

Neofolk in Poland. Between a New Religious Movement and Subculture

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INTRODUCTION

THE ‘folk turn’ is a phenomenon affecting several cultures today. In Poland, the third wave of the ‘folk turn’, also known as the ‘peasant turn’, is currently underway. This raises the question of what makes the Polish incarnation of the ‘folk turn’ stand out. The first wave took place in the 19th century and was linked to the Romantic movement’s turn toward folk culture. Romantics eagerly drew on folk tales, fascinated by the people’s imagination and the dark, strange world of legends and fairy tales. Folklore attracted poets with its mystery, fantasy, vivid imagery, rich mythology, unspoiled freshness of feeling, and clear moral messages. Moreover, these stories were closely intertwined with songs and the music to which they were performed.

The second wave had a more political character and emerged after the war with the rise of communist rule. The communist government made peasant identity a symbol of the fight against the bourgeoisie, and folk and rural culture became a sign of opposition to the prewar intelligentsia. The official cultural narrative highlighted all that was associated with folklore as an expression of what was ‘truly Polish’ in contrast to Western culture.

After 1989, with the political transformation, there was a backlash against folklore in Poland. However, as Adam Leszczyński argues¹, Polish culture has predominantly peasant roots. The third wave of interest in folk culture emerged as a result of nostalgia, retro-mania, and also postcolonial reflection.

In the discourse that has been unfolding for nearly a decade, parallels are drawn between Polish serfdom and American slavery, both marked by brutality and dehumanization; a form of servile dependence is seen in Poland’s social relations between the upper class and the peasantry². This reflection has also embraced social and cultural issues: male behavioral structures, patriarchy, religion, and gender relations. In literature, there is a turn toward what is provincial, simple, and sometimes even crude or uneducated. “Neo-peasant” literature presents the countryside not only as the place where core values, traditions, customs, and folklore were shaped, but also as a symbolic space of being in the world³. Depicted through literature or scholarly discourse, Polish folk, rural, and provincial culture is shown here as an element of identity. This trend is evident in the new film adaptation of Władysław Reymont’s novel *Chłopi* [The Peasants], which has been widely acclaimed not only by audiences but also by critics.

In addition to their admiration of the visuals, which employed an experimental form of superimposing painterly aesthetics on the film frame, audiences were enthralled by the musical score. The soundtrack consists of a dozen or so songs based on folk chants and melodies played in completely new arrangements prepared by neofolk bands. Łukasz “L.U.C.” Rostkowski, a composer from Wrocław, invited artists associated with Polish traditional and folk music to collaborate on the film’s soundtrack, thus involving: Maria Pomianowska, the band Tęgie

¹ A. Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, Warszawa 2020; M. Rauszer, *Bekarty pańszczyzny*, Warszawa 2020; K. Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, Wołowiec 2022; A. Leszczyński, *Obrońcy pańszczyzny*, Warszawa 2023; J. Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopi. Opowieść o naszych babkach*, Warszawa 2023.

² G. Borkowska-Arciuch, *Perspektywa postkolonialna na gruncie polskim – pytania sceptyka*, “Teksty Drugie”, 2010, 5, pp. 40-43.

³ The peasant revival is evident in contemporary Polish prose, including in novels by Maciej Płaza, Andrzej Muszyński, Jakub Małecki, Anna Ciarkowska, Weronika Gogola, Wioletta Grzegorzewska, and others.

Chłopy, Sutari or the legendary Kurpie singer Apolonia Nowak. The music for the film quickly gained an independent status as a cultural text and entered the charts of popular music. It followed in the footsteps of earlier successes by Polish singer Kayah, who, in the 1990s, recorded an album with Serbian musician Goran Bregović⁴.

NEOFOLK AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN POLAND

The success of the soundtrack to *The Peasants* is no coincidence. The artistic search focusing on combining modern sounds with Slavic folk tradition is a musical trend that has been extremely popular in Poland since the 1990s and produced its own distinct representatives. Initially, neofolk was primarily an attempt to incorporate folklore into popular music, especially rock (VooVoo)⁵, reggae (Trebunie Tutki and Twinkle Brothers)⁶ or electronic (Psio krew)⁷. Later, it took on a life of its own and became a way of expressing values other than those commonly accepted in Polish culture, with bands drawing on pre-Christian themes and beliefs that have been suppressed or covered up in Polish Christianised culture. The combination of anti-Christian pronouncements and music growing out of folk energy, like rock, is no accident. Analysing manifestations of folk anticlericalism in Polish lands, Michał Rauszer, writes that unrestrained music – capable of inducing trance-like ecstasy – is an expression of the libidinal element, and as such could not be accepted by a religion that imposes order, obedience, and moral purity:

Impetuous, passionate and making people forget their hard work for a moment, folk music in a dancing frenzy made everyone equal, above all depriving the authorities of control over people for a moment. For this reason, it was believed that such music – immoral, anarchic and breaking all conventions – must be the work of Lucifer⁸.

