently compares the Lower Silesian costume to those from "other regions of Poland", noting, for example: "The second scarf, that is, the outer wrap that enveloped the woman, was also white. It bestowed upon the women a mark of Slavic simplicity" (Seweryn, 1950, p. 7). A few pages later, he writes: "It can be assumed that the main winter garment of Lower Silesian women, similarly to the general trend in central Europe, was the so-called *sukienka* 'dress', worn in Lusatia, Greater Poland, and generally throughout Poland in the early nineteenth century" (Seweryn, 1950, p. 21).

Seweryn added two colored plates to the publication, depicting couples dressed in "Lower Silesian" attire (see Fig. 1). The first of these is captioned as "Lower Silesian costume from Szklarska Poręba". The female is dressed in a blue kaftan and a red skirt with green trim, the latter partially covered by a white apron. Atop her head rests an embroidered green bonnet embellished with lace, and across her chest, a crossed white shawl is visible. The male figure is garbed in a decorative green vest beneath a blue coat, a top hat, high boots, and black trousers. In the second plate, captioned as "Lower Silesian costume from Jedlina" (in the Owl Mountains), the female wears a purple jacket (*katanka*) with green trimmings. Below the green apron peeks the hem of a blue skirt. Her head is adorned with a decorative purple bonnet accented with lace. The male standing beside her is dressed in a navy jacket, light trousers, dark shoes, and a cap; he holds a pipe in his hand. Around his neck, similarly to the male from the first plate, he wears a decorated colorful shawl.

Both illustrations, created by Jerzy Karolak, are based on costumes documented by the German nineteenth-century ethnographer and folklorist Albert Kretschmer.[7] However, the types of costumes chosen by Seweryn are not dominant in Kretschmer's publication, which also has illustrations of other types, including those made of colorful, patterned fabrics. It is thus unknown why Seweryn's choice fell on such models. Perhaps costumes in dark, solid colors reminded him more of the medieval clothes? Similarly enigmatic is why Seweryn describes the female costume shown in the first illustration as "the most popular",

research primarily focused on regional differences and ethnographic cartography. From 1953 onwards, he was the editor-in-chief of *Polski atlas etnograficzny* [Polish Ethnographic Atlas].

7 Unfortunately, the source is unknown; it is possible that Seweryn was familiar with Kretschmer's publication (Kretschmer & Rohrbach, 1864, 1906), or perhaps only with lithographs or its reproductions discovered, for instance, in museum collections.

because he does not cite any source of this assertion: “The most popular skirt color was coral, ornately trimmed at the bottom with a 15 cm-wide woolen ribbon in light cerulean green, and arranged at the back in flat pleats. These skirts were typically covered at the front by a cotton apron, usually striped in yellow” (Seweryn, 1950, p. 15). This statement has profoundly influenced reality and has determined the postwar appearance of the Lower Silesian costume. To this day, it remains an unquestioned reference point, widely accepted as definitive proof of how the costume “should” look.

Fig. 1. Illustrations depicting the Lower Silesian costume (from the Karkonosze Mountains (left) and the Owl Mountains (right)), featured in the book by Tadeusz Seweryn (1950).

Interestingly, the settlers arriving in Lower Silesia after the war had little to no contact with the regional costume, which, in the first half of the twentieth century, was perceived as a reconstructed symbol of attachment to the region and was, in many places, simply absent. If settlers did encounter elements of the costume, it was often in a repurposed form, such as embroidered white aprons reworked into curtains (one such object is preserved in the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław). Traditional folk costumes were present in prewar ethnographic collections, but these collections were dispersed during the war and, after the war, often lacked catalogues, which made precise identification of the items nearly impossible.

The significance of folk dress in Lower Silesia was not solely confined to the pursuit of identifying Polish traces. In the nascent Polish Republic (later the Polish People’s Republic), the (re)construction of folklore assumed a pivotal role. Presented as the creation of the working

and peasant classes, the "totalitarian folklore", as termed by Zuzanna Grębecka (2010), was aimed at transmitting new messages that aligned with the regime in power:

> National in form, socialist in content – this essentially determined the fate of traditional folklore in the era of totalitarianism. As traditional folklore refers to a traditional worldview, clearly incompatible with the communist proposal, it required either appropriate analysis, interpretation, and commentary, or reduction to merely its external form, filled with new meanings, or even treatment as a collection of patterns, adornments, and ornaments. What was previously spontaneous, was to be subjected to top-down supervision [...]. In this way, it is noted that during the totalitarian times, it was not the fading traditional folklore but reconstructed folklore that fared considerably better. The reconstruction was, in fact, the construction of something new. (Grębecka, 2010, p. 45)

One of the favored forms of postwar institutionalized folklore was the song and dance ensemble. The repertoire and costumes, tailored to the requirements of stage performances, emphasized the regional diversity of Poland. According to Ewa Klekot, this was also a policy of evading the display of much more pressing postwar socio-economic differences in Poland (Plinta, 2022).

