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## RITUAL OF CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER IN THE OPOCZNO REGION. TRADITION AND THE PRESENT DAY

**Summary:** This article presents the customs, rituals and beliefs of the Christmas Eve supper in the Opoczno subregion, both those practiced at the beginning of the 20th century and those that have survived to the present day. To address the problem at hand, the author has used his own factual material, collected during ethnographic field research conducted in Opoczno in 1990–1993, as well as the literature on the subject. The author's intention is not only to present the preparations for the Christmas Eve feast and its course but also to show the customs and rituals of this day and supper as rites of passage according to the theories of Arnold van Gennep. These rituals assume three phases: preliminal, liminal and postliminal. In the first phase, a break is made with the previous reality and everyday life in order to enter a state of suspension, i.e. a transitional state, and after performing the rituals specified by tradition, to reach a new reality. The realization of rites of passage can be seen in the inner experiences of the participants at the Christmas Eve feast, which has a religious character.

**Keywords:** customs, rites, beliefs, traditions, Christmas Eve supper, dishes, special white wafer, exchanging Christmas greetings, singing carols.

### Introduction

In traditional society, individual or communal existence is determined by different periods destined to fulfil various tasks. Each of these sequences is marked by rites of passage, honoring biological, psychological, social, familial, and religious transformations. Rituals facilitate transitions and give support to the family, the religious community that represents and transforms the updated world order, as it were, forbidding a return to the past. Rituals occur in religious and secular spaces, as well as when crossing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, performing many important functions in the lives of individuals and religious and secular communities (Tardan-Masquelier, 2002, p. 1980; Zimoń, 2012, p. 713).

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In the liturgy of the Church, as well as in folk rituals, certain symbolic actions performed according to formalized rules constitute an external form of a socially important act, taking on the model of a rite, a religious ritual or magic procedures. A ritual consists of certain behaviors that are stereotypical and repetitive and thus predictable in their form. According to C. Geertz, ritual is not only an expression of “being together” in moments important for man, but it allows him to find cognitive, emotional and ethical order in the chaos of everyday life. A. van Gennep distinguished in the ritual the phase of separation, transition and inclusion, which is best illustrated by the rites of passage (Burszta, 2003, p. 11–12).

In religious studies, either ritual is identified with ceremony and custom, or these phenomena are treated as different. Henryk Zimoń suggests the term ‘rite’, which is broader, to describe all symbolic actions independent of the object of reference. He calls those directed towards transcendence or the sacred ‘rituals’ and those referring to the secular sphere or the profane secular ‘ceremonies’. According to him, such a division is applicable in modern industrial societies with Judeo-Christian tradition and other great religions (Zimoń, 2012, p. 714).

The aim of this article is to present the ritual of the Christmas Eve supper in Opoczno by presenting its references to tradition and relating this ritual to contemporary times. Considering the Christmas Eve feast as one rite is not easy because it can be said that it is a ritual which consists of many smaller rituals. The study will be made according to A. van Gennep’s view of ritual, which is based on the assumption that the world is divided into a sacred and a secular or profane sphere. Rituals concern all areas of life in which a visible change occurs. Not only an individual but also the universe undergoes these rites of passage (e.g. from month to month, from season to season). Both changes in human life and cosmic changes are accompanied by ritual activities, which enable the transition from the profane to the sacred. Rituals relieve anxiety and restore order (Kupisiński, 2006, p. 146–147).

The development of this topic is based on materials collected by the author during ethnographic field research conducted in the Opoczno subregion in the years 1990–1993 on annual folk rituals. The field research lasted 189 days and was conducted in 45 localities. The information was provided by about 330 people of different age groups. The oldest respondents reached back to the memories handed down by their parents or grandparents. In this way, it was possible to reach the tradition of the late 19th century and compare it with the current situation (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 10–12). Apart from the above-mentioned research, the author has been coming to the surveyed area every year since 1990 to participate in the Christmas liturgy and the Christmas Eve supper, which made it easier for him to notice the changes taking place in the Christmas Eve

rituals. Moreover, while working on the chosen issue, the literature on the subject was used, both from publications on religious studies and theology.

The first section will present the preparation for the Christmas Eve supper – the exclusion or preliminal phase. The second section will present the course of the Christmas Eve supper – the transitional state (liminal phase), and the last will present the time after the supper, integrating into the new world (post-liminal phase).

