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The issues of the evaluation and protection of intangible cultural heritage as exemplified by the Kashubian tradition of the obeisance of feretra

*Problemy postrzegania i ochrony
niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego
na przykładzie kaszubskiej tradycji
poklonu feretronów*

The issue of the obeisance of feretra

Certain practices and ways of thinking, of solving problems, which are described as folk ones or ones inherited from ancestors, are astonishing, often no longer fully understood; they sometimes seem trivial or even comical. In recent years, many of such practices have gained a new perspective for their appraisal as elements of intangible cultural heritage. One example of such heritage that has met with a number of assessments, sometimes extremely varied, is the obeisance of feretra. It is a custom associated with religious life, practised mainly during pilgrimages and indulgence feasts; in the form described by researchers, it has so far been observed only in the region of Kashubia in Poland. Apart from the obeisance, the dances of feretra are also mentioned. To describe the distinction, I refer to the position of Krystyna Wejher-Sitkiewicz,

who believes that an obeisance is an official choreographic arrangement performed during the greeting or farewell of a given parish “to the rhythm of an invariable fanfare”. The dance, on the other hand, encompasses “all the other actions performed with the feretrum to the rhythm of music” (Wejher-Sitkiewicz 2018:20).¹ I assume that due to its context and socio-cultural functions, the dance of feretra constitutes a part of the same tradition, which, like all culture, is subject to change and modification; in this case, the obeisance of feretra has gained a certain superstructure in the form of dance. In the remainder of this article I will focus on the obeisance of feretra, which constitutes a certain canon, a basic pattern and a starting point for other, more spectacular forms of this phenomenon that can be observed today.

The aim of this article is to present the obeisance of feretra as an element of intangible cultural heritage in the Kashubian region set in a broad context, and to describe ways in which this phenomenon is perceived. I would also like to indicate the reasons for certain attitudes towards it and, subsequently, the possibilities of its protection. The normative and axiological background for the analysis undertaken here is the Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003 in Paris. In the context of the postulates for the identification, promotion and especially protection inscribed therein, the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, addressed later and endorsed on 4 December 2015 in Windhoek, Namibia, must also be borne in mind.²

The analysis of the problem as presented herein is based on pre-existing sources and my own field research. The former consist of published and unpublished scholarly studies, amateur and professional films, and Internet users’ entries on discussion forums. The field research material was obtained by the method of interviews conducted during the indulgence feast celebrations in Wejherowo during the arrival of the so-called “land pilgrimages” on 19–21 May 2023, and the so-called “sea pilgrimages” on 3–4 June of the same year, into that town. A total of forty-one interviewees took part in this study; they were pilgrims of both genders arriving in Wejherowo, individually or in groups, in order to take part in the above celebrations. The youngest interviewee was 17, the oldest, 87 years old. The most important criterion for the selection of informants was the fact of their participation in the pilgrimage and indulgence feast celebrations and the resulting opportunity to acquaint themselves with the phenomenon of the obeisance of feretra. I also present conclusions and reflections that emerged from many years of participant observation.

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

2 See Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, to be found at the UNESCO: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/ethics-and-ich-00866>.

The historical, social and landscape contexts

In its “classic” and most widespread form, the obeisance of feretra consists essentially of three choreographic arrangements; alternatively, it may contain at least one of those. These arrangements involve the sign of the cross and the circle, and a deep backward bow, being dynamically executed by the feretrum. All these figures have their symbolism, firmly grounded in theology and religious practice (Jażdżewski 2008:138). It is worth remembering that the obeisance of feretra, although most often associated with the sojourns of Kashubian pilgrim companies in places of worship, is also practised on the road these companies take. This is not only an expression of social integration and identity of the region’s inhabitants, but also contributes to the formation of a Kashubian pilgrimage’s specific character (Błahut, Łaga 2023).

An interesting issue in the context of the considerations undertaken here is the genesis of the obeisance of feretra and the historical continuity of this custom’s occurrence in Kashubia. In comparison to popular science, journalism and the colloquial discourse, the scholarly discourse displays scepticism and caution regarding these issues. One source that indicates the presence of this custom at the end of the nineteenth century is Aleksander Majkowski’s poem *Pielgrzymka wejherowska* [A Wejherowo pilgrimage], written no later than in 1899.³ The poem contains a description of the company from Kościerzyna being greeted upon arrival at Kalwaria Wejherowska, from which it can be concluded that this was not a launch of any kind, a debut performance, but an already tested, established and awaited custom.