The first and exemplary ensemble was the State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble "Mazowsze" [Mazovia], established in November 1948 by decree of the Ministry of Culture and Arts. The second one, the Song and Dance Ensemble "Śląsk" [Silesia], was formed in 1953, initially with a regional focus, which later expanded to national. Lower Silesia was not left behind. In 1952, the Song and Dance Ensemble "Wrocław" was founded (first operating as a cooperative). Despite initial problems, the ensemble quickly developed, presenting three "customary" programs in performances: the regional "Lower Silesian Suite", the national "Our Beautiful Poland", and "Songs and Dances of Friendly Nations", a nod to the Soviet Union. Hence, costumes were necessary for stage presentations.[8]

In the same year, 1952, a song and dance ensemble was established in Kłodzko. Over the course of its decade-long existence, the ensemble focused on exploring "Lower Silesian folklore" (Kołt, 2019). The performers wore costumes reviewed and approved by Wanda Modzelewska on behalf of the Central Office of Folk and Artistic Industry (CPLiA, also known as Cepelia). Following her visit to Kłodzko, Modzelewska affirmed her commitment to "maintaining regional authenticity" in the design of these costumes (Modzelewska, 2022, p. 261). Later in the text, it is noted that this authenticity referred to consistency with Seweryn's publication and Kretschmer's prints. This raises questions about how postwar ethnographers accessed these materials, suggesting that they may have been the only, and possibly incomplete, sources available to them.

In the postwar era, ensembles emerging in subsequent years – specifically in Wałbrzych (1955), Nowa Ruda (1971), and Legnica (1975) – set a precedent for what was known as

8 Most folk costumes were either sewn or assessed by the Central Service of Artistic Enterprises and Institutions (COPIA).

the amateur stage movement (*amatorski ruch sceniczny*). This term, within the context of the People's Republic of Poland, referred to groups composed of non-professional performers who appeared during local holidays and festivals. However, it was not an entirely grassroots movement, but one that was controlled and directed by local cultural institutions. Therefore, it conformed to the principles of centrally managed folklore, albeit with limited resources and scope.

One of the most significant festivals, fondly remembered by the inhabitants of Lower Silesian villages – according to research by the Ważka Foundation – was the "Colorful Villages" Tournament (Turniej "Kolorowe Wsie"), held from 1973 on a district scale, and from 1979 – on a provincial scale (within the then administrative province of Wrocław). Archival photos from the late 1970s show the presence of the Lower Silesian costume, though it was not predominant. Other types of costume present at the time, and still present today, include the so-called rural costume, perceived as a universal outfit (in the female version, including a floral skirt, scarves, beads), and costumes from other regions of Poland, typically in a folkloric style, custom-made.[9]

It is worth noting that during this period, starting from the 1960s, the interest of Lower Silesian ethnographers shifted from the politically propagated endeavor of searching for Polishness to the exploration of the cultures of settlement groups. In 1965, Magdalena Rostworowska organized an exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław titled *Kultura wsi dolnośląskiej 1945–1965* [Culture of the Lower Silesian Village 1945–1965], where, apart from the previously shown relics of so-called Silesian folklore, the heritage of the incoming groups was presented. However, the Lower Silesian costume, introduced in its postwar form, has remained the prevailing folkloric outfit associated with regional identity.

The times of the Polish People's Republic were not a monolithic era, and a similar periodization can be observed in attitudes toward folk culture in Lower Silesia, which reflected broader perspectives on the so-called Recovered Territories. During the early postwar years, there was a strong focus on seeking "Polishness", and folk costumes were used to legitimize Poland's presence in the western territories. The institutionalization of folklore contributed to the creation of stage costumes, including the Lower Silesian costume. The legacy of this process – a belief in the necessity of having a folk costume as a unifying element for groups – remains visible today.