### **1. Preparation for the Christmas Eve supper – the preliminal phase**

In Europe, Christianity assimilated many pagan beliefs and ritual imagery. From the first centuries AD, a number of pagan festivals and ceremonies associated with the most important moments in the cycle of the seasons were assimilated into the Christian liturgical calendar in order to Christianize them. They were usually intended to commemorate particular significant stages in the life of Christ. For example, Christmas Day (25.12) is celebrated during the former festivals in the Roman Empire associated with the rebirth of the sun Saturn (Poirier, 2002, p. 1978–1979).

The Christmas Eve supper marked the beginning of a new period – both in folk rituals (where many customs and beliefs referred to pre-Christian times) and in the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church. In order to enter this period in a proper way, it was necessary to separate oneself from the immanence into which the biological and social needs of everyday life plunge a person so as to free oneself, at least for a moment, from the burden of passing time and metaphysical anxiety. In order to ‘free oneself’ and properly begin a new period, according to the popular imagination, one had to experience the entire Christmas Eve differently from the previous days of the year that was coming to an end. This required a transition from the secular state to the festive interval state and both physical and spiritual preparation (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 56–57; Błońska, 1976, p. 869; Salij, 1972, p. 1537).

Christmas Eve day, which is the time preceding the supper, was shaped by tradition, where certain activities and actions were established. The faithful wanted to welcome the Savior without any contamination by sin during the approaching Christmas, to which the Christmas Eve supper was the introduction. There is an eternal longing in man for liberation and change for the better. Many wish to abandon their vices and start a new life characterized by nobler behavior, and the realization of these desires could be seen in the early morning hours, where utilitarian and spiritual beliefs were combined and accompanied by many

religious practices and magical procedures (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 57; Ogrodowska, 2008, p. 91).

In the Opoczno region, Christmas Eve was a ritual in which the whole family was involved, and every action or behavior carried a symbolic meaning. There was a common belief among the inhabitants of the surveyed area that on that day, one should not sleep long in order not to be sluggish and lazy in the coming new year. People's conduct on that day was to impinge on their behavior in the near future. After the morning prayer, when people started to wash their faces, they would throw a few coins into a bowl of water to provide themselves and their families with money. This goal could also be achieved by putting a shell from a Christmas carp into a purse (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 57; cf. Lechowa, 1967, p. 19).

On Christmas Eve day, there was an unwritten schedule of chores, and everyone knew what to do. The boys would help their father with the farm chores (cleaning the livestock and preparing fodder for Christmas). In the afternoon, the farmer would bring home the Christmas tree, and before supper, he would put a sheaf of straw behind the bed or in the corner of the room and put a handful of hay on the table under the tablecloth to commemorate the birth of Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem. The mother and older daughters would prepare the food for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, decorate the room and put up the Christmas tree. The work had to be done with joy and cheerfulness because the behavior on that day was to be reproduced in the future: what happens on Christmas Eve, happens all year round (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 57). Entering the holiday period required complete preparation of the household and its inhabitants. General cleaning was carried out everywhere. The house had to be given a festive look (the chamber was swept, colorful 'spiders' and multicolored doilies were hung, and twigs of juniper were sprinkled with flour and placed in various places in the chamber). The house would take on a fresh, festive smell (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 58; Siek, 1939, p. 38).

On this day, people were actively involved in the work undertaken, and they tried to fulfil traditional customary and ritual practices as best they could. Great importance was attached to matrimonial fortune-telling, along with divination related to life, prosperity, fertility and harvest. In folk beliefs, at this time of change, a particular increase in evil forces and the arrival of otherworldly powers was perceived, and juniper twigs, among other things, were supposed to provide protection against them. Customs of this kind point to vestiges of magical practices and confirm the uniqueness of that day and time (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 60; Zimoń, 1989, p. 246–247).

Spiritual preparations were also made. The faithful received the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist, and a strict fast was obligatory on Christmas

Eve. People abstained not only from meat dishes but also from dairy products and festive cakes. Meals were eaten only twice during the day, i.e. in the morning and in the evening, and certain people also restricted their drinking of water. For some, this was a magical procedure (so as not to be thirsty during the harvest work), while for others, it contained a religious motivation: to prepare their inner self for the coming of the Savior. This religious intention was usually justified by the representatives of the older generation, as some people limited their intake to just one meal, eaten at suppertime on Christmas Eve (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 58–59; Dekowski, 1963, p. 107; cf. Dekowski, 1964, p. 188).

