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## **Religious traditions in oral history as a co-component renewing the polish interrupted cultural identity in Brazil**

### **The phenomenon of interrupting cultural identity in post-migrant generations**

In the early 21st century we are more often witnessing the phenomenon of interrupting cultural identity trajectory, where inter-generation sequence or succession in reproduction of cultural identity has been historically disturbed by some reasons. It is particularly the case in the post-migrant generations who by assimilation or restricted integration policy towards their ancestors, as well as later social mobility of the descendants and transformation of the ethnic group, lost some of their ethnic cultural features that existed at the beginning of the settlement process in the destination country. Those features were of different nature, including among others, rich ethnic traditions connected with the religious rituals and celebration of feasts or events enforcing togetherness and belongingness in the group.

As we know, the concept of belonging refers to participation of individuals in collective contexts in social, cultural and political spheres. So belonging relates to the individual's relation to social groups but also to society as a whole. In conceptual terms, this is often discussed in connection with questions regarding identification and identity.

Modes of belonging can be inherited, chosen or ascribed. They may arise from circumstances that cannot be influenced (like belonging to a family, a group of origin or a demographic and age group); they can be a matter of choice, self-determined, determined by others or forcibly imposed. Modes of belonging that are not freely chosen, are more stable and lasting. By contrast, a form of belonging that is open to change can

be changed, for example, by migration, like one's belonging to a given country. So belonging should not be viewed as a static state. Moreover, multiple forms of belonging or hybrid modes of belonging are possible and can be manifested in styles of living, in manners of thought and behavior, as well as in concepts of value, a person may develop and forms her/his everyday life. Freely chosen modes of belonging can be also associated with religion.

Cultural identity, treated as one of the elements of individual's social identity, is an important part of the identity structure, conceived as self-knowledge of the subject. It is connected with her/his feeling of belonging and emotional identification with the given cultural circle and typical world for it, norms and values, organization of social space.

The oral history used to play a significant role in maintaining the ethnic cultural heritage over the times. It can be treated as an active instrument or mean in formation of the cultural identity in traditional stable migrant communities.

Historically, when the immigrants only established themselves collectively, individual and common memory was the matter of succession of generations. Typical for the territorial ethnic communities, oral history was usually transmitted within the family or the group boundaries, from one generation into another one. It followed a temporal and vertical pattern of reconstructing the identity. Simultaneously, it fostered intra-ethnic cohesion and harmony. So we could find a strong link among ORAL HISTORY and ETHNIC IDENTITY. These were the features that existed widely at the beginning of the 20 century. When continue to exist in some places today, then its oral history still remains an integral part of the identity reconstructing in the coherent post-migrant communities, spatial ethnic with the clearly defined borders.

However, this relationship undergoes now profound transformations along with the social changes that had occurred during the last decades. When individual is searching for a new form of belonging under conditions of extended diversity, then the linear trajectory is disturbed in its intra-generation transmission and *reconstruction*, being replaced by the process of *construction* based on the individual choice.

The relation between *reconstructing* and *constructing* the cultural identity, give us the reason to state that we begin to live in the times of paradigm shift. "New" has been emerging objectively and needs to be conceptualized differently. In the case of the post-migrant cultural identity its shaping is situated at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity.

By being at the cross-roads of modernity and postmodernity I mean to be under influence of various and competing sometimes discourses, some historically emerged in modernity and others evolving from the contemporary system of communication and postmodern cultural changes. As a consequence, an individual can participate in many ways of using those various discourses in constructing and maintaining own identity. Since the linear transmission, typical for modernity, is interrupted and the role of oral history as an integrated element of continuity transmission of migrant cultural

patterns within generations, is undermined, new situation situates post-migrant identity trajectory and oral history separately. That process can be additionally enforced by new forms of circulation and mobility triggered by globalization, trans-nationalization and economic restructuring resulting in social mobility of highly skilled persons.

In this context, for the purpose of the paper, I will name only three interrelated, main – in my opinion – reasons of *interrupting* in a new situation:

- evolution of paradigm from modern to postmodern
- evolution of closed immigrant communities into the non-territorial dispersed type of communities.

- replacement the *territory* by the *conscious* in the identification process<sup>1</sup>.