⁴ *Kayah i Bregović*, 1999, BMG Poland-PolyGram.

⁵ I am thinking here of Wojciech Waglewski's search for Ukrainian music (*VooVoo and Haydamaky*, 2009, Agora) and the tradition of Podhale (*Tischner* – an album recorded with the Terbunie-Tutki highlander band, 2007, Agora SA).

⁶ *Come Back Twinkle to Trebunia Family* (1994) and *Songs of Glory/Pieśni chwaly* (2008).

⁷ Szumi Jawor Soundsystem (2007).

⁸ M. Rauszer, *Ludowy antyklerykalizm. Nieopowiedziana histo-*

Neofolk, represented by bands such as Żywiołek, Leśne Licho, Radogost or Jar, grows out of the disobedience described above. It is not about rebellion, but rather a completely different way of thinking about humanity, nature and the world, derived from a different value system. The point of reference here is not the Polish tradition, anchored in the paradigm of Christian culture, but the Slavic tradition based on beliefs, customs, and behaviours representing the old native religion.

Songs in the spirit of neofolk are inspired by mythical stories derived from Slavic mythology and related rituals, such as the Kupala Night or the Midsummer Festival, when the birth of the sun (*Sol invictus* by Żywiołek) is remembered. The protagonists of these musical stories are forces of nature that personify the gods, hence many musical prayers are offered to the sun or trees. The themes of neofolk's musical tales are wrapped around folk tales, inspired by native legends and myths, as well as experienced festivals such as Kupala Night, when “they awake from their long sleep” (*Kupalnocka* by Jar), or Midsummer, when the birth of the sun is remembered (*Sol invictus* by Żywiołek). Besides, many musical prayers are offered to the sun (*Sons of the Sun* by Stworz) or the oak (*In the shadow of the great oak* by Radogost).

Neofolk is not just a musical trend seeking to express an old sound in a new format, but a new way of life, linked to both an ecocritical attitude toward the world and a postcolonial rejection of Christian cultural hegemony. This involves a return to pantheistic thinking, in which divine forces are discovered in nature. Adopting such an assumption makes it possible to negate the achievements of civilization to date, above all technology, in favour of a return to traditional pro-ecological ways of living. An expression of this attitude may be a return to herbalism and avoidance of pharmacology, resorting to magical solutions that make use of the forces of nature (sun, water, earth). Also included in this perspective are all activities in support of freedom and environmental movements (such as Greenpeace): fighting for the preservation of the natural environment,

opposing highway construction, rebelling against consumerism, big markets in favour of producing healthy food themselves, etc. The return to Slavic music became a way of returning to a certain way of life, known as neo-paganism or indigenous faith⁹.

The new musical practices entailed a new way of life closer to nature and the indigenous Slavic beliefs¹⁰. Neofolk, through its idea of music, became an expression of an ecstatic return to oneness with the cosmos – the universe. This music seeks ecstasy, the intoxication of the infinite, which can manifest itself in exhilarating music, in rhythm, in dance, in the madness of light and darkness, in the human mass. All of these can be found in the rituals performed by native believers. Music is meant to express a connection with the cosmos, to allow for the union of an individual human existence with the universe, to offer the possibility of dissolving one's identity in the realm of nature. Hence the turn toward rhythm, toward trance. The adherents of the native faith thus attempt to reconstruct the ancient, or rather early medieval, concept of pagan beliefs, creating their own vision of the past and referring to a particular worldview construct¹¹.