It seems quite interesting that the obeisance of feretra was noted in Pomerania also in the context of pilgrimages performed in a completely different region of Poland. Describing pilgrimages performed in Upper Silesia in the period 1869–1914 with reference to A. Łaziński’s *Przewodnik dla pielgrzymów i zwiedzających* [Guidebook for pilgrims and sightseers] dating from 1930, Father Jan Górecki wrote that in Częstochowa, “a ceremony was held of a triple mutual obeisance of crosses, banners and standards”, for comparison adding a footnote that “in Pomerania, the sign of greeting is an ‘undulation’ of feretra” (Górecki 1994:105).

In the opinion of many inhabitants of the region and participants in the pilgrimages – an opinion often repeated by the journalists and authors popularizing the knowledge of the Kashubian culture – the custom of the obeisance of feretra has been practiced since the time when the first pilgrimages from Oliwa and Kościerzyna set off to the Calvary sanctuary site in Wejherowo (Kalwaria Wejherowska). According to the views of contemporary authors, as well as some of their sources, this happened in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. In the light of historical research,

3 I refer here to a 1992 edition with an afterword by Edmund Puzdrowski, who reports that the poem was originally printed in the Sunday supplement to “Gazeta Gdańska” in 1899.

the opinion that these pilgrimages have a 350 years of tradition behind them, and that the obeisance of feretra were their element from the very beginning, is difficult to uphold (cf. Lademann 2023). Examples of the tradition of the obeisance of feretra being perceived as older than the historical sources indicate are also given by Krysztyna Wejher-Sitkiewicz, who states that “the custom in its mature form emerged in the nineteenth century, but its earlier forms and varieties had appeared before that, probably in the eighteenth century” (Wejher-Sitkiewicz 2018: 20).

As to the perception of historical continuity of the obeisance custom, two perspectives have become apparent, one placing it in the nineteenth century, the other giving it over two centuries more. The latter is not scientifically grounded, but it shows a certain tendency to create a narrative that is desirable from the point of view of a given community; a narrative that can enhance the value of this community's culture, in this case signified by the custom of the obeisance of feretra. I believe that from an anthropological point of view, this phenomenon can be considered as an example of collective memory. This concept was introduced to the humanities in the 1920s by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. “Collective memory perceives a group from within and seeks to give it an image of the past in which it can always recognise itself and which excludes deeper transformations”, explains Jan Assmann (2009: 74). Jacek Nowak, in turn, juxtaposing collective memory with history, writes that history is an intellectual activity and requires analysis and critical discourse. Collective memory, on the other hand, situates recollection in the sphere of the sacred, and is at ease with the group in which it is rooted (Nowak 2011 35). It can thus be pointed out that collective memory is a community's own, intentional vision of its past. The image of the history of the obeisance of feretra as being “from time immemorial”, “from the beginning”, similarly to intangible cultural heritage, “plays an important role in the creation and preservation of identity (...), it is an expression of cultural, social as well as political continuity” (Kwaśniewska 2021: 17).

The UNESCO Convention states that intangible cultural heritage “means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (Art. 2, para. 1). The second paragraph reads that intangible cultural heritage is manifested, inter alia, in the domains of performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events. “Naturally, the Convention indicates a definitional framework for intangible heritage, but this seems insufficient” (Czerwińska 2012: 221). In response to the need to make it more precise and to indicate the relevant cultural areas within the territory of the Polish state, in line with the statement that “each country should update it and relate it to the peculiarities of its own culture” (Adamowski, Smyk 2013: 11), the Council for Intangible Cultural Heritage created a relevant document in which it “proposed to add specific exemplary references tailored to national traditions” (Adamowski 2017: 72).

The enumerative but general UNESCO list was thus made more specific with such elements as the vocal, instrumental and dance traditions, religious performances, and socio-cultural practices that appear, for example, in customs, rituals and annual rites, including indulgence customs and pilgrimages (Adamowski 2017: 73).

