

Brief history and current developments

Brief history and current developments

The institutionalised presence of ethnology at the University of Warsaw dates back to 1935 when two new chairs were established: the Chair in Polish Ethnography and the Chair in Ethnography and Ethnology; the nominated professors were respectively Professor Cezaria Baudoin de Courtenay Ehrenkreutz J?drzejewiczowa and Professor Stanis?aw Poniatowski. This double appointment to some extent reflected the double origin of the discipline in Polish context.

The Polish ethnological and anthropological tradition is strongly rooted in 19th century studies of peasant traditions, folklore and so-called folk art, ideologically related to the modern search for national traditions. Romantic idealisation of "the people" as bearers of pure, ancient lore — related to modern developments of urbanisation and industrialisation following the industrial revolution — prompted educated elites to collect and document peasant customs, songs and legends. On the other hand, facing the political non-existence of the Polish nation-state the elites mobilised this "folk heritage" in nation preserving/ building processes. Therefore, deeply rooted interest in cultural traditions of local peasant societies — ethnography — had become one of the founding intellectual currents for the discipline.

The second current was related on the one hand to the emergence of the academic discipline of anthropology in the West, and on the other to the fact that the major part of the pre-partitions Commonwealth of Both Nations had fallen under Russian rule becoming part of the tsar's empire. As a result numbers of Poles became engaged in colonisation processes taking place within the empire, both involuntarily as convicts forced to settle and work mainly in Siberia, as well as voluntarily or semi-voluntarily (when banned from inhabiting Polish territories within the empire as "politically insecure persons"), becoming explorers or entrepreneurs in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Siberia and the Far East. In these circumstances anthropological interest in the area developed and Polish researchers organised or participated in a number of expeditions, as did Stanis?aw Poniatowski himself.

These two founding currents were reflected in the nominations of 1935, and are still present as intellectual heritage within the institution that is a descendant of both pre-World War II university Chairs, namely Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. However, the process that eventually led to the establishment of the Department was marked by developments of local history in the same way as the origins of the discipline had been.

After World War II Professor Cezaria J?drzejewiczowa decided to remain in exile, and spent the rest of her life in the UK, eventually becoming Rector of Polish University in Exile, while Professor Poniatowski perished in 1945, in a Nazi concentration camp. In 1949 the two Chairs merged into one, which was filled by Professor Witold Dynowski, a pre-war student and assistant to Professor J?drzejewiczowa. However, political changes in Poland started influencing university life and according to the Marxist classification of disciplines, ethnography — together with archaeology — became "an auxiliary discipline to history", which resulted in 1950 in closing university studies in both disciplines and establishing Courses in History of Material Culture. The 6-year Plan assumed that 600 small regional museums would be opened in Poland, and the graduates of the Courses — specialists in archaeology, folk art and culture — were supposed to find work there. The Courses were closed in 1958, and the Chair in Ethnography was reestablished within the Faculty of History.

In 1984, following the initiative of Professor [Zofia Sokolewicz](#) [1], the chair she occupied at that time was renamed and in this way the Chair in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology emerged. In 2001, under Professor [Lech Mróz](#) [2], the Chair was transformed into the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, as a result of the long process of re-establishment of social and academic acknowledgement of the discipline, accompanied by substantial changes in student curriculum, as well as a considerable increase of the number of students and staff.

Nowadays the Department in Warsaw is one of the biggest ethnology departments in Poland, offering three level university education (BA, MA, PhD) in ethnology and cultural anthropology. The offered courses are very diverse but the two original founding currents are still visible, both in the research interests of the staff members as well as

in the curriculum. The first, "ethnographic" current of studying "own people" can be traced both in well-developed and dynamic studies of contemporary (post)peasant communities in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine, and in more traditionally understood research in contemporary folklore as well as critical and reflexive approach to so-called folk art, religion and culture; while the second, the one related to studies of "foreign people" can be seen in the strong interest in Siberia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, both among staff members, and students. Additionally, it can be said that both traditions account for the strong emphasis on fieldwork, understood as a substantial and indispensable part of the curriculum on all levels of studies. Obviously, new areas have also emerged — such as visual anthropology, political and economic anthropology, medical anthropology, migration, nationalism, gender and sexuality — and in the last few years the Department has been undergoing very dynamic development and opening up to new possibilities of research and co-operation on both the national, and international level.

Ewa Klekot

Adres URL Źródła: <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/node/1298>

Odnosi

[1] <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/instytut/ludzie/pracownicy/zofia-sokolewicz>

[2] <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/instytut/ludzie/pracownicy/lech-mroz>