SLAVIC NATIVE FAITH

The Slavic religion is a religion of nature, based on the assumption that human beings are a part of nature, which is why the most important festivals are associated with the seasonal changes. Such gods as Perun the Thunderer, Svetovit (incorrectly

called Światowid) the god of heaven, war and harvest, Swarog the sun god and Mokosh – Mother Earth – embody the phenomena of nature. In the unusual confession *The Lechite Creed* from early 1990s, we find a very important connection between the natural world and religious thinking:

In the laws of nature, we constantly discover the divine causal forces of the world. All life happens according to these laws. It is our duty to obey them. We profess to live according to the laws of nature. To the Sun, the closest focus of the hierarchical, infinite, eternal and living Universe, we owe everything on our Earth. Together with the lands, waters, plants and animals, we are a part of it. Only the human being is aware of this; because of this, he bears an enormous responsibility. [...]

Body and spirit form an inseparable and mutually contingent whole. They are two sides of the same being. Lechites emphasise the equal value of both, striving for their equal and simultaneous perfection.

The all-embracing, homogeneous God-World – Glory to Him! Man's honoured vocation is to participate actively in this development and to constantly increase the value of life in order to make it better and more beautiful, to give it superior dimensions in accordance with the creative will¹².

The postulates of indigenous Slavic beliefs can be reduced to a few basic points. These are: naturalism, which consists of approaching life in accordance with the laws of nature, harmonising human life, attuning oneself to the rhythm of nature, living in harmony with one's nature and thus the nature of the universe; a holistic perspective; soteriology, understood as the pursuit of inner perfection, the unity of body and spirit; and pantheism (God-world).

It is difficult not to see the parallels with New Age postulates. Zbigniew Pasek, analysing the similarities between Polish neo-paganism and the spirituality of the New Age, mentions: the conviction of the equality of all cultures and religions (apart from Christianity, which is treated with hostility); the cult of nature as Mother Earth; individualism and the related cult of freedom; a holistic perception of reality; the rejection of external systems of orders and laws in favour of morality inscribed in the nature of man (you can do everything without hurting others); and progress understood as the strengthening of one's own creative powers¹³. What Polish neo-paganism

⁹ In order to avoid negative connotations, I refer to 'indigenous faith' although such terms as neo-paganism, modern pagans, or followers of traditional religions are also in use. The literature uses the term neo-paganism as a name to describe contemporary religious movements referring to pre-Christian European religions. See: M. Strutyński, *Neopogaństwo*, Kraków 2014, pp. 9-14.

¹⁰ The interpenetration of these scopes stems from the tradition of Slavic neo-paganism, the roots of which lie in the 19th century. A special role was played here by Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski, who, in his treatise *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem*, linked Poland's chances of regaining freedom with a return to pre-Christian sources and the Slavic community, which had been broken up and weakened by Christianity precisely. See: Z. Dołęga-Chodakowski, *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem i inne pisma*, Wrocław 1999.

¹¹ I skip here the national theme, which is important for neofolk and native believers, and which often docks neo-pagan identity by linking it to nationalist tendencies, e.g. the Nazi idea or Pan-Slavism.

¹² Z. Pasek, *Neopogaństwo w Polsce a duchowość New Age*, "Państwo i Społeczeństwo", 2008, 4, p. 206.

¹³ Ibidem.

has in common with New Age spirituality are therefore the following features:

- the need for religious experience as spiritual unification rather than striving for the primacy of one religion;
- the worship of nature, of which humans are an integral part;
- an openness to individual development and fulfilment of needs;
- an understanding of the world as a material-spiritual whole;
- soteriology, understood as personal growth and strengthening one's creative powers;
- the laws of nature, conceived as a universal principle, and the only laws to live by;
- strong emphasis on the individual's responsibility towards fellow human beings and history.

There is no doubt that adherents of the indigenous Polish Church, and, more broadly, sympathizers of neo-paganism immersed in a romantic vision of mythical history, are today a part of a very tangible phenomenon¹⁴, which is both religious and cultural. With regard to Neofolk music, the latter seems to be of greater interest. In this sense, one would have to look at the circle of indigenous Slav believers and their manifestations – neofolk, Slavic (Wiccan) festivals and the accompanying fantasy literature – in the context of the following: subculture, counterculture and alternative culture¹⁵, and thus three components of a process that separates itself from hegemonic culture.

NEOFOLK AS A SUBCULTURE

The most expressive form of action against the dominant culture is subculture. I use the word 'expressive' because subculture manifests itself mostly through external forms of opposition¹⁶. It is about

mostly external (though not necessarily superficial) ways of representing one's distinctiveness. These usually include a certain way of dressing, the type of music listened to, characteristic daily habits, and the places that define the meeting space. A subculture is, therefore, a segment of social life centred around a specific criterion: ethnic, professional, or – in the case of neo-paganism – religious and worldview. It is lifestyle with its externalized signs of behaviour that makes it possible to determine membership to a certain ideological community. Behaviour and values intersect in this space, as values are located in ideologies and worldviews and these are externalized through lifestyle. Lifestyle, with its outward signs of behaviour makes it possible to determine membership of a certain ideological community¹⁷. Let us now look at this issue in the context of neofolk.