In the obeisance of feretra, the combination of cultural elements surrounding this custom is clear and obvious. The feretrum – which is often an object of historic value – is an artefact that organises certain behaviours and social relations, situated in the space of pilgrimage routes and centuries-old shrines (Błahut 2024). Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a broader look and consider intangible cultural heritage as a phenomenon related to cultural heritage in general, protected in the acts of the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland, as well as to landscape, which is recognised by the Convention as cultural space (Zalasińska 2013). In the case under discussion here, an interesting exemplification of the latter may be the Mirachowski Forest, which for pilgrims from Kościerzyna going to Wejherowo constitutes a space of special spiritual, aesthetic and emotional experiences:

Nor is it surprising that the Kashubians themselves, living in a given natural environment, sometimes gave it a magical meaning. For them, forests, rivers, lakes and marshes were an expression of mystery and a manifestation of unknown forces, which they often feared. (...) During the passage through the Mirachowskie Forests, the image is taken off the cart and carried by the men of the brotherhood. In the history of the pilgrimage, there have been occasions when it was the priests that carried the feretrum through the Mirachowski Forest. Sometimes it is also carried by women (Jażdżewski 2008: 83–84).

Research shows that consent to carry the Kościerzyna feretrum along this stretch now includes any willing pilgrim. In the documentary *Dotknąć obrazu* [To touch an image], Olga Blumczyńska, one of its directors, comments: “We are slowly entering the Mirachowski Forest, where it is an unwritten tradition that anyone who wishes to is allowed to carry the image upon their shoulders” (Blumczyńska, Ostrowska 2020). The experiences of the pilgrims are also interestingly illustrated by the statement of a man new to the practice of pilgrimage, who, when I asked him about the feelings accompanying the carrying of a feretrum weighing over a hundred kilograms through the Mirachowski Forest, replied: “I don’t know how to describe it, but my heart grew a little softer”.

However, the natural heritage of Kashubia, intertwined with human activities and creations, has more to offer than vast tracts of forest: “The Pomeranian landscape is exceptionally diverse in its form. Countless guidebooks to the Kashubian region praise its unparalleled beauty that combines an unusually varied terrain, interspersed with numerous lakes and picturesquely meandering rivers, with a wealth of flora and fauna” (Klein-Wrońska 2017: 83–84).

Each of the three oldest and most popular of Kashubian sanctuaries, to which numerous foot pilgrimages go each year, is situated in a different landscape. The Calvary way on the hills in Wejherowo lies in a beech-dominated forest, which is an integral part of the Tri-City Landscape Park (see Fig. 1). Many pilgrims would associate Sianowo, where for long centuries has held the statue of Our Lady Queen of Kashubia, with open spaces. The solemn indulgence mass takes place in a glade, in a valley near Lake Sianowo fed by the river Łeba; the place is surrounded by hills, forests and fields so characteristic of the Kashubian landscape (see Fig. 2). In Swarzewo, in turn, participants in the indulgence feast must squeeze into the centre of a small village, but they have a view of the vast waters of the Bay of Puck, and thus by implication of the Baltic Sea (see Fig. 3); this sanctuary is, after all, associated with a legend concerning the origins of the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Swarzewo, crowned Queen of the Polish Sea in 1937 (Stachowiak 2017). "An extremely elaborate mode of cultural heritage reception is thus established by a whole complex of tangible/observable/imaginary phenomena. Despite its ontological diversity and wide spectrum of experience, cultural heritage is supposed to constitute a unified universe" (Bełkot 2012: 35).

Intangible heritage cannot, of course, exist without people, most often a group of people, who are its bearers. In the case of the tradition under discussion, these include those who make pilgrimages and take part in indulgence feasts, but above all those who carry the feretrum and perform obeisances with it (see Figs. 4, 5). These are the



Fig. 1. The believers and pilgrims gathered during the indulgence feast ceremony at Kalwaria Wejherowska; Wejherowo. Photo by G. Błahut (2015).