It is also worth to mention, that when post-migrant cultural identity trajectory appeared to be interrupted in the multicultural societies, with intensive deterritorialization<sup>2</sup> of culture, an individual has access to diverse cultural resources. This constitutes one of the basic factors of cultural distancing from the locality. Oral history – “talk of the elders” – is hardly one of many possible option, post-migrant generations can choose as a way of enforcing their ethnic roots, if they are interesting to feel closeness with their own ethnic cultural heritage, being now “in distance” from it. Deterritorialization which is far from being a linear process, produces evident costs, such as feelings of cultural rootlessness, especially in multiethnic society, when historical ethnic ties are still maintained by the *Others*.

Generally, the social construction of oral history is connected with social time and social space. However nowadays, with the rapid changes of the communities and societies, common memory has been becoming the issue more complicated. We are witnessing now the process of pluralisation of memory about the Past. Instead of one official version of the Past we are dealing with many alternatives of them. Common memory and oral history can be interlinked on different levels like, family level, organizational level, generation level and even global level.

I argue that nowadays, there are new challenges towards the oral history. It can become one of the potential co-creating elements of new, fluid ethnicity. It may happens especially, when post-migrant identity trajectory is interrupted in the era of global social changes weakening the modernist paradigm with its collective code and the deep meaning of the frontiers.

The emergence of new types of identity, more or less fluid and temporary, situates the topic of cultural identity in a boarder theoretical context. It embraces different

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<sup>1</sup> More on this issue is written in: E. Budakowska, *Ewolucja paradygmatów a wyjaśnianie procesów mobilizacji etnicznej poimigracyjnych pokoleń*, „Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny”, 2012, no 2, p. 25-38.

<sup>2</sup> Deterritorialization is meant here as the loss of the „natural” relations between culture and the social and geographic territories. It is caused by the transformation of the link between our everyday cultural experiences and impact of growing cultural transnational connections making more difficult to maintain a stable sense of local/ethnic identity. See: García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, Mexico 1990.

stages, from linear trajectory to interrupted trajectory, from trans-generations strong transmission of oral history in cohesive group to dispersed non-territorial post-migrant generations, from *forgetting/abandoning* the ethnic background to *(re)searching* of imagined ethnicity. The previous totalizing concept of ethnic group and identity is being challenged by ambiguity and change. The fluid ethnicity is defined in terms of constant action and process, but it is not clear and hard to predict what particular element of ancestors' core values will be chosen in a proper moment and play a crucial role in rebuilding a sense of belonging.

Since some of the post-migrant generations, taking part in the advanced human mobility, live in a deterritorialized conditions, and others still remain within the territorial ethnic entities, their process of overcoming the interruption takes its stimulus from the different context. Dual location of post-migrant generations between the ethnic habitus with the modern principles of *reconstruction* of cultural identity and – on the other hand – pluralistic milieu with syncretic cultural base of *constructing* the identity, puts individual between options of *return* or *choice* the Past. Either of each, it would introduce more cultural innovation in the Present.

It happens like that because narration of “self” now takes place in different socio-cultural space, which frameworks more liquid belongingness of individual to the group of certain history, tradition, culture and religion. That context is enforced by, at least, few contemporary distinct elements, like:

- higher self-esteem of post-migrant generations in comparison to pioneering generations,
- increase of individual subjectivity of a contemporary social actor,
- individual autonomy and freedom to choose between alternatives in construction of own cultural “self”,
- intercultural character of communication and alteration of feeling of belonging,
- multiculturalization with cross-culture of the nation state and more democratic approach towards the *Difference*.

Researching the contemporary social dependences in which an individual is involved, we can risk to say, that contextual variables and individual decision about the sources of cultural identity are more important than essences. If so, then the question is: how history will be used, experienced, remember, or created to lead to ethnicity of post-migrant generations? Finding answers to this question gives us new insights and substantial knowledge on role of enforced subjectivity in renewing the contemporary forms of belonging.

This is why we can say, that postmodernity as a cultural fact creates a new social-cultural framework for analyzing oral history, which cannot be recognize only as a means of gathering materials, or a practice and method of research. Although, it is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then

analyzing their memories of the past<sup>3</sup>, however, the research requires rethinking and distancing ourselves from the old modernist, linear concept of progress and statism. The focus should be rather put on: how subject chooses to life, both individually and collectively, in the age of uncertainly and insecurity, while the nature of relationship between culture and activity is: reflexivity, flexibility, negotiability, situativity, transitionality. New questions arise here: to what extent new individualism can cause the deconstruction of ethnocentric identities and stimulates the many-faced strategies of including the other elements into a multiple identities? (since, for example, the identification with the own origin community may be less important); how much this process depends on the biographic circumstances and internal situation in the ancestor's group?