In the 1960s, with the political "thaw", there was a shift toward uncovering previously silenced narratives about the diverse groups of postwar settlers. The topic of the "eternally Polish" Lower Silesian costume faded into obscurity. The 1980s, by contrast, saw the development of amateur rural cultural initiatives, initially supported by local cultural institutions. This laid the groundwork for contemporary phenomena in Polish villages, including numerous amateur singing groups and locally organized contests and showcases.

9 Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu (State Archives in Wrocław), I Edycja Turnieju Gmin "Kolorowe wsie". Fotografie [1st Edition of the Municipal Tournament "Colorful Villages". Photographs], 1979, AP Wr 82/1140/0/6.1/10.

Interestingly, after World War II, the Lower Silesian costume disappeared from German studies on the subject – only to re-emerge in contemporary times through online discussions and publications.

Contemporary Overview: The Costume as an Object of Contradiction

Currently, the Lower Silesian folk costume remains in use predominantly by song and dance ensembles specific to the Lower Silesian region, indicating that it has not been included in the national canon. Notably, even the prominent Song and Dance Ensemble "Śląsk", which represents Upper Silesian cultural heritage, does not incorporate it into their repertoire. The costume remains in use among amateur folk groups, particularly in rural areas, where it is worn during local and supra-local festivals, celebrations, and community events.

Amateur singing groups are common in Polish rural areas, including Lower Silesia. The groups often evolved from rural women's circles, which adapted to address the village's need for representation at festivals and the organization of local events, such as harvest festivals. Originally institutionalized during the Polish People's Republic as associations aimed at self-education and equitable resource distribution, they re-emerged in the early twenty-first century as grassroots social organizations. Although they attract women of all ages, due to time constraints they are mostly composed of retirees who can finally pursue passions beyond household and occupational responsibilities (Kurpiel & Lewińska, 2015; Sulejman, 2017).

Despite recent minor state funding, these circles have often faced significant financial challenges. One of them is the acquisition of "folk" or "rural" costumes – an element regarded as indispensable. The costume serves to unify the group's members and symbolically signal their local and regional affiliations.

In Lower Silesia, which is often described by members of the folk ensembles themselves as a region "without its own traditions", where "everyone comes from somewhere else", selecting a costume is not a straightforward task. The most commonly chosen model, often due to financial constraints, is the so-called rural costume. It consists of a floral skirt, a scarf, a white blouse, and a coral necklace. Such a costume also allows for the incorporation of local symbolism or the ensemble's name, primarily through embroidery motifs or color schemes. For example, the Lower Silesian group *Kowarskie Wrzosy* [Kowary Heather] uses costumes in a heather shade of purple.[10]

Another common choice is the costume from the Rzeszów region, which reflects the widespread belief that many Lower Silesians have origins in eastern Poland. This costume is also considered aesthetically appealing due to its vibrant and rich colors. In rare cases, villages where the majority of postwar settlers originated from a specific area choose a traditional folk costume reflecting their ancestral heritage. However, such situations are exceptions rather than the rule.

10 All example statements originate from the interviews and conversations with field collaborators.

The Lower Silesian folk costume remains an infrequent choice, largely for pragmatic reasons – it is typically commissioned from professional sewing workshops, which makes it relatively expensive. The decision to adopt this costume is influenced by several motivations and attitudes. First, it is often considered the "correct" choice, particularly by instructors, cultural center employees, ambitious ensemble leaders – such as retired librarians or teachers – and local authorities. In such cases, the costume serves as a material expression of regional identity, aligning with the traditional belief that the Lower Silesian region should be represented through Lower Silesian attire. The funding for these costumes often comes from municipal or district budgets, or is obtained through external grants, such as those awarded by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Occasionally, ensembles independently fund the purchase using prize money won at festivals of folklore, as was the case with the *Lejwoda* ensemble. Folk groups wearing Lower Silesian costumes are more likely to receive institutional support and recognition, particularly when representing the region at national events. For instance, during the 2016 Presidential Harvest Festival (Dożynki Prezydenckie) in Spała, Lower Silesia was represented not by the group that had made the best harvest wreath, but by the ensemble dressed in Lower Silesian costumes.

Fig. 2. Members of the Folk and Dance Ensemble "Porębiok" in Lower Silesian costumes (private collection of the ensemble).