Fig. 2. The solemn indulgence mass at Sianowo; the sanctuary and one of the temporary parking areas in the fields made available by local farmers are visible; Sianowo. Photo by G. Błahut (2015).

feretrarii, or feretrum bearers (Polish: *obraźnicy* [masc.] and *obraźniczki* [fem.]). Each feretrum is carried by four bearers. Recruitment to the ensemble, as well as leaving it, takes place according to the rules laid down in the parish. Feretrum-bearers from Gdańsk Oliwa and from Kościerzyna, for example, must be bachelors and members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Cross. The marriage of any member of the ensemble is tantamount to the release of his place to another bachelor.

It is thus evident that the obeisance of feretra operates in the rich and broad context of cultural and natural heritage in general. As emphasised in the literature, the aforementioned UNESCO Convention presupposes, among others, the identification as well as the protection of intangible cultural heritage (Smyk 2023; Czerwińska 2012). In the case of the obeisance of feretra, protection seems obvious, to which issue I shall return further on; yet in practice – in the realities of the Polish society a decade after the adoption of the Convention in Paris – there has been media confusion about its identification and perception. The situation that arose can be succinctly described as a clash between noble ideas and an existing reality. In the course of the research and analysis undertaken on its basis, it proved possible to distinguish certain attitudes towards the tradition of the obeisance of feretra, certain ways of perceiving this phenomenon, which will be presented below, with the indication of their possible causes and conditions.



Fig. 3. The Sanctuary of Our Lady, Queen of the Polish Sea at Swarzewo seen across the waters of the Bay of Puck; Puck. Photo by G. Błahut (2024).



Fig. 4. Female feretrum-bearers (*obraźniczki*) waiting to perform the obeisance during the closing ceremony of a religious feast at Kalwaria Wejherowska; Wejherowo. Photo by G. Błahut (2015).



Fig. 5. Teams of female feretrum-bearers (*obraźniczki*) waiting to perform the solemn obeisance before the image of the Our Lady, Health of the Sick in the Soul and in the Body, queuing in front of the church of St. Anne in Wejherowo; Wejherowo. Photo by G. Błahut (2023).

Attitudes towards the tradition of the obeisance of feretra

Using the terminology of media studies, it can be said that for many decades of the twentieth century nothing special happened in public opinion regarding the obeisance or the dance of feretra. A rather precise and factual description of the obeisance at the Calvary in Wejherowo by Józef Merson, published in "Kurier Bałtycki" of 26 May 1938, remains an isolated and solitary example. In 1953, the Primate of the Millennium, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, witnessed the obeisances being performed and commented that "despite the peculiarity of the feat, a true religious acrobatics, this does not make a negative impression" (quoted after Frankowska 2020:260). For generations, the region's inhabitants have not paid any particular attention to this custom as a distinctive feature of their own culture. It is reasonable to assume that this was also not helped by the centralised cultural policy during the communist period, considering that this policy was mainly oriented towards the creation of a state that would be monolithic in terms of identity and, in addition, it applied repressive measures against the Church and the multitude of believers. Some Kashubians even today admit that they used to be convinced that the obeisance of feretra was practised in other regions of Poland as well. The situation changed dramatically with the spread of the Internet, along with social media and communication channels independent of time, space and traditional authorities.

It is beyond doubt that a favourable, albeit unintentional contribution to the broad popularisation and increase in the awareness of the obeisance of feretra at Kalwaria Wejherowska was made by the posting, on 26 June 2013, on the YouTube online video

sharing platform of an amateur film under the provocative title *Aerobik ze świętym obrazem (feretron dance)* [Aerobic with a holy image (feretrum dance)],⁴ which in time reached 664,000 views, and a video-clip posted on the same day, entitled *Harlem shake ze świętym obrazem (Best polish harlem shake)* [Harlem shake with a holy image (Best Polish Harlem Shake)] (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcPjDkvgZA), the latter showing the feretrum dance with the soundtrack of the then-popular tune and reaching the astounding number of 1.3 million views (Lademann 2023: 40).

Yet looking closely at the content of the comments and the reactions of the Kashubians, it would be difficult to accept an unequivocally positive assessment of this form of popularisation. Witosława Frankowska notes that following the posting of this and other films "in 2013, the Internet was flooded by a wave of aggressive comments, the subject of which became the Kashubians and, more specifically, the custom of the obeisance of feretra practised by them during the indulgence feast at Kalwaria Wejherowska" (Frankowska 2020: 259). The hermetic and age-old tradition, one handed down from generation to generation in Kashubian families, was forced to confront the globalised external world instantly and on a large scale. The practice, associated with the sphere of the sacrum, was subjected to various judgements, often harsh ones, formulated by outsiders – people from outside Kashubia – under the influence of emotions and in isolation from its cultural context.