In the preparations for the Christmas Eve supper, one could notice the first phase of the rites of passage from secular to sacred time. In personal and family life, an attempt was made to switch off and get rid of previous life, especially bad inclinations, vices, and the “old man”, in order to enter a new stage of life internally purified. Apart from the customs and beliefs prescribed by tradition, this was to be achieved through religious practices such as coming to the sacrament of confession and strict fasting on that day. The whole family took part in the rituals of the day, each member of the family having to do certain chores that were necessary in order to enter the festive phase – the Christmas Eve supper. The beliefs and customs of this day include many practices of ‘good beginnings’. The winter solstice and Christmas Eve, celebrated at that time, marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new solar and vegetative year (Błońska, 1976, col. 869; Klimaszewska, 1981, p. 132–133; Ogradowska, 2006, p. 12).

Very few of the old customs, rituals and beliefs practiced on this day remain today. In the 1960s, many of them were still being observed in most families. Nowadays, only in some households are characteristic dishes prepared, as most of them are bought in supermarkets. The nature of the preparation for Christmas Eve has also changed, with many people working on that day, and families meeting only in the evening, at the Christmas table, with the result that they do not have the opportunity to share in the preparation of the meal. All fortune-telling and magical practices have been forgotten, and the Christmas tree is not decorated on Christmas Eve, but earlier (depending on the household’s free time). Today, for the faithful, only the religious and spiritual dimension of preparation for the supper and Christmas is important, but there have been changes in this area as well since strict fasting is no longer obligatory on Christmas Eve, and priests only encourage abstaining from meat dishes, thus suggesting the preservation of tradition (Kupisiński, 2016, p. 220).

The preliminal (exclusion) phase can only be found in the faithful who have made personal resolutions in ascetic work on themselves, giving up their previous “sinful life” in order to enter a higher state of their own spirituality, into which the Christmas feast was to introduce them.

## 2. The Christmas Eve supper – the liminal phase

The liminal phase is associated with status reversal rituals and is found in cyclical rituals, and usually has a communal character. At this stage of transition, one is no longer ‘this’, but one is not yet ‘that’ (Teodorczyk, 2013).

When everything was ready, participants of the supper dressed up in their Christmas outfits. The children would announce to their parents that the first star had risen in the sky and it was time to celebrate. The Christmas Eve supper had a religious character. The whole family gathered around the table and, standing, began the ceremony with a prayer presided over by the father, saying the words: God bless us in the field, house and barn (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 63), and then “Our Father” and “Hail Mary” were recited together. The deceased were also remembered by the recitation of the “Angel of the Lord” and “Eternal rest deign to give them, O Lord”, so that the deceased may also enter heaven and live in everlasting happiness. (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 63). In some families, a passage from St. Luke’s Gospel about the birth of Christ was read. After the prayer, the host would take a plate with special wafers and hand everyone a piece to break together and wish each other well. This was one of the most touching moments of the Christmas Eve supper. The outstretched hand with the snow-white wafer broke down the barriers of human weakness, and the words coming from the depths of the heart were sometimes filled with love and forgiveness for all the sorrows of the past year. Breaking the wafer was not only about saying sorry to each other but also about exchanging wishes for the coming new year. The most common wishes were health, God’s blessing and that we may happily live to see the next Christmas Eve (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 63). After such an emotional moment, the host called to the table with the words: He who believes in God, let him sit down to supper (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 63; cf. Klinger, 1928, p. 22; Kolberg, 1885, p. 71–72).

It was a tradition of that evening to place one additional table setting: It was necessary to leave it, because sometimes an unexpected guest came, and on Christmas Eve everyone must be hosted (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 63; cf. Bystroń, 1947, p. 149). An extra seat at the table also meant a place for a recently deceased family member. For humanitarian reasons, or based on the superstition that there should be an even number of people at the table, single people, the poor and orphans were invited to Christmas Eve. If there were an odd number of people at the table, one of the family members could die in the coming year. It used to be believed that the souls of the deceased would come on Christmas Eve. Favorite dishes were specially prepared for them and left on the table after supper. It was also because of their presence that the household respected the ban on noisy movements at the table, getting up and sitting down abruptly, and

tried to remain solemn and quiet, which, according to ethnographers, was intended to show respect for the souls. It was also believed that calmness and stability would prevent the souls from being frightened away. The fire in the stove was not extinguished so that cold souls could get warm (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 64–65; Bystroń, 1947, p. 149; Kuchowicz, 1957, p. 210).

The number of dishes was not clearly defined, but each family tried to prepare as many as possible, as this meant an abundance of food in the following year. Wealthy families would prepare 9 or 12 dishes, while only three dishes were served in poorer households. Attempts were made to follow the rule that the number of meals should be odd, except for the number twelve, symbolizing the presence of the Twelve Apostles accompanying Jesus during the Last Supper (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 64; Dekowski, 1968, p. 157, Lechowa, 1967, p. 137).