The Lower Silesian costume is also chosen by villages with mixed postwar settler origins, serving as a unifying element and a common denominator for groups' members –

a shared symbol "to connect the group", as stated by members of the *Sąsiadeczki* ensemble. In such cases, the uniformity of attire is prioritized to reinforce the cohesion of the group (Kurpiel, 2018). However, there are instances where diversity becomes an argument against adopting (or re-adopting) the Lower Silesian costume. For example, in the case of the *Lejwoda* ensemble mentioned above, the wide variety of songs in their repertoire, originating from different regions, was presented as justification for rejecting it. The costume, viewed as unpopular among its users, was described by the group leader as lacking emotional significance or personal connection.

Despite the sense of pride associated with the "regional correctness" of choosing the Lower Silesian costume, the emotional response to it is largely negative. Members of folk groups and ensembles frequently describe it as dark, "poor-looking", uncomfortable, and, above all, unattractive. For example, Urszula from the *Leszczynki* ensemble remarked: "The Lower Silesian costumes are really ugly! They have those jackets here, and those funny caps there!" The costume is perceived as "folk-less" – a stark contrast to the vibrant, striped, richly flower-embroidered costumes from other Polish regions, which are widely admired for their beauty. The adorned costumes from eastern or central Poland "have embroidered vests, colorful details! Sequins, beads! They're wonderful!" This approach reflects a broader perception of color as a primary attribute of folkloric products, a phenomenon not limited to Poland (Gradén, 2014). The bonnet, once a principal adornment and social marker, is today deemed the most problematic element of the costume; it makes its wearers feel unattractive, infantilized, and displeased: "like babies".

The lack of emotional involvement and knowledge about the costume's history means that folk groups do not look further into the matter; the primary concern is to maintain a uniform costume that is regionally "correct". This observation is supported by interviews with employees of folk costume workshops, who report a noticeable lack of emotional investment in the crafting of costumes for ensembles from Lower Silesia. They highlight the absence of specific or personalized requirements for these costumes, especially in contrast to regions where traditional dress remained in use after World War II. Members of ensembles from those regions often request customized costumes modeled on familial traditions: ones "like my grandmother used to have". In the case of Lower Silesia, no such sentiments or demands have been observed. The workshop employees themselves acknowledge their limited familiarity with the subject, noting that the vast majority of patterns continue to be derived from the publications by Seweryn.

Few groups seek local variants of the costume. This happened in the case of the *Szklarki* ensemble from the Głogów region. The leader of the *Szklarki*, Danuta, consulted the Wrocław Ethnographic Museum. She was pleased to discover that the permanent exhibition featured a painting depicting a woman in the Głogów costume, which differs from the established postwar unified model of Lower Silesian attire. The woman in the painting is dressed in a blouse with short sleeves and a striped apron in light colors. Satisfied, Danuta decided on this model for the entire ensemble.

The ambivalent feelings toward the costume today lead to the concept of contradiction as described by the anthropologist David Berliner. The scholar advocates for the reintegration of "ambivalent statements, contradictory attitudes, incompatible values, and emotional internal clashes as research objects" (Berliner et al., 2016, p. 5). He asserts that contradictions are fundamental components of our identity, suggesting that our statements or behaviors can be contradictory yet not mutually exclusive, as illustrated by "the case of Madame de Deffand, who says that she does not believe in ghosts, but is afraid of them" (Berliner et al., 2016, p. 3). Berliner elaborates as follows: "The contradictions that interest me concern *nonreflexive*, i.e. unconscious, intrapersonal inadequation between discourses, ideas, feelings, values, and practices" (Berliner et al., 2016, p. 3).[11] In line with Berliner's thought, the Lower Silesian costume nowadays can be regarded as an object of contradiction. It elicits conflicting feelings and behaviors: a sense of regional attachment alongside beliefs in its lack of folkloric value; pride in its "correctness" and simultaneously negative feelings about its appearance or the comfort of wearing it; the desire to own a regional costume while simultaneously lacking reflection on its origin or local variations.

However, when contradictions are recognized, they serve as a foundation for self-awareness through the process of "reflexivity-in-action" (Berliner et al., 2016). This was observed in the abovementioned case of Danuta from the *Szklarki* ensemble, who wanted a folk costume but was skeptical of the uniform version nonreflexively repeated following Seweryn's publication.