As of 13 December 2023, the most popular of the related video-clips, i.e. the *Harlem shake ze świętym obrazem*, has reached over 1.3 million views and garnered 1,631 comments. It would be impossible to refer to all of them, but on the basis of their content it is possible to propose a certain systematisation and distinguish several ways of receiving and evaluating the obeisance of feretra.

First of all, a dividing line could be drawn between negative and positive comments. However, this line is not clear-cut; it is more like a border strip where cautious or neutral comments can be located, written perhaps by authors seeking the essence of the phenomenon presented in the film. The Kashubians felt offended because in many cases their important and beautiful tradition was openly ridiculed. Many of the negative comments are devoid of merit, often limited to vulgarisms or succinctly worded simplistic statements. In a significant number of entries, the obeisance of feretra presented in the manipulated film appears to be merely a pretext for personal duels on the issues of worldview, theology or politics. The manipulation lay, above all, in the soundtrack, which was completely alien to the obeisance of feretra, especially when performed at the climax of the ceremony of farewell to pilgrimage groups departing after the indulgence feast at Kalwaria Wejherowska. At this point, the orchestra plays distinctive pieces sanctioned by tradition. It can, in fact, be said that this is an

4 Currently available on YouTube under the title *Areobik ze świętym obrazem feretron dance*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bbEex1WL6E>.

expression of a certain diplomatic protocol which constitutes a part of the "rituals of the feretra greeting and bidding farewell to one another, which are unique in indulgence feast customs on the scale of the whole Poland. Each incoming orchestra played the anthem of its own company, the so-called *tusz* [fanfare]" (Frankowska 2008: 92).

An analysis of other video-clips using the *Harlem Shake* tune to be found on the Web prompts the conclusion that this song serves to provide soundtrack to various displays of tomfoolery. As indicated by semiotics, it is, in part, the external relations of a sign, the context of its use, that construct its meaning. Perceiving the obeisance of feretra with a soundtrack of this kind must have caused a shock or a negative impression. The second manipulative procedure applied in the making of the video-clip in question consisted in speeding up the pace "to one and a half times", as pointed out, among others, by film professionals, Olga Blumczyńska and Barbara Ostrowska, the authors of the documentary *Dotknąć obrazu (Kaszëbskô Paradnica. Podcast...)*. One Internet user made a diagnosis of the situation in the following words:

ridiculous jokes... I am a Kashubian woman born and bred, and this dance is normal in our area... a tradition that does not hurt or offend anyone. Unfortunately, the lack of respect only proves the level of the young people of our country; Poles will never be a respected nation because, regrettably, they do not respect themselves.⁵

Yet the aforementioned media materials popularising the obeisance of feretra did not meet with disapproval only; approving statements can be found even among the participants and observers of the indulgence feasts. The following is an example:

Grażyna, ignorance may destroy you in the online world one day. Read for yourself about the dancing pictures in Kashubia; and it seems to me that this is not the first time they are dancing because I have seen them quite often. And that someone cut out the original film and added a different tune, well, you can't always be serious, and the clip is great.⁶

This statement may also be indicative of a tendency among the young people to seek out new forms of expression, ones adapted to the present times, when cultural codes differ from the ones used earlier. Tracing the history of pilgrimages in Kashubia with their inseparable feretra, certain modifications concerning their carrying are noticeable, for instance the introduction of trolleys for transport (Jażdżewski 2008) or the development of a dance form (Wejher-Sitkiewicz 2018). The issue evident here is that

5 From comments to the *Harlem shake ze świętym obrazem (best polish harlem shake)* video-clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcPjDkvgZA>. In all the comments cited herein, the often careless Polish has been rendered in standard English.

6 From comments to the *Harlem shake ze świętym obrazem (best polish harlem shake)* video-clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcPjDkvgZA>.

of the transmission of traditions in general and of making a certain compromise between generations or certain social groups.