Cabbage, herrings, mushrooms, peas, groats, compote, dumplings and “bird’s milk” made of hemp and eaten with noodles were the basic ingredients of Christmas Eve meals in Opoczno. Traditionally, the first spoonful of each meal was set aside for the animals. Of the animals, the dog was held in particular esteem, as a result of the special bond between man and this faithful guardian of the farm. Food was also set aside for a witch, and this was apotropaic in nature. People wanted to win the witch’s favor for the next year so that she would not torment the animals: she would not plait the horses’ manes and tails, and she would not take the cows’ milk or eat their food (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 64). Supper began with warm dishes, most often mushroom borscht, eaten with bread, then potatoes with fried fish (the presence of fish was supposed to be a reference to the agape of the early Christians), and finally dumplings stuffed with cabbage, onion, mushrooms and pepper – considered by many to be a great delicacy. According to custom, one had to taste every dish in order not to miss anything the next year. There was a belief among the inhabitants of Opoczno that the housewife should not get up from the table during Christmas Eve supper; otherwise, the hens will not sit on the yokes (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 65). On that evening, her daughters should take care of her duties. Apart from the dishes mentioned above, peas with cabbage, buckwheat groats and barley groats were also consumed, which were served with apple or fruit compote. When a woman (mother or daughter) brought peas to be eaten, she would toss one spoonful up to the ceiling so that “such a big one would be born”, and then count how many grains were left on the pile in order to predict good or bad harvests based on their number (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 64–65; Siek, 1939, p. 38–40; Dekowski, 1979, p. 204).

The participants of the supper tried to remain solemn. Loud jokes and disputes were avoided for the sake of the souls of the deceased but also so as not to wake the baby Jesus. People tried to experience with a ‘quiet heart’ the



mystery of the coming of the God-Man to earth. Children were not always able to sit still because they eagerly awaited small gifts – usually sweets and practical gifts (Klinger, 1928, p. 78, 88; Klinger, 1932, p. 14; Błońska, 1976, col. 871; Heckowa, 1961, p. 80).

Nowadays, the character of the Christmas Eve supper has changed somewhat. It is no longer celebrated with such reverence. In the majority of Catholic families, Christmas Eve still begins with the reading of a passage of the Holy Scripture and a common prayer. The custom of breaking the special wafer and exchanging greetings is also maintained. However, during the supper itself, the atmosphere is much more casual, the topics of conversation are diverse, and the participants do not avoid laughing or having loud conversations. In many homes, the television is on during supper, and sometimes the members of the household listen to Christmas carols and watch news programs or films together. They also telephone friends or family members who are far away. For children, and sometimes for adults as well, presents are still an important part of Christmas Eve. They are usually placed under the Christmas tree and unwrapped as soon as the first star appears in the sky. Just like centuries ago, people try to prepare as many tasty Christmas Eve dishes as possible. The repertoire of dishes has changed considerably due to the availability of various products in shops, as well as the migration of the population – young people do not only start families with people from the same village or neighboring towns. They often marry people living in distant regions of Poland or in other countries, which results in the interpenetration of different customs and the assimilation of new, unfamiliar dishes into the previously hermetic tradition of Opoczno (Kupisiński, 2015, p. 200–204).

The transitional state in the Christmas Eve feast is symbolized by the special wafer, ready to break it while wishing for health and prosperity, not only for Christmas but also for the future. This state can also be seen in the extraordinary forms of behavior, which are permeated by mutual kindness, cordiality, and the observance of the conventions of good manners, where one does not think only of oneself but also of the supernatural world. Therefore, during the transition phase, it was necessary to enter the world of abundance (hence the multitude of dishes on the Christmas table, the household members dressed in festive clothes, as well as the special decor of the flat). We would like to preserve this state of joy, happiness and inner elation forever.

### **3. The time after supper – the postliminal phase**

In the incorporation phase, the individual or the family is introduced into a new world in which they wish to remain permanently. The Christmas Eve



supper followed a characteristic ritual developed by past generations in a sacred space. Its atmosphere was maintained by the singing of Christmas carols, the presence of a loaf of bread with a special wafer placed on it symbolizing the Eucharist and the decoration of the room (hay or straw in the corner of the room or scattered on the floor, or even hanging from the beams, because the room is supposed to resemble a stable where Lord Jesus was born (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 62; cf. Kolberg, 1888, p. 110).

