

## I. RESEARCH ARTICLES

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## SYMBOLISM OF FERTILITY IN POLISH FOLKLORE\*

The article discusses the symbolism of fertility and the means of its expression in Polish folk culture. Fertility can be recognised, protected, and stimulated in communal and family customs, or hindered through word and gesture. The verbal code is treated here as a carrier of symbolic meanings and so is inalienable from other cultural codes: material, personal, temporal, locative, or involving action, music, and dance. The codes function interchangeably, replacing and complementing one another.

KEY WORDS: traditional culture, folklore, symbolic meanings, fertility, cultural code

### 1. Fertility and its expression in traditional culture

Fertility is one of the most frequently recurring motifs in oral Polish folklore. With folklore being defined as “a necessary component of spiritual folk culture, based on socially agreed-upon knowledge of the world and shared values, where the living word is preserved in rituals, behaviour, music, and dance” (Bartmiński 1990: 5),<sup>1</sup> the fertility of humans, animals, and plants is the focus of attention in both folk texts and general folk culture. It is usually encoded in symbolic language, derived from “natural signs of things”, and understood as part of a specific cultural code (cf. Mayenova 1974; Tolstoy

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1995; Tolstaya 2008). Via symbolic language, “the idea of a content [is expressed,] which in turn serves as expression for another content, one which is as a rule more highly valued in that culture” (Lotman 2001: 103).

As discussed in my earlier studies (Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2013, 2015), in particular those referring to the works of Russian ethnolinguists (e.g. Tolstoy 1995 [1982]), symbolic meanings in traditional culture are expressed by:

1. ritual objects (the korovai wedding bread, the wedding veil, *różga weselna* ‘wedding twig’, harvest wreath, Easter eggs) and objects of everyday use or otherwise commonplace (the harrow, the broom, the bread peel);

2. practices (putting a broom under the bride’s seat, turning objects face down, washing oneself with a metal coin on Christmas Eve);

3. music, dance, and games (e.g. singing the religious song *Serdeczna Matko* ‘Beloved Mother’ at the bridal couple’s blessing; a dance with a lame bride; various tricks, e.g. pinching, slapping, turning over the girls, chasing girls (the symbolic “butting”) by a horned creature called *Turoń* during carolling, walking around the Orthodox church on Easter Sunday; the game called *Mr Zelman*);

4. figures (a beggar or a Jew that appears in *Herody*, a type of nativity play); men dressed up as women and women dressed up as men during *Zapusty* (the last days of the carnival), a figure of the goat “dying” and “coming back to life” during carolling;

5. time (e.g. Christmas Eve as the time of changes; St. John’s Eve as the time of sexual initiation);

6. space (a circle drawn with blessed chalk that represents tamed space, including both the house and the farmyard). Above all those there is

7. the verbal code, which involves formulaic expressions and texts. Defined as a universal or superordinate code, the verbal code serves as the basis for a network in which words connect with “objects, people, as well as personal and group history” (Bartmiński 1986: 18). An account of the meaning of a verbal message requires that a broad context of an utterance be activated. At the same time, some signals that carry symbolic meanings are hidden in the verbal layer of the message, whereas others are not “rendered linguistic” and can only be identified through the relevant concepts and against their context of utterance.

The symbolism of fertility in Polish folklore rests on the mutual relationship between the verbal code and other cultural codes; cf. the following observation from Jerzy Bartmiński:

An ideal folklore text should be viewed as a non-autonomous part of a greater situation: not everything is explicitly stated in the text itself. The structure of such folklore texts is usually shaped by oral tradition, inseparable from cultural practices. Therefore, the text of folklore should not be viewed solely as a conventional symbolic sign but as something

that maps people's behaviour, reflects their judgements and worldview, and, besides pure communication, influences and shapes the stance of the speaking subject. (Bartmiński 1990: 195)

## 2. Fertility in its male and female aspects

Fertility in folk culture functions in the context masculinity and femininity and is always evaluated positively: it brings wealth and provides good living standards to the farmer's family. In contrast, infertility or sterility are always assessed negatively. The dichotomy finds confirmation in animal names, cf. *ogier* 'stallion', a male horse able to breed, vs. *walach* 'gelding', a castrated horse; *tryk* 'ram', a male sheep able to breed, vs. *skop* 'wether', a castrated ram. *Jałówka* 'heifer' is the name used with reference to a young cow that has not yet given birth to a calf. Used metaphorically, these animal names code the same features when used to refer to people, human sexuality or its disfunction, to human fertility or infertility. Thus, *ogier* 'stallion' can denote a sexually active young man, whereas *byczek* 'bull calf' is a category extension from 'a strong young bull' to 'a young man exuding sexual energy'.<sup>2</sup>

Human sexuality and sexual activity, and as a consequence fertility, also appear in folk erotic songs and are expressed in symbolic language. Usually, symbolic imagery recalled in erotic folk poems is based on everyday experience and its strong bond with nature (cf. Krzyżanowski 1989) – in this respect, the imagery of folk songs bears a striking resemblance to Old Polish erotic poetry (cf. similar observations in Bartmiński 1974; Wężowicz-Ziółkowska 1991; Prorok 2014). Consider the following excerpts, where womanhood is conceptualised as land, field, or meadow, manhood is expressed by means of farming tools, while a sexual intercourse is portrayed as farming:

- (1) 'Get up, Johnny, you have to go farming, you have had a good night's sleep.' 'Be quiet, Mary, stop calling me, I have already ploughed the field, I have already done that.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Numerous examples that refer to the fertility-infertility opposition can be found in Masłowska (1988), e.g. *byk*, *buląšk* 'bull': 1. 'young bull', 2. 'young lustful male'; *kaban* 'barrow', a neutered male pig > pej. 'fat man'; *walchoń* 'gelding' > pej. 'a person who is sluggish and lazy' (p. 75); *čučopa* 'ewe lamb', a young woman who has not given birth to a child; *kurzaja* 'a cock or hen showing no typical signs of gender' > pej. 'neither a man nor a woman' (Masłowska 1988: 50). Negative valuation based on the image of old and useless things also accompanies the bachelor/spinster opposition, e.g. *grochowiny* 'pea straw', *klamot* 'stuff', *knaga* 'a hook used for hanging clothes' > 'skinny old cow' > 'spinster', etc. (p. 48).