Neofolk music is a combination of references to early music traditions using folk instruments (basetla, hurdy-gurdy, violin, pipes, czynele)¹⁸ with electronics or even metal sounds. Content-wise, neofolk artists are fascinated by the common heritage of Europe, particularly its pre-Christian dimension, free of Judeo-Christian influences. Many neofolk musicians (such as Laboratorium Pieśni, Sutari, Dikanda, Żywiołak in Poland, many others in Europe such as British Sol Invictus, German Forseti and Finnish Tenhi and many other Nordic bands) express their fascination with a spiritual Paneuropa, a Europe based on indigenous values, hence the references to pre-Christian mythologies or pagan ritual

language, style or leisure activities is emphasized. P. Piotrowski, *Subkultura młodzieżowa. Psychosocial aspects*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ A. Jawłowska defines lifestyle as not merely the sum of life's activities, but as their complex construction. It is like a form imposed on the totality of seemingly chaotic sequences of purposeful activities and habitual behaviours. In other words: the process of style formation is the process of giving a specific form to different types of activity and the consolidation of relatively stable relations between them. From this, it is clear that the behaviours constituting a particular lifestyle form a whole. They are not individual behaviours isolated from the others. A. Jawłowska, *Lifestyle and Values*, in *Styl życia: koncepcje i propozycje*, ed. by A. Siciński, Warszawa 1976, p. 207.

¹⁸ Basetla (or bass), is a Polish folk string instrument with a low range, shaped like cello. It serves a rhythmic function. 'Czynele' is another name for cymbals, a musical instrument consisting of two circular metal discs that produce a sound when struck together. It serves a rhythmic function too.

¹⁴ Scott Simpson of the Jagiellonian University reports that the number of active adherents is currently around 4000, plus an even wider circle of people interested in the religion and sometimes participating in rituals. S. Simpson, *Native Faith. Polish Neo-Paganism at the Brink of the 21st Century*, Kraków 2000, p. 151.

¹⁵ M. Filipiak, *Od subkultury do kultury alternatywnej*, Lublin 1999, pp. 14-15.

¹⁶ In defining subculture as a mechanism for distinguishing oneself from society as a whole, the role of external attributes such as dress,

themes. Many neofolk records are decorated with runic notations (like *Morgenstern – Fuego, Birke – Rytuły (Rituals)*), esoteric motifs, glorifications of nature, and an adherence to traditional lifeways.

However, the focus here is not on the music itself, but the accompanying external ways of life of the communities creating or listening to it. On a musical level, Polish neofolk music emphasizes repetitive, almost trance-like rhythms intended to celebrate seasonal celebrations: Kupala (the festival of fire, water and love on the shortest night of the year, 21-22 June), Harvest Festival (21 September), Mid-winter Eve (on the winter solstice, 22 December) or Jarego (21 March, heralding the arrival of the spring deity of harvest). This is compounded by a distinctive style of dress that alludes to an anti-civilization (anti-technical, anti-machine nature of production) and an ecological way of life: linen dresses, hand-sewn sheep-wool slippers, and bast shoes. The girls wear dresses and flower wreaths on their heads. In their way of being, they evoke a dimension of sisterhood and brotherhood that brings their relationships closer to those of similar hippie communes. According to Norman Goodman¹⁹, such external representations are a kind of subcultural pattern that gives the group a distinct identity and style. This style is what distinguishes a subculture from the overall society of which it is a part.

Interestingly, this subculture of ‘indigenous faith’ is not defined by generational ties. Usually, when the components of subcultures are defined, attention is drawn to their generational factor, linked to the association of the subculture with social and moral rebellion attributed to youth. Marian Filipiak defines subculture as follows:

When a large number of individuals share similar problems and when, on the basis of common interests and aspirations, fairly permanent bonds are formed between peers who form norms, values and patterns that only correspond to and are valid for them, then a certain totality of these norms, values and patterns constitutes a subculture of a particular collectivity²⁰.



