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Summary of the PhD thesis

**Semiotics of ritual gestures in Polish family and annual rites**

(written under the supervision of Prof. Jan Adamowski)

Ritual gestures are an important element of the ritual structure, perform many cultural and social functions, and first of all they are signs with rich symbolical meanings. No attempts have been made yet to elaborate ritual behaviors systematically and syncretically, therefore it is important to document and interpret them due to a rapidly progressing process of a disappearance of many ritual gestures, and thereby traditional folk culture and all its forms.

The purpose of the dissertation in question is, on the one hand, to show how gestures contribute to the semantics of the rite and what functions they perform, and on the other hand, to explain the selected (most culturally important) ritual gestures. Eleven gestures that are the most culturally fixed and commonly present in Polish family and annual rites, were analyzed in detail. The material basis for the work is all-Polish documentation that includes such sources as published ethnographic materials (regional monographs, folklore texts and dictionary data), field interviews as well as film and photo sources.

The work uses the semiotic method which allows to capture ritual behaviors comprehensively, i.e. in a structural and processual way, and thereby to indicate their fixed symbolical meanings. The proposed model of the description of a ritual gesture is determined by three levels of semiotic analysis: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic ones.

The dissertation was divided into two parts: theoretical and analytical ones. The theoretical part consists of three chapters sequentially dedicated to the history of studies on gestures, methodological assumptions and the semiotic model of the description of a ritual gesture. The main part of the dissertation is Chapter Four where you can find explications of selected ritual gestures inscribed in the semiotic model

of the description of a ritual gesture. The analysis focuses on eleven ritual gestures that are the most frequently duplicated and best fixed in Polish family and annual rites, such as kissing, drawing a cross, sprinkling, destroying, gifting/sharing something, giving somebody or something a wash, strewing/sprinkling with something, going around, jumping/throwing up, hitting, putting something somewhere / in(to) or behind something.

Chapter Five - *The ritual gesture and the rite of transition* - is an attempt to show how specific ritual gestures function in a structure of the rite of transition. The gestures accompanying a preparation and consumption of the wedding *korowaj* were analyzed here.

The executed explication leads to a formulation of a few basic conclusions.

Firstly, a ritual gesture as an integral element of the textual ritual structure can be treated and described as a culture text being both a determinant of the cultural and religious identity of a social group and an important transmission being carried in collective memory and mediating between the past and the future.

Secondly, ritual activities are deeply symbolical. As the gestures (in particular ritual gestures) do not exist outside of the context and are never autonomous, their symbolic meaning is always disclosed in relation to both other signs and a specific context.

And thirdly, ritual behaviors fulfill many cultural and social functions. Among the most frequently realized cultural functions it is worth indicating apotropaic, fertile and agrarian-vegetative ones which prove that a protection of man and his entire surroundings is the highest and most frequently exposed good in the hierarchy of peasant values. A fertility of the humans, animals and plants as a necessary condition for prolonging life and a constant reference to the *sacrum* (a sacralization of time, space, man and his immediate environment) seem to be equally important. In the daily existence of a traditional community, an exposed place was also occupied by concern for the future - hence a commonness of fortune-telling behaviors. Either, the ludic function of ritual behaviors, which has been becoming dominant especially in contemporary rites, is of no less importance. In more detailed contexts, there is a purifying, flirty or penitential function. A social aspect of ritual gestural communication seems to be also equally important. The initiatory and performing functions come to the fore here - gestures signal the moments of

transition and cause changes of a social and moral character. Social functions emphasize a role of ritual gestures in building and maintaining interpersonal bonds.

The analysis of the collected material in the historical and cultural context shows a similarity of the content and symbolic significances of ritual behaviors which in fact implement a common meaning of the rites - they signal the moment of transition, destroy the old order and create the world anew, protect and sanctify a human being and everything that surrounds him, on both a micro- and macrocosm scale.

The methodological assumptions of the dissertation in question situate ritual gestures between two scientific disciplines of the contemporary humanities: semiotics and cultural anthropology. The combination of these two research traditions allowed to show the fullest possible cultural image of individual ritual gestures and to build the semiotic model of their description.

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