The time after supper (the postliminal phase) was characterized by the fact that it became a new period, an existence in a new world, a sacral space, ushered in by the rituals performed during the Christmas Eve supper. Both the cosmos and man were changed. Finding oneself in the new space aroused the participants' interest in the future, in the sphere of both personal and economic life, which resulted in the emergence of many magical and divination practices (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 67; Grześkowiak, Szczaniecki, 1976, col. 865–866).

When the Christmas Eve feast was officially over, there came a time particularly awaited by the youth: the stage of matrimonial fortune-telling. Young people knew many of the customs connected with Christmas Eve, which revealed the secret of a possible marriage, and they cultivated them with excitement. While drinking compote during the supper, young bachelors and maids scrupulously put away the seeds left from the fruits, as well as the stalks from the dried pears. After the meal, they counted them – an even number meant early marriage. The girls would take out a straw of hay from under the tablecloth. A green stalk meant that the girl would be married in the next carnival, a yellow one meant spinsterhood, a long one indicated a long life and a blossoming stalk taken out by a married woman meant that she would marry again. When supper was over, the girls would go out onto the threshold of the house and shout: “Hop, hop, where’s my man?” and the young bachelors would call out: “Ita, ita, where’s my woman?” (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 65). Then they listened to where the echo was coming from. The side where it was heard was supposed to be the place from which the future spouse would come. Girls also practiced a custom connected with St Andrew’s Day – they would take up rails in the fence, and if one of them managed to grab an even number of rails, she would expect a suitor (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 65; Kolberg, 1885, p. 72).

It was not just the young people who were intrigued by the future; farmers also used to undertake certain procedures to find out what the new year would bring. After Christmas supper, they would go out into the yard and watch the sky – if it was starry, it meant a “good year” – the hens would lay many eggs. On the other hand, an overcast sky meant that there would be a lot of rain and, therefore, a poor harvest, as well as plenty of milk from the cows, since only the grass would grow luxuriantly (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 65–66; Zadrożyńska, 1983, p. 71).

In the old days, food was left on the table after supper. The mother and her daughters would decorate the room for Christmas by hanging decorative “spiders” and colorful napkins under the ceiling. Lent was over. The farmer would make a string from the straw and go on a tour of the orchard and farm. He approached each fruit tree, circled it three times, hit it with the twine and asked: “Shall I cut you down? Not cut you down? Will you grow? Will you not?” Of course, he did not cut down any of the trees but tied them with twine so that they would bear fruit in the summer (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 66; Siek, 1939, p. 42; Kolberg, 1988, p. 73).

The inhabitants of most villages mention a belief about farm animals ‘speaking’ in a human voice on Christmas Eve. Farmers would come to the stables and cowsheds to hear what their little brothers had to say. However, no one has confirmed this fact, and it is only known that many hosts, exhausted by the whole day’s preparations for Christmas Eve and the supper itself, fell asleep without ever having heard these dialogues (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 66–67; Siek, 1939, p. 42).

When all the divination practices were over, the family would gather in the room again to sing carols while waiting for the night mass called ‘Pasterka’. The whole family would be involved in the carol singing, which could last up to two hours. In the past, most of the villagers would set off for church to attend Midnight Mass. Sometimes the faithful had to cover a distance of several kilometers, and they usually walked in groups because it was more cheerful and safer for them. In some villages, the custom used to be that the lads would bring a Christmas tree to one house and the women would get together and dress it (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 67), and then, with the tree already decorated, they would go to church together, singing carols along the way (Kupisiński, 1997, p. 67).

Today many of these customs have been forgotten. Especially fortune-telling practices are not cultivated at all by contemporary youth living in the Opoczno area. Some respondents are familiar with the tradition of visiting farm animals in a stable or cowshed in order to listen to their conversations, as well as offering them Christmas special wafers. Divination and carol singing have been replaced by family board games, watching TV, visiting various websites or unwrapping and enjoying gifts, as the custom of giving presents to each other nowadays concerns not only children but all family members. The Midnight Mass is still very popular, but many people now stay at home and attend only the Masses on the first and second days of Christmas. No parishioners can be seen wandering to church from distant villages; everyone arrives at Mass by car (Kupisiński, 2015, p. 200–205; Kupisiński, 2016, p. 271–272).