As L. Passerini<sup>4</sup> had discovered, oral sources derived from subjectivity are not static recollection of the past but are memories reworked in the context of the respondent's own experiences. If so, then oral history interviews let gain not just information about past event but also signification and meaning of particular cultural practice in the Past. In private face to face contacts of post-migrant generations with their distant relatives, oral histories can provide information on the essence of ethnic cultural practices, fulfilling the interrupted gap.

In the new era, the construction of identity evolves into a process of continuous modification, re-definition and adjustment of the individual to the social context. Searching for the roots is a good evidence to see how important role Memory plays in creation of different types of cultural identity. We cannot forget that the processes of reconstructing of the Past have big influence on the Present and even the Future of the communities.

## **Religious traditions in oral history as a co-component renewing the polish interrupted cultural identity in Brazil**

The Polish post-immigrant generations in Brazil started to undertake effort to re-adapt materials coming from the ethnic cultural tradition into their live and restore upon selection of them interrupted cultural identity. They wanted to renew the process of continuity and experience of remote origin. A civic commitment intensified, as they work for the common cultural goods.

Some historical traditions were recreated and filtered by cultural needs of contemporaneity and heritage, being established as a product of the reflexive conscience. Since people are selective in their treatment of the past, the Polish ethnic group also uses and selects history in the process of self-definition. What is interesting is, that oral history was one of the restoration factor also of some religious traditions in the post-migrant

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<sup>3</sup> L. Abrams, *Oral history Theory*, London 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Memory and Totalitarianism*, L. Passerini (ed.), New Brunswick (USA), London (UK) 2009.

generations' families. Secondly, that process facilitated exchange between grassroots activists in many Polish localities, especially involved in a civic organization of Brazilians of Polish origin "BRASPOL". Its network of branches (*nucleos*) created awareness by meetings and oral narrations, informing about the Polish cultural heritage to reinforce belonging and historical sense.

My research in Brazil<sup>5</sup> discovered that the role of orality in social *construction/reconstruction* of Polish cultural heritage in Brazil has become quite essential, especially in the post-migrant places of big cohesion, where knowledge about pioneers' traditions was mostly preserved and migrant history still remembered.

However, in some parts of historical settlements where the process of assimilation was extremely strong, continuity of intra-generations transmission had been interrupted and safeguarding of intangible and tangible cultural heritage practically none. Oral history didn't play any special role and even didn't exist. Individuals from post-migrant generations, if they wanted to create their cultural identity in connection with their ethnic origin, had to look for the contact with ethnic environment exercising wider range of memory narration and oral tradition. They learnt about the Past by choice and made own construction and interpretation of oral history.

It must be emphasized here that in a such a pluralistic environment as Brazil is, being proud of your Polish descent was a serious stimulus for individual quests for reaching the culture of your ancestors and renewing cultural identity as well as a factor motivating to being socially active. A close correlation between understanding the essence of the Polish ethnicity and the way to revive it in the process of activation of other groups in Brazil is evident. Especially the competitive European post-immigration environment, focusing their activity on strengthening their cultural presence in the Brazilian society, motivated to similar quests. It refers to reviving such cultural elements, which would be able to be presented in an interethnic environment, including also the ethnically mixed family environment.

In the research on postulatively declared pattern of the Polish ethnicity in Brazil, respondents from post-migration generations, interested in renewing the continuity of their ethnic cultural identity, mentioned several elements, which in their opinion were to represent: the central cultural canon (centrality), group community action (affiliation and tradition) and the Brazilian context (assessment). In a classification based on ranging the submitted components of the Polish ethnicity from the most important, the following took the first ten places:

1<sup>st</sup> place – the knowledge of the Polish language, understood as the learning and teaching as well as the contact with the contemporary Polish language.

2<sup>nd</sup> place – the knowledge of the Polish culture, understood as a scope of information and the process of education about its different aspects.

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<sup>5</sup> See: E. Budakowska, *W poszukiwaniu etniczności. Ruch BRASPOL w Brazylii – współczesna interpretacja*, Warszawa 2007; E. Budakowska, *Etnicidade Polonesa no Brasil a luz de pesquisas sociológicas*, Warszawa 2014.

3<sup>rd</sup> place – the Polish folklore and folk art; presenting the regionalization of folklore was regarded as a crucial element of inspiring ethnic awareness in descendants coming from separate regions.