<sup>3</sup> Polish original: "Wstawaj Jasieniu do roli, już się wyspał do woli. Cicho Maryś, nie wołaj, juzrolkę zaorał, zaorał." (K 27 Maz 184.2) All abbreviations of the sources come

Positive valuation concerns two aspects here: (i) a fertile soil able to produce good crops, and (ii) good farming tools. The girl in the folk song praises the soil, whereas the boy boasts of his tools:

- (2) ‘Johnny, I have a field where good crops grow but it has to be farmed properly. With God’s help we will be happy together.’ ‘Katie, I have got three cows, the first will go forward and we two will follow it. There will also be a little plough, we put everything together and we will be happy.’<sup>4</sup>
- (3) ‘Mattie, I have got a small meadow where silky grass grows. In the middle of the grass there is a spring, the grass around it is always green and it will never rot.’ ‘Katie, and I have got a large scythe; when I start cutting with it, the grass will burn out. Come on, let swathe after swathe fall to the ground, my scythe cuts well enough to remove the dew.’<sup>5</sup>

These excerpts uncover correspondences between a woman and the earth. A woman, similarly to the earth, brings forth new life, accepts semen inside her body, carries the foetus and produces offspring. Thus, we obtain the so-called “fertility complex” that consists of male, female, and earthly components. The complex is based on numerous analogies between a deep furrow and a woman, between soil and the womb, a plough and the phallus, ploughing and fertilisation. The symbolic woman-earth merger “saturates sexual practices with farming metaphors and vice versa: farming techniques with sex metaphors” (Niewiadomski 1999: 11). As observed by Mircea Eliade, “feminine fecundity has a cosmic model – that of Terra Mater, the universal Genetrix” (Eliade 1961: 144).<sup>6</sup>

In erotic poetry, the names of male and female sex organs are encoded in symbolic language:

With respect to shape, appearance, natural gender, or function, symbolic language operates with opposites. Thus, pointed and sharp objects used for hitting, plunging, and moving are contrasted with round and flat ones (usually vessels), with holes and indentations; the predator is contrasted with the prey; male birds are contrasted with female birds; finally, actors are viewed in opposition to the actions they perform. All

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from the Dictionary of Folk Stereotypes and Symbols (*SSSL*, vol. 1(1): 35–83, vol. 1(2): 9–15, vol. 1(3): 9–22).

<sup>4</sup> “Mam ci ja Jasiu swój roli staję, na niéj się zboże bujne udaje. Tylko uprawy potrzeba, da nam Pan Bóg wszystko z nieba, dobrze nam będzie. Mam ja też Kasiu bydłatek troje, pójdzie jedno wprzódy, a za nim dwoje. I pluzek tez tam będzie, wszystko się do kupy zjeździe, dobrze nam będzie.” (K 21 Rad: 39)

<sup>5</sup> “Mam ci ja, Maćku, łączeńkę drobną, trawczkę na niej, gdyby jedwabną, a pośrodku źródło bije, trawczka się pięknie wije, nigdy nie zgnije. Mam ci, Kasiu, kosisko spore, jak wezmę kosić, trawka wygore, hej pokos koło pokosa, dobrzeć kosi moja kosa, aż pierzcha rosa.” (Chod Śp: 193)

<sup>6</sup> The notion of the female element conceptualised against the anthropocosmic water–soil–moon fertility complex is thoroughly discussed in Maślowska (2014).

these elements underlie the “symbolising-vs.-symbolised” kind of relation and the parallels of woman–earth, vagina–furrow, *cunnus*–the *bandurka* [Ukraine’s national instrument], man–ploughman, etc. (Wężowicz-Ziółkowska 1991: 162)

As a determinant of life on earth, fertility should not be considered a separate category, nor should it limit itself to the world of people, animals, or plants. In a more thorough interpretation of the cosmos, both the male element, as a fertilising factor, and the female element that is capable of breeding, permeate and enliven the world (cf. Bartmiński 1988: 99). Thus, manhood is associated with the sky, fire, and the sun, whereas womanhood is associated with the earth.

In folk cosmogonic myths, the male sky fertilises the earth (SSSL 1(2): 17–56), the act being described as “the sacred union (hierogamy) between the Sky-God and the Earth-Mother” (Eliade 1961, after Cummings n.d.). The cosmogonic myth is quite widely disseminated: “human marriage is regarded as an imitation of the cosmic hierogamy” (Eliade 1961: 145). Echoes of the hierogamy can be found in a Polish folk riddle: “Father shoots but doesn’t kill; mother eats, though it has no mouth”,<sup>7</sup> which stands for the heaven–rain–earth complex. In peasant poems, heaven embraces the earth with love: at the crossroads, where Christ dies, heaven embraces the earth and presents the Mother of Bread with a herb-and-wheat wreath.<sup>8</sup> The earth, conceptualised here as a mother giving birth to a child, uncovers its lactating breasts:

- (4) The freshly-ploughed soil uncovers its breasts full of milk and waits for a person to come to her with the blessed seed.<sup>9</sup>
- (5) And then the peasant knelt down on the earth’s black bosom,  
filled with the sun and damp,  
and started his silent begging... ‘Earth, our beloved mother  
give us tasty black bread.’<sup>10</sup>

In traditional culture, the fertilizing function is often expressed through reference to atmospheric conditions:

– the sun (SSSL 1(1): 119–144):

<sup>7</sup> “Ojciec strzela, nie zabija, matka zjada, gęby nie ma”. (Folf Zag no. 581)

<sup>8</sup> “Na dróg rozstaju, gdzie Chrystus kona, / niebo przygarnia ziemię w ramiona / i dary składa Chleborodzicy / ogromnym wieńcem ziół i pszenicy.” (Ad Złote: 238)