Among the observers, but also, as confirmed by field research, among the participants of the ceremonies there are also those who accept the custom of the obeisance of feretra as a sacred ancestral tradition, not to be judged or discussed, and not to be pondered over.

Every year, during pilgrimages to the Calvary at Wejherowo, [choreographic] figures with holy images are performed. For their farewell, the pilgrimages stop in front of the monastery and there, in front of the open doors of the church and the Holy Sacrament, they also perform such figures with images. I live in Wejherowo and every year I watch this (as you called it) "dance of images". This is the way it was, is and will be, and all those who criticise this custom must accept this...!⁷

A certain dividing line regarding the evaluation of the obeisance of feretra has also been drawn between those familiar with the basics of religious faith and worship. In those cases, arguments in the disputes that have arisen are based on biblical quotations, especially ones derived from the Old Testament, on the knowledge of "appropriate" and "correct" religious practices, and even on general theological issues. Opponents of the obeisance/dance of feretra accuse its proponents of, for example, idolatry. They, in turn, explain that it is not people who make the obeisance but images, which are merely symbolic representations of holy figures, in this context, the idea of blessing and worshipping God through the feretrum is legitimate.

During the field research in 2023, isolated voices could be heard among the participants of the indulgence feast that the obeisance, and especially the dance of the feretra, was inappropriate, that during a religious rite, before the majesty of God, there should be solemnity, and that regional or local variants that represent a deviation from the commonly accepted practices and liturgy should not occur. I believe that this approach may be due to insufficient knowledge of the theological interpretation, or the wider socio-cultural context, of the obeisance phenomenon. In order to better explain this problem, it is worthwhile to recall the commentary on another amateur video published online in 2016, entitled *Pokłon feretronów na Kalwarii Wejherowskiej* [The obeisance of feretra at Kalwaria Wejherowska] (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp7y7Gc4Y1Q). Amongst such statements as "horrible", "occult", "completely sick", "what do these people have instead of brains", Henryk Jakub Muński OFM, a Franciscan brother, takes the floor:

Dear User watching this clip, Before you post a comment here, read the article at this link: [here a reference to a Wikipedia entry]. The obeisance of feretra is not any kind of

7 From comments to the *Harlem shake ze świętym obrazem (best polish harlem shake)* video-clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbcPjDkvgZA>.

"throwing the image round"; the symbolism of this act of popular devotion is very profound. If we looked at the act from above, we would see the sign of the cross – the symbol of salvation. Moving [the image] in a circle, in turn, is a symbol of the world embraced by this salvation. So if you want to continue to comment on and spread hate speech about not only an element of Kashubian culture, but also – perhaps above all – an act of popular piety, think twice. We are so enchanted by the Catholic Church in Africa, that the [believers] are so joyful there, and when we have something similar in our own backyard, we use hate speech on it and ridicule it. "The grass is always greener on the other side".⁸

The quoted author, as a clergyman, is apparently trying to indicate the most appropriate interpretative perspective. Also, the above statement points to another important theme recently taken up by the Kashubians, namely, that in a broad, multicultural and global context, the tradition of the obeisance of feretra is an example of intangible cultural heritage of a world-class rank. This view may also be indicative of a certain transformation of awareness that has taken place in the last ten years.

A variety of approaches to the tradition of the obeisance of feretra, and different ways of receiving this phenomenon, are thus in evidence. The perception of images or, more broadly, of performative phenomena depends on the personal characteristics of the individual, for instance his/her cultural competence (see Deręgowski 1990; Vorbrich 2007). On the basis of an analysis of empirical material, mainly online comments, but also interviews that took into account persons who did not function in social media, it was possible to distinguish five types of attitudes related to the reception of the obeisance of feretra.