In neofolk, the generational factor does not play such an important role. People of different ages may belong to a subculture with a religious-ecological-pacifist orientation: in fact, this intergenerational experience is an expression of values such as tolerance, equality, subjectivity, or the idea of naturalness²¹.

If one were to go back to Milton Gordon’s definition of subculture²², that is, the combination of mea-

¹⁹ N. Goodman, *Wstęp do socjologii*, transl. by J. Polak – J. Ruszkowski – U. Zielińska, Poznań 2001, p. 45.

²⁰ M. Filipiak, *Od subkultury do kultury alternatywnej. Wprowadzenie do subkultur młodzieżowych*, Lublin 2003, p. 13.

²¹ Marek Jędrzejewski lists similar values valued by youth. M. Jędrzejewski, *Subkultura a przemoc*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 26-32.

²² Gordon defines a subculture as a combination of measurable social

surable social situations whose connection forms a functional unity exerting a holistic influence on the individual, territory and religious affiliation should be considered in the context of the neo-folk neo-pagan community. It is not so much a matter of territorial origin as a conscious choice of this rural – that is, natural – space. This is because the majority of participants in this peculiar subculture come from large cities (studies show that more than 70% reside in urban areas with populations exceeding 100,000), but they share a conviction of the need to escape from civilization, the city and, above all, the hegemonic culture based on the Judeo-Christian model. The territory referred to in the case of native speakers is therefore understood in intentional and volitional terms, not in ethnic terms. Indigenous beliefs thus become a category of belonging by choice, a kind of optionality, which is reflected in the educational level of this group members – more than 50% hold a university degree, another 30% have at least a secondary education²³.

Religious affiliation, in other words a worldview choice, very often involving abandoning ancestral faith and beliefs in favour of a new communal experience, is yet another related issue. This last indicator determines the practices of the neo-pagan subculture. It questions cultural achievements to date, or even deems them detrimental to human development. It rejects the social lifestyle considered to be universal with its values, such as work, earning money or the family, and its axiology and directions of development, including modernity²⁴. It seems, therefore, that we are dealing with a subculture of the alternative search type here. It is then not

surprising that the neo-folk and neo-pagan milieu is akin to countercultural activities with their alternative history festivals or fantasy festivals (e.g. the festival of Slavic culture “Rodzima Ziemia” or the festival of Slavic and Cistercian culture in Łąd).

NEOFOLK AS A COUNTERCULTURE

The phenomena discussed earlier bring the presented issues of neopaganism, expressed in neofolk, closer to the concept of counterculture. The concept of counterculture can be understood in two ways. Firstly it refers to a specific movement, constituted around 1969, which opposed the existing Western culture and which tried to lay the foundations for a new culture, liberated from cultural hegemony, proposing diffuse forms of social presence, adhering to alternative ideas of culture and living in a different way from the commonly accepted. Secondly it denotes a set of traits characteristic of nonconformist activities towards the norms of a given cultural reality. In this first sense, the term counterculture was used by Theodore Roszak in his book *The Making of a Counter Culture*²⁵ and was associated with a very specific social reaction to materialist Western culture. As a social movement it brought together a range of alternative activities under one name, providing the ideological underpinning for many of the subcultures emerging at the time. At the same time, it is important to note that the counterculture was not simply a reaction of the younger generation, but had support in intellectual circles, including poets, writers, artists, philosophers, and sociologists such as Norman Mailer, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Carlos Castaneda, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Norman Brown, Charles Reich, Paul Goodman, Allan Watts, Gridley Wright and others.

If one were to look at the assumptions of the neo-pagan movements, one could easily find in them the same postulates that accompanied the slogans of counterculture. Among the characteristic ideas, one could mention the concept of the return to the lost

situations, such as class position, ethnicity, territoriality, urban or rural residence and religious affiliation, which in combination form a functional unity exerting a holistic influence on the individual. M. M. Gorgon, *The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application*, “Social Forces”, 1947, 2, p. 40.

²³ A. Barcikowska, *Autoportret polskich (neo)pogan. Prezentacja wyników badań ankietowych*, “Państwo i Społeczeństwo”, 2009, 4, pp. 25-28.

²⁴ Statements by participants confirm this recognition. See: A. Bukowska-Pastwa, *Być poganką – być poganinem. Odrodzenie neopogańskie we współczesnej Polsce*, “Uniwersyteckie Czasopismo Socjologiczne”, 2011, 5, pp. 58-86; A. Barcikowska, *Autoportret polskich (neo)pogan. Prezentacja wyników badań ankietowych*, “Państwo i Społeczeństwo”, 2009, 4, pp. 23-44.