<sup>9</sup> “Świeżo zaorana rola / odkryła piersi / wezbrane pokarmem / i czeka by do niej przyjść / z błogosławionym ziarnem.” (A. Magdziak, *Karmiąca ziemia*, in Niewiadomski 1999: 18)

<sup>10</sup> “A potem ukląkł [chłop] na czarnej jej piersi / pełnej słońca i wilgoci / i począł szeptać ciche błaganie... obdarz nas ziemio – matulu kochana / chlebem czarnym smacznym.” (Poc Poez: 106)

- (6) 'My garland faded, it really did, and I also went pale, my garland faded in the sun, and I went pale because of my lover.'<sup>11</sup>
- (7) 'Girl, why are you standing under the sycamore tree? Is that the sun that keeps beating down on you, or do you fear rain?...?' 'No, the sun is not beating down on me, I fear no rain; I am standing under the tree waiting for my lover to come.'<sup>12</sup>

– lightning (SSSL 1(3): 411–433):

- (8) When people dream about a lightning strike, it is believed that a woman will get pregnant, or something else will happen.<sup>13</sup>

– fire (SSSL 1(1): 264–285):

- (9) I will make the bed for you but I can't watch over you to prevent the fire coming into your lame leg. Do not be afraid, girl, do not be afraid of fire. I will hug and caress you till dawn.<sup>14</sup>
- (10) Do not be afraid, Kate, do not be afraid of fire and swelling, I will rest my bad leg on a feather quilt.<sup>15</sup>

– wind (SSSL 1(3): 307–338):

- (11) 'Why are you crying, Kate?' 'The wind is blowing and my garland is withering, the outside world is no longer for me.'<sup>16</sup>
- (12) She tends peacocks and collects feathers... , all collected feathers she puts into her apron... and makes a garland of the feathers... And she made the garland of peacock feathers and fixed it on her head... But strong winds blew it off.<sup>17</sup>

The role of semen, which induces fertility in humans, soil, plants and animals, is always associated with moisture-related phenomena:

– water (SSSL 1(2): 153–235; see also Majer-Baranowska 1986):

<sup>11</sup> "Zblod mi wionek, zblod mi, jo sobie tyz zbladla, wionek uod slonecka, ja uod k uochanecka." (Sad Podh: 143)

<sup>12</sup> "Czego ty dziewczyno pod jaworem stoisz? Czy cię słońce piecze, czy się deszczu boisz?... Słońce mnie nie piecze, deszczu się nie boje, czekam na miłego, pod jaworem stoje." (Bart PANLub 4: 324)

<sup>13</sup> "Jak [śni się, że piorun] uderzy, to tak zawsze tłumaczyli, że ktoś w ciąży albo coś będzie." (Nieb Pol: 198)

<sup>14</sup> "Posłać ci się nie odrzekam, lecz czuwać nie mogę, Żeby ci się ogień nie wdał w tę kulawą nogę. A nie bójże się, dziewczyno, nie bój się ognia, Będę ścisłał i przytulał, choćby do samego dnia." (Pieś Śl 1: 246)

<sup>15</sup> "Nie bójże się, Kasiu, ognia, ani puchliny, położę ja chorą nogę wedle pierzyny." (K 2 San: 131)

<sup>16</sup> "Czegóż Kasińku płaczesz? Wietrzyk wieje, wiāneczek mdleje, świat mi się zawięzuje." (MAAE 1903: 233)

<sup>17</sup> "Pawki pasie, piórka zbiera... , co zbierze, w zapaskę kładzie... , a z zapaski wieniec wieje. I uwila pawi wieniec... , przyszpiliła do swej główki... Skąd się wzięły bujne wiatry... , i zerwały pawi wieniec." (Bart PKL 389)

- (13) A rich miller and his wife adopted a poor girl who was very beautiful. . . The girl grew up to be a beauty, she went everywhere alone, both to the forest and to the field. One day she got extremely tired and drank some water, which made her pregnant. Soon, she gave birth to beautiful twin-boys.<sup>18</sup>
- (14) When the cow went through heat that did not end up in fertilisation, it was led to a neighbouring village. It was mated with a bull, led through deep water, or intensely washed with water, which was to make it pregnant.<sup>19</sup>

– rain (SSSL 1(3): 129–166):

- (15) The May rain is falling onto the boys' heads and the girls' bellies, the girls will deliver bastards.<sup>20</sup>
- (16) Dear Good, give us heavy rainfall. Let it pour and let the flowers in my garland bloom.<sup>21</sup>

– dew (SSSL 1(3): 45–68):

- (17) Dew covers the birch forest; love me, my dear, and remain faithful to me.<sup>22</sup>
- (18) 'Where were you, my daughter, I can see dew all over your body.' 'I was in the linseed field, mother.' 'But there were other girls as well, and still, they aren't dew-soaked.' 'There was dew, mother, there was dew.'<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Fertility as a divine gift

In traditional culture, fertility is taken to be God's gift, because God made the universe and all things in it, whereas infertility is interpreted as God's punishment; cf. the popular proverb "Those who are blessed by God are rewarded with children".<sup>24</sup>

God also extends his providence over all forms of life: he commands the earth to bring forth plants, while the earth is fertilised with "the supernatural,

<sup>18</sup> "Bogaci młynarze wzięli na wychowanie biedną, ale ładną dziewczynkę. . . Dziewczynka wyrosła na pannę, chodziła sama wszędzie, do boru, na pola. Raz zmęczyła się bardzo i napiła wody. Od tego zaszła w ciążę i wkrótce powiła prześlicznych chłopaków bliźniąt." (ZWAK 1878: 144)

<sup>19</sup> "Gdy krowa kilka razy latowała się, a zawsze bez skutku, prowadzono ją za granicę, do sąsiedniej wsi do buhaja lub też przeprowadzano ją przez głęboką wodę, bądź mocno zlewano wodą, co miało powodować zacielenie krowy." (Wit Baj: 60)