1. The aggressive stance. It is presented by people who formulate their judgements in the spirit of online hate speech and probably come from a variety of social backgrounds. As social psychology suggests, aggression is the result of frustration (cf. Aronson 2002). Indeed, their statements, while offensive, vulgar and provocative, are also vague, short on factual value and context, the consideration of which is necessary to express a meaningful opinion.
2. The analytical stance. The evaluation is the result of in-depth analysis and reflection. It is based on knowledge; the obeisance of feretra is perceived as a cultural asset, an element of heritage; the content of behaviour forms is considered; the broadest possible context is taken into account. This stance is also represented by researchers and heritage professionals.
3. The open stance. It can be the starting point for an analytical stance, and is often displayed by persons from outside Kashubia who are curious about the presented phenomenon and aware of the limitations of their own knowledge of it. If adopted by persons hailing from the region, especially native Kashubians, this

⁸ Henryk Jakub Muński OFM, comment on the film *Pokłon feretronów na Kalwarii Wejherowskiej*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp7y7Gc4Y1Q>.

stance also manifests itself in a selective approach to the tradition of the obeisance, and in allowing criticism.

4. The conservative stance. It consists of an a priori recognition of the obeisance of feretra as a part of tradition, this tradition being usually treated as a value in itself. This stance is found in older people, who are attached to the norms and values established in their social environment, as well as to ritualised ways of practising their faith. A variant of this attitude is the criticism of the custom in question as an iconoclastic deviation from commonly accepted practices in liturgical rites.
5. The apologetic/affirmative stance. In the perspective resulting from this approach, the obeisance of feretra appears, first and foremost, as a theologically justified religious practice on the one hand, and on the other, as an element of one's cultural heritage that deserves respect and protection. In my view, this stance is characteristic chiefly of the young bearers of this tradition: the *feretrarii* of both genders, the clergymen and the pilgrims.

In reality, of course, it is difficult to find an ideal type among the attitudes described above. Certain elements of the characteristics of the approach to the obeisance of feretra can overlap or influence one another to produce a more pronounced dynamics. The analytical attitude, for example, may combine with the apologetic/affirmative one, and they both have their opposite in the aggressive attitude. I treat the above classification primarily as a model to support the analysis undertaken above.

The need for respect and protection

As has already been said, the obeisance of feretra remains in essential connection with the broad socio-cultural context, with the material heritage represented by the historic feretra and the pilgrimage shrines, and with the landscape, of which the sacrum-endowed network of pilgrimage routes is an important element. The surrounding land, in fact, forms an inalienable cultural space for the custom in question. The degradation of the natural environment, the expansion of roads and motorways and, above all, increased car traffic pose a further threat. Counter-measures, such as modifying pilgrimage routes to run along quiet country roads as they did in the past or increasing the security and safety procedures for pilgrims on their way, have their limitations. It can actually be said that a new group of functionaries has appeared among the pilgrims: the movement of wheeled vehicles that are supposed to alternately and safely bypass the pilgrims is controlled by persons trained to do so. The behaviour of drivers who maliciously use their horns or deliberately rev up the engines of their vehicles is an analogy, as it were, to the offensive online comments.

The obeisance of feretra, an old custom accompanying Kashubian pilgrimages and indulgence feast celebrations, deserves to be respected and protected. Addressing the issue of protection of this custom with reference to the provisions of the 2003

UNESCO Convention and the subsequent 2015 Ethical Principles document, Katarzyna Smyk offers valuable guidelines and recommends a number of specific actions that should be comprehensively implemented for this purpose. In the context of the issue addressed in this article, I consider it important that she draws attention to the problem of promoting the tradition of the obeisance of feretra through both the classical and the new media, pointing to the need to harmonise messages found therein. This, as she writes, can be achieved in two ways: "Firstly by harmonising the messages addressed to an audience outside the community with those dedicated to the bearers of this tradition. Secondly, one cannot remain blind to unreliable information, misrepresentations and overinterpretations" (Smyk 2023: 49). The endeavours to undertake should also include monitoring the media, not discounting possible interventions; those, in turn, should be preceded by preventive actions, "i.e. adequate preparation of materials for the media, including a good, properly described photographic resource with publication rights" (Smyk 2023: 49).

The tools and models for identifying, promoting and protecting intangible heritage are, apparently, already well developed and it can be said that the postulate posed a decade ago: "Ensuring effective protection of intangible heritage in Poland is currently a huge challenge, with the challenge being more about changing the philosophy of protection than about significant systemic changes" (Zalasińska 2013: 322) has been largely fulfilled.