²⁵ T. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, Doubleday 1969.

unity of humanity, the natural world and the cosmos and the desire to restore the spiritual dimension of human existence, thus challenging the Western model of experiencing life in its material dimension. In this key, the entire system of Western civilization (particularly American civilization) based on institutional forms of social life, of which the family, school, art, mass media, language, conceptual systems, social roles, patterns of success and aspirations in life, and the churches (primarily Catholic and Lutheran-Presbyterian) were then questioned. The official policy, the promoted social and moral lifestyle, symbolized by the American dream, career, stability, and the patriarchal model of family and social life, was countered by ideas of pacifism, free love, nomadism, *flower power* and so on²⁶. Very similar assumptions accompany the ideas of neo-paganism today: opposition to the enormity of consumption, contestation of a hegemonic model of social life associated with the particular vision of the family and the patriarchal model, rebellion against the axiology based on the Judeo-Christian model, manifestation of religious-spiritual needs through a return to pre-Christian beliefs, evoking closeness to nature as an emanation of the divine element, escape from technology towards what is tangible and sensual, etc.

For many individuals, neo-pagan religions fulfil the above requirements. This is confirmed by the statements of native believers, who mention among the most important values: their own free choice, being in harmony with themselves (“I am glad that pagan beliefs are a difficult object to manipulate and cannot be institutionalized... many people who understand their freedom and value it greatly, finding strength and fighting spirit for themselves, in native pagan beliefs...”)²⁷; respect for nature, worship of nature (“To live in harmony with Nature”; “Recognition of the sacredness of nature”)²⁸; reference to the ethical message of the Slavs; worship of the gods, contact with them (“Paganism is freedom – some of us gravitate more towards the native gods [Svarog, Triglav, Weles and others] and others – myself in-

cluded – towards the gods of ancient Greece and Rome. My view is that paganism is the following: a natural state, because every society has arrived at polytheism on the way of its development”)²⁹; tradition, the heritage of the ancestors (“Attachment to our old Slavic faith and the struggle for the survival of these beliefs”)³⁰; constant self-development, spiritual development (“Self-improvement on the path of the Soul and Body”)³¹; cognition, expansion of knowledge; opposition to Christianity (“For me, a return to native beliefs has a strong connection with the deep and painful experience of the Polish Church”)³²; patriotism; celebration of festivals; experience of the sacred (“To believe in the metaphysics of nature, the cosmos and our existence, in the unidentified links and dependencies between our lives and a Greater Order”)³³; neo-pagan religiosity’s positive approach to human sexuality.

Scott Simpson listed eight main themes that are characteristic of Polish neo-pagans. These are:

- mythical imagination, an element of belief creation, reminiscent of artistic creation;
- ‘rebuilding the ruins’, understood as the meticulous restoration of ancient pagan beliefs;
- rejection of Christianity;
- monism-polytheism, a surprising ability to oscillate in beliefs between monism and polytheism;
- the balance of the masculine and feminine aspects of divinity;
- nature’s religion;
- ties of ‘blood and soil’, attachment to indigenous traditions;
- immanentism, experiencing the immanent sacred, pantheism³⁴.

These phenomena, described within a framework of counterculture, could be understood not only as a process of separation from the mainstream, but also as a basis for constructing an alternative culture.

²⁹ A. Bukowska-Pastwa, *Być poganką – być poganinem*, p. 76.

³⁰ A. Barcikowska, *Autoportret polskich (neo)pogan*, p. 36.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ivi, p. 37.

³³ A. Bukowska-Pastwa, *Być poganką – być poganinem*, p. 76.

³⁴ S. Simpson, *Native Faith*, pp. 141-149.

²⁶ A. Jałowiecka, *Drogi kontrkultury*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 8-13.

²⁷ A. Bukowska-Pastwa, *Być poganką – być poganinem*, p. 76.

²⁸ A. Barcikowska, *Autoportret polskich (neo)pogan*, p. 36.