<sup>20</sup> "Pada deszczyk majowy chłopakom na głowy, dziewczynom na brzuchy, będą mieć znajduchy." (from Kraśnik near Lublin)

<sup>21</sup> "Dajże Boże deszczu, żeby lał, żeby lał. Żeby mi się wianek na głowie rozwijał." (ZWAK 1886: 287)

<sup>22</sup> "Sieje rosa po białej brzezynie, kochajże mnie, kawalerze, ale nie zdradliwie." (K 46 Ka-S: 47)

<sup>23</sup> "A kędzyś mi coruś była, kiedyś mi się tak zrosiła? U lnych była, matuchno. . . A dyc też tam inne były, toli się tak nie zrosiły. Rosa była, matusiu, rosa była." (Rog Śląsk: 250)

<sup>24</sup> "Komu Pan Bóg błogosławi, temu dzieci daje."

divine patronage, and so yields a good crop” (Niewiadomski 1999: 97). People address their pleas for a good harvest to God and engage in various practices, e.g. blessing the field or celebrating the holy mass for good crops during the vegetation period (Bart PANLub 1: 450). Similar practices can also be found in secular customs, as when girls walk around with a green branch and sing a wishing song:<sup>25</sup>

- (19) We enter the palace, We wish you luck and health;  
All the best from our beloved God. . .  
A white tenement in front of the house,  
Green wheat in the field.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Fertility conjectured

Fertility and infertility can be conjectured from natural phenomena and can be invoked in prophecies, recommendations, or prohibitions. For instance, making a prediction about good crops is usually recalled in weather forecasts:

- (20) When there is hoar frost on trees in the Advent, a fertile year might be expected.<sup>27</sup>  
(21) Frosty weather in January gives good crops in the summer.<sup>28</sup>  
(22) A Dry March, a wet April, and a cold May make a fertile year to grains and fruits.<sup>29</sup>

The forecasts can also contains inferences about infertility:

- (23) The rain on 1 May brings crop failure.<sup>30</sup>  
(24) When June brings coolness and water, the whole year is spoilt.<sup>31</sup>  
(25) When it thunders in the south in November, one may expect infertility in everything.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The custom of going around with two spruce trees, combined with singing songs, was very popular in the region of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland).

<sup>26</sup> “Do tego pałacu wstępujemy, / Szczęścia, zdrowia wieszujemy; / Od Boga miłego wszystkiego dobrego. . . / Przed tym domem biała kamienica, / A na polu zielona pszenica.” (MAAE 1906 (8): 38–39)

<sup>27</sup> “Gdy w adwencie sadź na drzewie się pokazuje, to rok urodzajny nam zwiastuje.” (NKPP)

<sup>28</sup> “W styczniu mroźna pogoda, to latem w polu uroda.” (Bich Przep: 33)

<sup>29</sup> “Marzec suchy, kwiecień mokry, maj chłodny zbożom i owocom roczek płodny.” (Bich Przep: 63)

<sup>30</sup> “Pierwszego maja deszcz, nieurodzaju wieszcz.” (NKPP)

<sup>31</sup> “Gdy czerwiec chłodem i wodą szafuje, to zwykle cały rok popsuje.” (NKPP)

<sup>32</sup> “Gdy w listopadzie od południowego kraju grzmi, znaczy niepłodność wszystkiego.” (NKPP)

## 5. Controlling, protecting, and stimulating fertility

In Polish folk culture there is a strong conviction that people are able to control fertility, both their own and that of other organisms. Fertility is a recurring motif in annual rituals and customs, and is usually expressed through words, gestures, or the use of objects. A thorough documentation can be found in vol. 4 of the monograph *Lubelskie* (Bart PANLub); here we only provide selected examples.

One of the most popular customs in the Lublin region with a function of inducing fertility was that of covering a barren pear or apple tree with straw on Christmas Eve. The custom was accompanied by an act of brandishing an axe and saying: “Remember, if you bear no fruit this year, you will be cut out”.<sup>33</sup> In villages near a small town of Poniatowa (the same region) the apple tree was beaten with apple dumplings:

As soon as they finished their supper, for which they had eaten dumplings made of dried apples, pears, or plums, the farmer would take three such dumplings into his pocket, would head towards the orchard where apple trees grew and would beat the trees with those apple dumplings, repeating the following words: “Will you bear fruit? Will you bear fruit? Will you bear fruit? Will you bear fruit or not? If you don’t bear fruit, I’ll cut you down”. Then, the farmer would go to pear trees and did the same thing. And then over to plum trees to do the same. This is how it was. (Bart PANLub)

In the village of Budziska, the farmer would sprinkle the tree with poppy seeds “to secure fertility in orchards in the new year” (Bart PANLub 1: 111). The custom of *chodzenie po szczodrakach* (going round for *szczodraki*, poppy-sprinkled crescent rolls) consisted in singing at neighbours’ houses during Christmas time in return for the roll and was believed to bring good crops, an abundance of grain and vegetables, as well as stimulating fertility in the livestock. The farmer was greeted with the following words (from the village of Ulów, near Tomaszów Lubelski):

(26) We wish you happiness and health  
On St Stephen’s Day;  
May God give you good crops,  
And may your barn be full of grain.<sup>34</sup>

Such wishes were usually accompanied by non-verbal gestures, e.g. showering oat grains over the farmer’s family and house. The gesture was believed to have a magical function of bringing good crops and fertility to the family.

<sup>33</sup> “Pamiętaj, jak nie bedziesz rodziła tego roku, to bedziesz wycięta.” (Bart PANLub 1: 110).