4<sup>th</sup> place – the Polish cuisine treated as an element of bonding and reviving tradition within a family as well as the re-construction of knowledge about cooking Polish dishes.

5<sup>th</sup> place – traditional celebration of Catholic holidays.

6<sup>th</sup> place – the knowledge of the Polish music.

7<sup>th</sup> place – the knowledge of the Polish history.

8<sup>th</sup> place – maintaining the Polish faith and religiousness.

9<sup>th</sup> place – the knowledge about contemporary Poland.

10<sup>th</sup> place – maintaining the knowledge of organizing traditional events favoring the popularization of the Polish culture and presence in Brazil.

The achieved list allows us to make several general observations. First of all, ethnicity is treated as a cognitive process, but at the same time as an emotional state connected with affiliation to the descent group, embedded in the network of significant symbols. High valorization of the ethnic language has been confirmed. Moreover, the correlation of variables indicates how the essence of ethnicity refers to the culture of the place. Generally, the essence is accepted by an entity from previous generations. Meanwhile, research has shown that the culture of the place has found its reflection in perceiving Poland as a country of origin of previous generations. Striving, within the revived interest, for tighter bonds with the country of origin, its inhabitants and direct communication, among other things, resulted in placing the Polish language as the most important component of the declared pattern of Polish ethnicity in Brazil.

Memories and stories produced on the basis of remembered cultural traditions by distant relatives also played an important role in reviving some religious patterns of exercising the ethnic and social bonds by further generations of the Polish settlers in Brazil. The assimilation process and geographical isolation from the contact with the Polish original core values, motivated the post-immigrant generations with interrupted cultural identity to visit contemporary Poland and its historical heritage, including Częstochowa and other places connected with history and religious worship.

The *traditional celebration of Catholic holidays*, indicated by respondents in the 5<sup>th</sup> place, was treated as a group of cultural and religious elements, connected first and foremost with observing Christmas together with the tradition of the nativity play, singing carols, sharing the holy wafer and Easter, including the preparation of painted eggs (pisanki), the blessing of the Easter baskets (święconka) and even celebrating “Wet Monday” and śmigus-dyngus.

The re-establishment of traditional celebration of Catholic holidays has become an occasion to restore and strengthen the reviving ethnical bonds of the people of Polish origin. In families of Polish descent, sometimes also in Polish-Italian ones, a broadly propagated idea of a return to sharing the holy wafer and preparing the Easter basket

to be blessed has become customary. The latter sometimes used to have all the hallmarks of hybridization, since the contents of the blessed Easter basket fell outside the classic Polish model, being enriched with coffee, pasta and other victuals important for their owners. On the other hand, "maintaining the Polish faith and religiousness", which was postulated in the eighth place, was connected with all kinds of indicators, partially related to the aforementioned.

In this category were found such postulated elements as: maintaining the Polish faith and religiousness, denomination and religious symbols, knowledge of the history of religious places in Poland, Polish saints and Polish religious songs. The respondents also paid attention to the correlation between propagating certain religious traditions and family bonds. One of them was the custom of the Polish wedding, popularized in a few regions of BRASPOL activity, which was to contribute to maintaining the value of the Polish family and reducing the divorce rate. It is another quality, which provided evidence of the need to rebuild the group identity towards the widespread idea of a return to the way in which pioneers celebrated Catholic holidays.

It should be concluded that when it comes to religion, it is one of the most permanent aspects of ethnicity in immigrant environments. It may undergo modifications or lose its ethnic symbolism and acquire qualities of a universal church, which is not without significance in Brazil. However, according to research, the Roman Catholic denomination is still an element of defining the Polish identity. In some cases, it overlapped with other, especially cultural and linguistic, components of ethnicity, such as the postulated preservation of church services observed in the Polish rite and a return to liturgy in the Polish language, maintaining the knowledge of organizing ceremonies connected with the worship of Our Lady of Częstochowa.

Research has confirmed that the process of cultural renewal, occurring within the Polish descent, was concurrent with making the Polish group more visible in society and cultural exchange on the level of individual or collective identity. The heterogeneous environment of Brazilian citizens of Polish origins has become so to speak a natural basis of the process of civic activation, which refers to the cultural wealth of ancestors. The Polish group, similarly to others, faced the task of restoring the assimilated descendants the knowledge of their origins so that they could popularize in a heterogeneous environment, like others, the meaning of the contribution of the Polish settlers to the development of Brazil.

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