NEOFOLK AS AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

The last element of the triad – alternative culture – is a fully developed proposal of new cultural patterns, which could be even more valuable. Importantly, it develops them through artistic creation, rather than through rebellion and disagreement with the dominant culture, which was the domain of earlier stages. The alternative culture phase appears to be the most mature stage of heterogeneous culture. Within it, the previous criticism of the existing world is gradually being replaced by attempts to create authorities, personal role models and positive behaviours. Alternative communities are oriented towards creative activity rather than attacking the old system³⁵. This circle should include not only all kinds of neo-pagan manifestos, peculiar confessions of faith of the indigenous Slavic churches, but also cultural representations of these values in the form of literature, music or holiday celebrations. Hence, the appearance of ‘Slavic villages’³⁶, inhabited in summer (due to weather conditions from May or June to the end of September) by adherents of this ideology, living in accordance with the values they have defined, without the use of technological achievements. Of course, one could say, following David Muggleton, that these are merely spectacular signs of an externally given style that resemble a fancy dress ball, a masquerade, ways of escaping into the fantasy of the past³⁷. Nevertheless, this way of life, accompanied by a change in behavioural style, with clothing, music, ways of making a living, values held, and so on, seems a substitute for what is termed alternative culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The popularity of neofolk as a musical, countercultural, and religious phenomenon draws on the Romantic tradition. In its narrative layer, neofolk taps into the same fascinations that fuelled the imagination of poets in the 19th century. Neofolk songs allow listeners to immerse themselves in a world of legends and fairy tales, where the main roles are played by wraiths, spirits, and forces of nature guarding the principles of social life. These are accompanied by a message well expressed in Polish Romantic literature by Adam Mickiewicz: “He who has never been human, no man will ever help”³⁸.

The Romantic foundation of neofolk’s appeal lies in its revolutionary character. The culture of Romanticism stems from the idea of revolution, which leads to the destruction of order. In relation to Hegel’s definition of history, Romanticism brings about a constant process of destruction and reconstruction, a continuous change in the form in which the world

³⁵ P. Piotrowski, *Subkultury młodzieżowe*, p. 11.

³⁶ The way the ‘villages’ operate is reminiscent of the essence of historical reconstructions, but in the case of the native believers it is not just about building a theme park or museum of antiquity, but about trying to live according to self-imposed rules in the spirit of the Slavs. See: A. Regiewicz, *Transkulturowe funkcjonowanie przestrzeni na przykładzie średniowiecznych rekonstrukcji historycznych*, in A. Regiewicz, *Medievalizm wobec zjawisk audiowizualnych i nowych mediów*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 176-201.

³⁷ D. Muggleton, *Wewnątrz subkultury. Ponowoczesne znaczenie stylu*, transl. by A. Sadza, Kraków 2004, p. 65.

³⁸ A. Mickiewicz, *Dziady*, II, Kraków 2019, p.19.

is clothed; and this always happens violently. Mickiewicz himself defines this principle in his *Ode to Youth*, writing about a world that must shed its outer layer – skin, moss, bark. Counterculture emerges with the same intention. Challenging established order, questioning rules, and dismantling structure are just some of the elements shared by both Romanticism and the counterculture of which neofolk is an heir. Finally, neofolk expresses the Romantic vision of Pan-Slavism, emphasizing the unification of the world of spirits and people, of all religions and nations.

In his *Paris Lectures*, Adam Mickiewicz argued that the Slavic world had a specific mission toward the West: to bring spiritual culture, which, together with the technical achievements of Western civilization, would form a synthesis of the modern world. Alongside this “world of the spirit”, the Slavs offered a different understanding of nature than that found in the West – one based on a kind of covenant, a desire for closeness to nature, for understanding and humanizing it. Whereas Western man sought to subdue and dominate nature, the Slavic man strove to coexist with it, to find harmony. This covenant with the world, characteristic of the Slavs, was rooted in their eternal bond with the land, their agriculture, which requires sympathy toward all forms of life. Mickiewicz also saw in this attitude an inclination toward what is earthly, tangible, and material. He wrote that Slavic “poetry is wholly natural, earthly... It is plastic, visible, and tangible in its style”³⁹.

Despite this emphasis on the sensory, human element of Slavic literature, Mickiewicz also recognized a second, religious dimension that reached into a “naïve” experience of the world’s wonder. He saw it manifested in fairy tales depicting the relationship between the sensory and the supernatural worlds. These narratives, like “subsurface water”, flowed beneath the official culture, keeping alive Slavic tradition and spirit. This is linked to another quality: the mythologization of the world. This was not mythology in the form of a fixed set of stories ensuring the survival of Slavic religion preserved in folk customs

and traditions, but rather the ability to perceive in the world an element of wonder and divinity, an emanation of spirit. Mickiewicz wrote: “Among the Slavs, as I have said, the divine instinct, the spirit, is perhaps more developed than among any other people; hence their inclination toward all that is religious, deep, and sublime; hence their constant delving into the past and the future”⁴⁰. In this there lay the concept of the “spiritual man”, who feels a unity with the cosmos.