<sup>34</sup> “Na szczęście, na zdrowie / ze świętym Szczepanem. / Niech wam Pan Bóg daje / w polu urodzaje, / a wasza stodółka / ze zbożem zostaje.” (Bart PANLub no. 29A)

In the so-called “extended versions” of Christmas carols (*A gold plough* or *God moves everywhere*), fertility is expressed through images of God and saints who accompany the farmer in crop and animal husbandry, and multiply his goods. The farmer’s work is sacralised by being strengthened with tools of supernatural power (e.g. a gold plough):

- (27) Whose is this ploughed field? New season, new season.<sup>35</sup>  
 It is our farmer’s. New season, ...  
 And in that field there is a small plough made of gold. New season, ...  
 And by the plough there are two pairs of horses. New season, ...  
 St. Stephen is ploughing, St. John the Evangelist is hurrying him. New season, ...  
 St. Anastasia would bring breakfast. New season, ...  
 She would bring breakfast and ask God. New season, ...  
 To let the spring wheat sprout. New season, ...  
 To let the ears of wheat reach the sky. New season, ...  
 To have lush fields of wheat with deep roots.<sup>36</sup>

In more extended versions of carols, prophesying fertility in the new year is also emphasised by referring to living animals, animal monsters, as well as their attributes (e.g. the figure of a Jew girded with a straw rope, or carollers dressed in sheepskin coats). Until WWII, many villages in the Lubelskie region celebrated the custom of strolling with a horse, a bull, an ox, a ram, a goat, or a sheep, either on St. Stephen’s Day or the New Year’s Day:

For the practice of carolling, people would choose a well-kept animal and adorn it with multi-coloured ribbons and flowers. Bachelors who participated in the practice expressed the following wishes upon entering the house: “We wish you good luck and health on St. Stephen’s Day”.<sup>37</sup> The farmer’s wife would reply: “May God let us make it through this year all the way to the next one”<sup>38</sup> (the wishes come from the village of Andrzejówka). In the village of Małochwiej Dolny, bachelors, having exchanged Christmas wishes and received a special treat, would address a young bull with the following words: “Hey bull, they have given us a treat, but they could have given us more”.<sup>39</sup> (Bart PANLub 1: 293)

<sup>35</sup> Lit. “A new summer”.

<sup>36</sup> “A u kogoż nam tu rola wyorana? / Nowe lato, dobre lato. / U naszego pana rola wyorana. Nowe lato. . . / A tam na tej roli złoty płużek stoi. Nowe lato. . . / A tam przy tym płużku dwie par koni stoi. Nowe lato. . . / Święty Szczepan orze, święty Jan pogania. Nowe lato. . . / Święta Nastazyja śniadanie nosiła. Nowe lato. . . / Śniadanie nosiła i Boga prosiła. Nowe lato. . . / Żeby jej się jara pszeniczka zrodziła. Nowe lato. . . / Żeby były kłosy pod same niebiosy. Nowe lato. . . / By była kłosista, w spodzie korzenista.” (Bart PANLub 1: 221, from the village of Aleksandrów, Józefów district)

<sup>37</sup> “Na szczęście, na zdrowie, ze świętym Szczepanem.” (Bart PANLub 1: 293)

<sup>38</sup> “Daj Boże ten rok sprowadzić i byśmy do drugiego roku doczekali.” (Bart PANLub 1: 293)

<sup>39</sup> “Hej byciu dali, żeby nam co więcej dali.” (Bart PANLub 1: 293)

The custom of *chodzenie po kusakach*, lit. ‘going around during the *kusaki*’ (the last days of the carnival), was usually accompanied by wearing special clothes, e.g. a sheepskin coat which had to be donned inside out and girded with a straw rope (Bart PANLub 1: 387). A sheepskin coat, similarly to other fuzzy, hairy, fleecy or shaggy objects, was considered the symbol of fertility, prosperity, wealth and success (cf. Niewiadomski 1999: 227; Domańska-Kubiak 1979: 19). Moreover, fertility and abundance were also symbolised by straw hats and skirts, as well as straw ropes and pea waste used to wrap up the legs, arms, and torso (Godula 1994: 87).<sup>40</sup>

A popular form of stimulating the harvest of flax and hemp were the so-called “vegetation dances”, performed exclusively by women during the *kusaki*. Let us consider two descriptions of the custom:

Women tried to jump very high because they believed it will make both flax and hemp grow equally tall. The custom is recalled in one of the songs from the vicinity of Lublin: “The women are dancing all day long in order to make both flax and hemp grow”, or “You old woman, you old man, dance today to make hemp grow”. (Bart PANLub 1: 388)<sup>41</sup>

‘When the clock strikes midnight, Lent starts and nobody can play any instrument. The exception is the dance performed to stimulate the growth of hemp, but it is danced without music. At present, nobody sows hemp any longer. When hemp was sown, there was a custom of bringing a hemp sheaf home and then putting it onto the farmer’s head so that he almost suffocated. And of course, everybody started dancing in order to make hemp grow.’ [‘What kind of dances did you dance at that time?’] ‘We usually danced the oberek, or the polka, typical dances for the elderly.’ (Bart PANLub 1: 387)

Yet another custom believed to bring good harvest, celebrated near Tykocin in the Mazovia region, was to jump onto a tree trunk. When it was performed by males, the goal was to induce a good harvest of oats; women, in turn, did it to induce a good harvest of flax (K 28 Maz: 80).

<sup>40</sup> As observed by Domańska-Kubiak (1979: 18), in the vegetation- and fertility-oriented aspect of carolling, a particular role is ascribed to straw. For instance, during the Christmas Eve dinner, a handful of straw was put under the tablecloth or scattered all over the floor. There were customs of wrapping legs of the table with straw, or attaching it either to the wooden beam or behind images of saints. Straw was also used to decorate the caroller’s outfit, or brought to the church during the midnight mass (known in Poland as the shepherds’ mass). After Christmas, it was used to stimulate soil and animal fertility, especially by following such practices as wrapping fruit trees with straw, wedging straw into the ground, burning straw and scattering the ash onto vegetables, feeding straw ash to chickens, placing straw in the barn, wrapping an infertile woman with straw, whipping household members with straw (a custom similar to that of whipping family members with an Easter palm), etc.