Conclusion: Cultural Transposition

The cultural biography of the Lower Silesian costume, necessarily limited in scope for reasons of space, reveals it as an ambiguous and multidimensional phenomenon. On the one hand, it represents a part of German legacy; on the other, its transmission occurred under different conditions than those of other material elements that were inherited and reused by new inhabitants of Lower Silesia (e.g. everyday objects or architecture). Moreover, it was not revived as part of the post-transformation search for Lower Silesian roots (as was the case of Bard's gingerbread, whose recipe was recently reconstructed through Polish-German collaboration, becoming both an interrupted and a continued local tradition). Nor does it currently serve as an element of Polish-German dialogue, and thus it does not fully align with the concept of cultural succession as proposed by Traba.

This observation leads to the proposal for an alternative perspective. The case of Lower Silesian folk dress shows the integration of prewar elements into postwar frameworks – a phenomenon I propose to term *cultural transposition*. The concept of transposition is utilized across various fields of knowledge, including genetics, math-

11 I refer to Berliner's concept of contradictions in my article about Schreiberhau / Szklarska Poręba (Kurpiel, 2023).

ematics, and music. In each of these domains, transposition involves the relocation of one or more elements to a different setting (a genome, a mathematical set, a musical key), resulting in a mutation. In the context of the Lower Silesian folk costume, I define transposition as the relocation of cultural elements or phenomena into new socio-political frameworks, which consequently leads to some change, yet it does not necessarily mean the opening of transcultural or transnational dialogical space. Folk dress becomes a movable transposon, whose core function as a visual marker of regional affiliation remains unchanged, yet when transposed into a different social, cultural, and political space, it causes a mutation and the creation of new (not necessarily harmonious)[12] networks influencing the meaning of and/or beliefs about heritage, local identity, cultural policy, and so on.

Initially, in the early twentieth century, the regional folk costume served as a marker of regional belonging for its wearers. At the same time, in a manner that corresponded with the ideological and philosophical trends of the era, it symbolized an attachment to the German nation. Following the change in national borders, the costume continued to serve as a visual manifestation of a new – this time Polish – Lower Silesian identity and became a tool of political manipulation aimed at the legitimization of the process of appropriation of "Recovered Territories" and their legacy. Its (re)introduction occurred within the context of institutionalized or even totalitarian folklore. Currently, due to the multiplication and democratization of narratives, the costume has become an object of contradictions: both desired and critiqued, recognized as a Polish folk costume yet not appearing typically Polish. However, it still remains a marker of complex, multifaceted, and ambiguous Lower Silesian regional identity combined with the process of heritage construction.

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12 I refer again to the notion of "dissonant heritage" (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), which is also derived from music theory.

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Dolnośląski strój ludowy: regionalno-folklorystyczna transpozycja przedwojennego dziedzictwa kulturowego

Abstrakt

Przez niektórych uważany za „poprawny i autentyczny", przez innych krytykowany jako brzydki i niespójny z polskim wyobrażeniem kultury ludowej, strój dolnośląski, będący przedmiotem artykułu, to uproszczona i zunifikowana wersja przedwojennego stroju regionalnego z okolic Karkonoszy. Po II wojnie światowej został spopularyzowany na Dolnym Śląsku w celu wypełnienia folklorystycznej luki spowodowanej niemal całkowitą wymianą

ludności na tym terenie. Obecnie jest używany przez wybrane profesjonalne i amatorskie zespoły folklorystyczne.

Analizuję fenomen stroju dolnośląskiego poprzez jego kulturową biografię, którą dzielę na trzy chronologiczne etapy: okres przedwojenny, gdy strój był noszony przez niemieckich mieszkańców regionu oraz lokalnych pasjonatów w duchu romantycznego nacjonalizmu, okres powojenny, kiedy został (na nowo) wprowadzony jako element instytucjonalnie kreowanego folkloru i propagandowej polskości tzw. Ziem Odzyskanych oraz współczesną sytuację, w której strój jest postrzegany jako przedmiot pełen sprzeczności. Artykuł kończy propozycja koncepcji transpozycji kulturowej, będącej przeniesieniem elementów lub zjawisk kulturowych do nowych ram społeczno-politycznych, prowadzącą do ich – niekoniecznie harmonijnej – mutacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Dolny Śląsk; folklor; strój regionalny; „Ziemie Odzyskane"; antropologia sprzeczności; transpozycja kulturowa

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