Can the culture of native believers, with which a peculiar subculture of neo-folk fans and neo-pagan sympathizers is coupled, therefore be considered a kind of alternative culture? It is certainly possible to find the traits of one of the three phases of development (subculture, counterculture or precisely alternative culture) in the representation of this the culture of indigenous Slavic beliefs. These are: the need to distinguish oneself from society as a whole through external attributes (clothing, language, style, way of spending free time); the manifestation of cultural distinctiveness through everyday behaviour, a lifestyle that rejects the generally accepted rules of functioning or valuing; the construction of an alternative worldview that can successfully replace the old order and be a point of reference for the created system of values, i.e. subjectivity, equality, tolerance, freedom, or to be precise, an alternative model of being in the world, escaping the capitalist, commercial, consumerist lifestyle.

Thus, an alternative culture reaching back to indigenous beliefs would be an expression of postmodern doubt, a kind of ‘no logos’ manifestation, an attempt to escape to a utopia beyond civilization. At the same time, the neo-pagan revival seems to be the result of a demand for a new form of faith, for a spirituality understood as going beyond hierarchy, institution, missionality, towards an inclusive image of the contemporary experience of the sacred. Neopaganism would thus be an expression of a post-secular searching that rejects institutional religious forms, but does not reject the very need for spirituality in human life. It is about the kind of religious experience that avoids institutionalising or even con-

³⁹ A. Mickiewicz, *Literatura słowiańska*, transl. by L. Płoszewski, in Idem, *Dziela*, XI, Warszawa 1955, p. 182.

⁴⁰ Idem, *Literatura słowiańska*, X, p. 208.

cretising ideas, proposing a vision of religiosity without God, in which he is not so much rejected as reduced to some kind of force or sacrum. This type of religious thinking places the emphasis on the development of human possibilities, placing the human being at the centre of action. In this case, concrete religious experience is displaced by magical activities that attempt to manipulate supernatural forces through appropriate rituals⁴¹.

On the other hand, it is a vision of the world escaping complicated relationships towards the primordality of instincts, where there is no need to adhere to conventions, where there is ample freedom of moral behaviour. Joerg Fichte, analysing the contemporary popularity of making the past present, points out that it is perceived as a better past, a less complicated, natural world, full of mythical power⁴². The primordality of instincts appears to the contemporary individual, entangled in a number of addictions, subjected to constant self-control and social mechanisms of correct behaviour, as an alternative world in which one would decide to immerse oneself, at least for a while. This world appears as a place of escape, an alternative to modernity, a utopia: social, moral or religious. At the same time, it is a world from which it is quite easy and effortless to escape, to return to the previous order, to civilization. All one has to do is change.

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⁴¹ P. J. Śliwiński, *Kraina Wodnika i okolice*, Poznań 1998, p. 13.

⁴² J. Fichte, *The End of Utopia – The Treatment of Arthur and His Court in Contemporary German Drama*, in *Reading the Middle Ages. The J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures*, ed. by P. Boitani – A. Torti, Perugia 1995, pp. 153-169.

◇ *Neofolk in Poland. Between a New Religious Movement and Subculture* ◇

Adam Regiewicz

Abstract

Following the collapse of communism in Poland, interest in folk culture and music emerged from the artistic explorations of alternative musicians in the 1990s. At the same time, bands with Slavic musical roots emerged alongside mainstream offerings that combined rock aesthetics with a highland feel. This gave rise to a distinct musical movement that sought to reinterpret the old sound in a new format. It soon became apparent that this new aesthetic was accompanied by a new lifestyle, linked to both an ecocritical attitude, ecology, and a post-colonial rejection of Christian cultural hegemony. Returning to Slavic music became a way of returning to indigenisation. At the same time, this new musical practice entailed a new way of life that is closer to nature and to the ancient Slavic traditions. In this article, I will discuss these religion elements and the moral life of neofolk circles.

Keywords

Neofolk, Poland, Music, Christianity, Ecology, Ancient Slavic Traditions.

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