<sup>41</sup> “To na konopie, to na len, tańczują baby cały dzień”; “Stara babo, stary chłopie, hulaj dzisiaj na konopie”.

“Provoking” a good harvest during a new vegetation period could also be linked to various customs followed in the spring. For instance, the *gaik* (lit. ‘cospse’) was a custom of carrying bouquets of evergreen twigs and branches after the rite of drowning *Marzanna* (an effigy of this Baltic and Slavic goddess). The *gaik* was the symbol of spring and rebirth: songs were performed by young girls who carried the *gaik* on their way back from drowning *Marzanna*. They used to stop by the door and sing the following song:

- (28) We drop in with the *gaik* And we wish you luck and health.  
 Oh, *gaik*, how beautifully adorned you are!  
 You walk around the village because you are so dignified.  
 We come with the *gaik* to the farmer  
 To wish him a good harvest.  
 Oh, *gaik*, how beautifully adorned you are!  
 You walk around the village because you are so dignified.  
 (Bart PANLub no. 332A, Dęba, Kurów district 1964)<sup>42</sup>

Inducing good harvest is also frequently recalled in numerous Easter traditions and customs, one of these being *chodzenie z kogutkiem* (lit. ‘walking with the rooster’), the custom of going around the village with the figure of a rooster, the symbol of manhood, fertility and reproductiveness (Kop Ssym: 150, Herd Lek: 64, Niewiadomski 1999: 98–99). The fertility function of Easter carolling is confirmed in one of the songs recorded in 1977 in Bychawka:

- (29) Farmer, why are you sleeping? Why don't you look into the barn?  
 In each corner there is a calf,  
 In each corner there is a colt,  
 Allelujah, Allelujah.’ (Bart PANLub no. 325A )<sup>43</sup>

The custom of visiting fields at Easter (or, more generally, in spring), includes both sacred and agrarian elements. As an example, consider the following Easter carol recorded in Osmolice in 2003:

- (30) Farmer, go into the field And bless your farmland,  
 So that the soil gives you a good crop,  
 So that you gather three measures of *korzec* out of the threescore,  
 Allelujah, allelujah. (Bart PANLub no. 325B)<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> “My z gajikäm wstampujemy, / sçeścia, zdrowia wom zycämy. / Gajiku zieluny, piänknieś ustrojuny, / piänknie sobie chodzisz, bo ci sie tak godzi. / My z gajikäm do gospodarza, / zeby sie rodziły te wszelakie zboza. / Gajiku zieluny, piänknieś ustrojuny, / piänknie sobie chodzisz, bo ci siä tak godzi.”

<sup>43</sup> “Gospodarzu, cego śpicie, / udo obory nie zajrzycie? / W każdym kuntku po cieluntku, / w każdym kuntku po źrebiuntku, / alleluja, alleluja.”

<sup>44</sup> “Gospodarzu, wyjdźże w pole / i poświęćże swoją rolę, / żeby dobrze plonowało, / po trzy korce z kopy dało, alleluja, alleluja.”

A similar function is expressed in yet another custom, known as *obchodzenie pól* (lit. 'going around the fields'), celebrated on 23 April. As noted by Adamowski and Tymochowicz:

On April 23, the farmer used to go through the field to check what he had sown in winter. He took rye bread (the so-called *piróg*) and a bottle of vodka. When he reached the end of his field, he waited for his wife to come and bring a tablecloth and a snack. It was also the place where the farmer and his wife met their neighbours to celebrate the day together with what they brought for eating. Next, the farmer would place the *piróg* in the rye field and if all of it was covered with the rye, this symbolised a good crop. Next, the *piróg* was rolled over the grain to be finally cut into pieces and eaten. (Adamowski and Tymochowicz 2001: 54)

A symbolic function was also ascribed to Easter eggs (*pisanki*), which were kept at home all year. *Pisanki* were also believed to protect the house from evil, thus becoming the symbol of fertility and abundance, and served as a remedy for various illnesses (Bart PANlub 1: 401).

There was also a very popular Easter game in eastern parts of the Lublin region and in the Kielce region called *Mr. Zelman*, commonly played by Poles and Ukrainians. The central figure in the game is a Mr. Zelman, "a mythical steward who opens the sky in spring and orders the sun to revive the forces of nature" (Bart PANLub 1: 436–437). Therefore, the game was also believed to stimulate fertility and vegetation growth.

Traces of symbolic aspects that refer to fertility and abundance are also found in practices performed on the eve of St. John's Day (23 June), in particular in the custom of jumping over the fire: the higher the jump, the better the crops of grain and flax. The better the fun, the higher the abundance of all crops (Bart PANLub 1: 457).

Customs associated with the vegetation period, plant growth, and fertility usually refer to the first tillage, sowing seeds, or growing plants. These include: (i) sprinkling holy water on the plough, the horse, and the ploughman; (ii) putting holy wreaths blessed on the Corpus Christi Day under the first ridge so that God may bless the field (K 48 Ta-Rz: 81); (iii) taking food into the field by the ploughman or the sower, eating the food in the field or burying it under the ridge. In the Mazovia region, the eggshells of Easter eggs were added to the seeds, whereas whole eggs were put into flaxseeds to make the flax exceptionally fertile (Dwor Maz: 126–127). In the Rzeszów region, raw eggs were taken to the field to induce the growth of flaxseeds and make them as big as the eggs (Kot San: 69).