The examples of the reception of the obeisance of feretra discussed above reveal a certain problematic aspect of identifying, preserving or promoting this custom; namely, they suggest that attention must be paid to its broad social, spatial, material and media contexts. It is also important to intensify educational efforts in relation to intangible cultural heritage, especially in terms of the dissemination of knowledge and the formation of certain attitudes. I dare say that offensive comments against the bearers of this tradition and the Kashubian community as a whole are not only a sign of ignorance, lack of openness or, ultimately, certain susceptibilities of their authors; they also signal an insufficient knowledge of the law and a shortage of good manners. In contrast, in the milieu of experts and collective entities dealing with these problems professionally, it is more of "a change in the approach to preservation duties that is needed, and this requires first of all an understanding of the specificity of intangible heritage, for which the main form of expression is a human being. Hence, the transience and elusiveness of intangible heritage, whose preservation is limited by human memory" (Zalasińska 2013: 322).

The process of polarisation of Polish society in recent years also poses, in my opinion, new challenges. Due to its specificity and close links with religious life, the obeisance of feretra increasingly places the bearers of this tradition at one side of a conflict. Field research conducted in 2023 shows that pilgrims feel increasingly stigmatised because of their participation in pilgrimages and indulgence celebrations.

This breeds further factors that may indirectly threaten the tradition of going on pilgrimages and performing the obeisance of feretra. On the one hand, this is a mark of inevitable socio-cultural and modernising changes; on the other, it springs from the resentment towards the Church and believers that is being promoted, sometimes also in the public sphere.

Recently, the obeisance of feretra became an object of particular care and attention of the Wejherowo district authorities, as well as a group of experts and researchers involved in the project *Tradycja pokłonu feretronów podczas pielgrzymek na Kalwarię Wejherowską jako niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe Kaszub*. In the year 2023, with financial support from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, a number of actions were undertaken at the level of local communities. These actions have already yielded tangible results, first and foremost the publication of a richly illustrated book *Obrażnik i obrażniczka – to brzmi dumnie! Tradycja pokłonu feretronów podczas pielgrzymek na Kalwarię Wejherowską* [A male/female feretrum-bearer – this has a noble sound! The tradition of the obeisance of feretra during pilgrimages to Kalwaria Wejherowska; no English-language version] and the submission of an application for the custom to be entered into the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Regardless of what the answer to this application might be, this Kashubian custom is worthy of protection and support in the broadest measure, because, as I have tried to demonstrate in this text, it constitutes an extremely important element that incorporates not only the spiritual, but also other aspects in the life and culture of the region's inhabitants.

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Summary

The article describes the tradition of the obeisance of feretra as a manifestation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the ways of perceiving, evaluating and protecting this tradition. The year 2013 was significant in this respect, since thanks to an amateur but intentionally edited video published on the Internet, the obeisance of feretra was shown to a wider audience and received various, sometimes radically different opinions. Simultaneously, a considerable increase in the interest in the obeisance was observed among researchers, experts and bearers of this tradition as they tried to learn more about it and explain its meaning. In the article, the author distinguishes five types of the evaluation of the obeisance of feretra and analyses their determinants. Relating primarily to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the author also considers actions that could help to protect the tradition of the obeisance of feretra.

Keywords: cultural heritage, the obeisance of feretra, Kashubia, social media, evaluation

Streszczenie

W artykule opisana jest tradycja pokłonu feretronów jako przejaw niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego oraz sposoby jej postrzegania, oceny i ochrony. Znaczący był w tym przypadku rok 2013, kiedy za sprawą amatorskiego, lecz intencjonalnie zmontowanego filmu opublikowanego w Internecie, pokłon feretronów został pokazany szerszej publiczności i doczekał się różnych, niekiedy skrajnie odmiennych opinii. Wtedy wzrosło też zainteresowanie pokłonem wśród badaczy, ekspertów i depozytariuszy, którzy starali się lepiej poznać oraz wyjaśnić sens i znaczenie tej tradycji. Autor wyróżnia w artykule pięć typów jakościowej recepcji pokłonu feretronów i analizuje ich uwarunkowania. Na koniec, odwołując się głównie do Konwencji UNESCO z 2003 r., rozważa także działania, które mogłyby pomóc w ochronie tej tradycji.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe, pokłon feretronów, Kaszuby, media społecznościowe, postrzeganie

Translated by K. Michałowicz