Farmers in the Tarnów and Rzeszów regions used to wear gloves and a sheepskin coat while sowing oat (K 48 Ta-Rz: 51, cf. Niewiadomski 1999: 222). The symbolism behind the practice converges with the custom followed

during the *kusaki*. In the Pińczów region (the village of Samostrzałów), the woman who sowed flaxseeds had to wear a clean white shirt and a skirt in order for the flax to grow clean and beautiful. A similar custom is recorded in the Mazovia region, where farmers had to wear clean shirts while sowing:

When farmers wear clean shirts, reduplication takes place. This means that vital energy is doubled: it comes not only from human strength but also from the energy comprised in the actual shirt. This energy is further passed on to the soil to make it more fertile. Shirts have to be clean, which indicates a metaphorical mapping between clean shirts and “clean grains”. (Niewiadomski 1999: 227–228)

No less symbolic is the bodily contact between humans and the earth, as in the custom practised in the village of Korytnica, where “both men and women, while planting cabbage, pick the nettle stem and wedge it into the ground in the middle of the field; then they perch on the stem three times, saying: ‘May the crops be as big as my bottoms’” (ZWAK 1885: 37). In another custom, “when two people plant cabbage, after the work one person knocks down the other. The person lying on the ground says: ‘Grow, grow, little cabbage, be as big as a quarter of a bushel’” (ZWAK 1897: 22).

Another custom that portrays a bodily contact between a person and the earth is *oborywanie kozy* (lit. ‘ploughing around the goat’), i.e. dragging a farmer on the ground around *koza*, a handful of grain that was left uncut. This was performed several times and was considered hilarious (cf. Bart PANLub 1: 481). Yet another custom, called *pielenie kozy* (lit. ‘weeding out the goat’), is described thus: “We would cut out ears of grain and then tear straw out of the ground. In that place we would dig in the ground and this is how the grain was removed from the soil. Next, we would let the grain sow itself, which was to symbolise a good harvest the following year” (Bart PANLub 1: 481). In the light of these examples, the annual *dożynki* (the harvest festival) is not only a joyful moment to celebrate the end of harvest, but it may also be interpreted as a symbolic beginning of a new successful season (Bart PANLub 1: 481).

The customs of rolling around on the ground at the first spring thunder, perching on various objects, falling down into the furrows while planting cabbage seedling into the ground, or *oborywanie przepiórki* (lit. ‘ploughing around the quail’) / *oborywanie kozy* (lit. ‘ploughing around the goat’), aimed to induce soil fertility via the human factor, i.e. by transferring human energy onto the soil, which brings benefit to people and the earth. Niewiadomski makes the following observation: “We experience multifarious results of the mutual relationship between people and the earth: women’s reproductive forces are strengthened, the soil receives a measure of human vitality – thus, humans and nature unite” (Niewiadomski 1999: 19).

There was a common belief that fertility may be induced during family ceremonies. Such convictions were extremely popular e.g. in the Podhale region (southern Poland), where seeds of oat, barley, and flax were put into the shoes of the bride and groom before going to the wedding ceremony. In the village of Czarny Dunajec, after the bridal couple's blessing, the bride and groom were additionally sprinkled with holy water. Moreover, oat grains were scattered on the couple to bring happiness and prosperity "in such amounts as the amount of oat grains scattered, or the amount of morning dew" (Bieg Wes: 228). Oat seeds are conceptualised as rain and, through further semantic extension,

... as semen.<sup>45</sup> Whenever this symbolic rain falls on a woman, she immediately acquires additional reproductive power. Thus, a woman becomes a symbolic representation of the soil. In the rich repertoire of wedding traditions we find numerous analogies between human marriage and a symbolic cosmic and sacred marriage of heaven and earth. (Niewiadomski 1999: 28)

Fertility is also recalled in other rituals performed during the wedding ceremony, e.g. in wedding speeches:

- (31) There is a road mended for you, sprinkled with green rue, covered with apples, with fir needles.<sup>46</sup>

Similar symbols are recalled during the act of handing over *różga weselna* (the wedding twig) to the master of the wedding ceremony, and the groom's attempt to repurchase it. The bridesmaids would take the apples off the wedding twig and throw them at the newly-weds (Bar Pil: 134). Thus, the apples became the symbol of fertility and happiness of the bride and groom (Kow Lek: 171). In the regions of Nowy Sącz and Rzeszów, the apples were taken off from the wedding twig and thrown onto the bride's lap "to provide her with fertility, easier labour, and numerous offspring" (Ogrod Zwycz: 68).

In the Mazovia region, the newly-weds were walked to the barn with a "matrimonial bed" in it, made of unthreshed rye sheaves. As observed by Niewiadomski, the aim of this custom was to

<sup>45</sup> Barley seeds symbolise fertility not only with reference to people but also in other contexts. For instance, near Bartoszyce, it was believed that barley seeds may prove helpful at cow mating: "I don't remember that but I recall my mother telling me (and this she probably knew from her mother) that people used to roast barley seeds and then feed them to the cow that was to get pregnant. They were considered a kind of medicine. And the cow had to be fed with the roasted barley from an apron" (Bart Wąż: 267).

<sup>46</sup> "Jest (dla was) droga naprawiona, zieloną rutą posypana, jabłkami wybrukowana, jodłowymi szpilkami wyłożona." (Wisła 1893: 458)

accumulate vital forces in the human reproduction process. [This was thought to happen] thanks to correspondences between soil fertility and human fertility, whereby human procreation is bound up with the reproductive energy of the soil. Thus, the newly-weds become “infected with fertility”, symbolised by grains, sheaves, and straw. (Niewiadomski 1999: 26, 27–28)

In many parts of Poland the newly married couple was welcomed “in a hairy way”, i.e. by shaking hands covered with the tail of a sheepskin coat, which was to bring wealth and prosperity to the bride and groom. A sheepskin coat was a symbol of abundance and wealth, and the gesture was accompanied by saying:

(32) We welcome you “in a hairy way”, let there be wealth! (Bieg Wes: 170)<sup>47</sup>

Similar customs were observed in the Pińczów region, where the newly-weds were supposed to shake hands with people through a handkerchief even two weeks after the wedding to avoid infertility in the future (Bieg Wes: 170).

#### 4. Hindering fertility and inducing infertility

Poor harvest or infertility may be induced verbally in specific contexts. Particular magical powers were ascribed to the words uttered either during the transition between the old and the new year or at various rituals. In a 1980 recording from the villages of Skierbieszów and Zawada, both located near Zamość in South-Eastern Poland, carollers invoke evil against farmers unwilling to give money in return for a good word:

(33) And in this hut there are only penniless people. They ate all and gave us nothing.  
Don't let them have any rye or wheat,  
The only thing they deserve is many brats.<sup>48</sup>

Infertility or crop failure could also be caused through various practices and gestures. Some of the examples include:

1. various attempts to hinder fertility: when a woman does not want to conceive soon after the wedding, she should carry a buttoned fastening underneath her girdle on the wedding day; afterwards, she should place the fastening under the pillow (Bieg Mat: 23–24, cf. Stomma 1986: 170);

<sup>47</sup> “Witamy kosmato, Niech będzie bogato!”

<sup>48</sup> “A w ty chałupce same gołodupce. / Wszystko pozjadali, a nam nic nie dali. / Żeby wam si ni rodziło ni żyto, ni pszynica, / tylko bachorów kupica.” (Bart PANLub 1: 135)

2. a common belief that a pregnant woman badly affects vegetation period by inhibiting the growth of everything she touches (e.g. a pregnant woman is believed to cause crop failure upon walking across the field already sown; a pregnant woman is not allowed to leaven bread because the dough will not rise well; Kwaśniewicz 1981: 104);
3. a prohibition to hit the ground: the beaten ground will not produce crops; it is also prohibited to plough a field during Advent, or the ground will turn infertile; cf. “He who ploughs his field in Advent, makes it infertile for three years” (NKPP);<sup>49</sup> “The blessed field cannot be touched by any tool during Advent, or it will become infertile for seven years”<sup>50</sup> (K 48 Ta-Rz: 50).<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Cultural codes and their elements

The Polish folk data relating to the symbolism of fertility point to a certain verbal code, inseparable from other cultural codes. All these codes, as carriers of symbolic meanings, function interchangeably, replacing and complementing one another – this is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Cultural codes and their elements

Cultural code	Elements of the code	Function
material code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the korovai and its decorations (apples)</li> <li>– the wedding twig adorned with apples</li> <li>– the “matrimonial bed” in the barn made of unthreshed rye sheaves</li> </ul>	to induce reproductiveness and fertility in the newly-weds
verbal code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– wedding speech about the road covered with apples</li> </ul>	
action code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– sprinkling holy water on the bride and groom and scattering oat grains on the bridal couple</li> <li>– throwing apples at the newly-weds</li> <li>– throwing apples onto the bride’s lap</li> <li>– putting oat, barley, and flax seeds into the bride’s shoes</li> </ul>	
music, dance, and game code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– wedding games, e.g. dragging a raw egg through the groom’s trouser leg, etc.</li> </ul>	

<sup>49</sup> “Kto ziemię w advent pruje, ta mu trzy lata choruje.”

<sup>50</sup> “Ziemi świętej podczas adwentu już się nie ruszy (pługiem, bronami, łopata), bo cierpieć będzie do lat siedmiu.”

<sup>51</sup> This is consistent with a common Polish belief that “the field must have a rest in Advent and it cannot be woken up, touched, or disturbed in any way, or else it won’t give crops” (Ogrod Zwycz: 9).

Cultural code	Elements of the code	Function
material code	– flax on the blessed candle	to induce flax harvest
action code	– jumping over the bonfire on St. John's Eve – women: jumping onto the tree trunk	
music, dance and game code	– dances and jumps during the <i>kusaki</i>	
material code	– putting raw eggs into seeds – adding eggshells of Easter eggs to the seeds – adding blessed herbs into the seeds on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the Feast of Our Lady of Herbs)	to induce grain harvest
action code	– sprinkling the sower with holy water – sowing oat grains while wearing gloves and a sheepskin coat	
verbal code	– formulae used at Easter carolling, e.g. "Farmer, go out into the field. . ." – formulae used at <i>szczodraki</i> carolling, e.g. "We wish you happiness and health on St. Stephen's Day"	
personal and action code	– rolling around on the ground at the first spring thunder – knocking down people while planting cabbage – "ploughing around the quail" – <i>Mr. Zelman</i> game	to induce soil fertility; to strengthen "weak" soil with human vital forces
personal, action and temporal code	– rubbing the leaven into the fruit tree after Christmas Eve supper – scattering poppy onto fruit trees – hitting fruit trees with an axe after Christmas Eve supper – beating the apple tree with apple dumplings – covering the pear tree or apple tree with straw on Christmas Eve	to induce fertility in fruit trees
verbal code	– warnings expressed at fruit trees on Christmas Eve, e.g. "If you don't bear fruit, I'll cut you down"	

## 6. Concluding remarks

Three major conclusions can be drawn from the considerations above:

1. According to folk tradition, humans, and the universe constitute an integral whole: "the cosmos should be viewed as a 'living organism', with

people being its natural part” (Tomicki 1981: 31); “everyone remains in an intimate relationship with the external world” (Pawluczuk 1978: 85); “the people-world relationship concerns all aspects of life and is built upon a mutual agreement between humans and the cosmos” (Bartmiński 1988: 99); “[Human] life is homologised to cosmic life; [...] this cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence” (Eliade 1961: 167).

2. Human life is linked with the agrarian sphere, where both the vegetation period and the life cycle are placed within the same image schema.<sup>52</sup> Sexual intercourse and its consequences, widely discussed in the texts of Polish folklore, reflect basic farming practices, in particular those referring to ploughing and sowing. The pairings that constitute the so-called “fertility complex” include: male–ploughman/sower, phallus–plough, semen–grain, woman–earth (womb), child–crop.

3. There is a strong bond of solidarity between humans and nature, based on a mutual relationship: the power of nature is used by humans for procreation. In return, humans support nature with their vital forces at the solstice (Bartmiński 1986). Both humans and nature become indispensable components of the cosmic and human universum.

*translated by Agnieszka Mierzwińska-Hajnos*

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<sup>52</sup> I refer to but slightly modify Niewiadomski’s (1999: 18) idea of the “fertility complex” schema.

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