This last phase of the rite of passage – postliminal (inclusion) – can be seen in the faithful in the sublime spiritual experience, the state of joy, peace of heart

and conscience, which is manifested in the common singing of Christmas carols and waiting for Midnight Mass, which completes this state. The religious context of the Christmas Eve supper and experiencing it in a way prescribed by the tradition passed down from generation to generation amounted to rites of passage, which led the participants of the supper to enter the festive time, the sphere of the sacred, in which a believer experiences a new reality. The completion, or state of complete joy, is brought by Christmas, the coming of God into the heart of a man and remaining with him and his loved ones.

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The annual return of the unchanging course of the Christmas Eve supper unites the past, the present and the future. The festive character of the supper is given by a festively decorated house creating a sacred space, the consumption of special dishes, festive clothes of the participants of the feast etc. The supper integrates the family. Each participant contributed to its preparation, which helped to strengthen mutual relations and thus revive family identity. The Christmas Eve supper unifies the family, whose members sometimes come from different backgrounds. Christmas supper fulfils the function of merging the “old with the new”, transmitting from generation to generation both religious elements and the way of experiencing this day and the supper itself according to a specific family ritual developed by the tradition of the surveyed subregion.

The attitude of the inhabitants of Opoczno to the preparation for Christmas Eve, the course of the supper itself and spending time after it has changed radically. Many customs and beliefs, which were still practiced in every home 60–70 years ago, have nowadays been forgotten. However, Christmas Eve is still considered by a great number of respondents to be the most important and the most family-oriented moment of the year. Some people decide to spend Christmas Eve in the mountains, at the seaside or in some distant corner of the world, but these are rare cases. For most inhabitants of the Opoczno region, Christmas Eve is a time when they come to their family homes, meet their parents and grandparents, and spend time in their company, rejoicing together at the birth of Jesus. It is a time when, in every believer, there comes a transition from the ‘old man to the new man’ and from the profane to the sacred, in which not only man but the whole cosmos participates.

The course of the Christmas Eve feast was presented on the basis of materials collected by the author of the study. An attempt has been made here to illustrate the rite of passage in which the inhabitants of the Opoczno subregion participated. The Christmas Eve feast is an example of the rite of passage consisting of three phases: preliminal, liminal and postliminal. In order to take part in it, one had to conform to the customs, rites and beliefs developed by

tradition, to pass from the 'old' to the 'new' order in the cosmos, or from the 'old' to the 'new' man. Therefore, in the first phase, it was necessary to break with everything that had happened in the past year, especially with what was sinful and defective. This was done through participation in the Advent retreat, the sacrament of confession, discipline and ascetic work on oneself, with the aim of having the best possible experience of Christmas Eve, which was to become visible in the work done in the house and on the farm (profane). In the second phase, a certain 'suspension' was experienced, breaking with the old, the past, and the sinful and entering into a state of experiencing a new, more beautiful reality. This is evident in the mutual harmony and fraternity that is introduced by the religious character of the Christmas Eve supper – the breaking of the special wafers, exchanging wishes, strengthening the relationship of the living with the deceased through prayerful remembrance and inviting them to the feast and the singing of carols. The final phase is the perpetuation of the new state, i.e. the world of goodness, beauty, love and harmony, both in human relations and in the cosmos. This is completed by staying in a religious space, singing carols and attending Midnight Mass in church.

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## Rytuał wieczerzy wigilijnej w Opoczyńskim. Tradycja a współczesność

**Streszczenie:** Autor przedstawił zwyczaje, obrzędy i wierzenia wieczerzy wigilijnej w subregionie opoczyńskim, zarówno te praktykowane na początku XX w., jak i te, które przetrwały do czasów współczesnych. Do opracowania wspomnianej problematyki autor wykorzystał własny materiał faktograficzny, zgromadzony podczas etnograficznych stacjonarnych badań terenowych prowadzonych w Opoczyńskim w latach 1990–1993, oraz literaturę przedmiotu. Zamierzeniem autora artykułu była nie tylko prezentacja przygotowań do uczyty wigilijnej i jej przebiegu, ale również ujęcie zwyczajów i obrzędów tego dnia oraz wieczerzy jako rytuałów przejścia rozumianych według Arnolda van Gennepa. Rytuały te zakładają trzy fazy: preliminalną, liminalną i postliminalną. W fazie pierwszej dokonuje się zerwanie z dotychczasową rzeczywistością i minioną codziennością, aby następnie wejść w stan zawieszenia, czyli fazę przejściową, a po dokonaniu określonych przez tradycję rytuałów osiągnąć nową rzeczywistość. Realizację rytuałów przejścia można dostrzec w wewnętrznych przeżyciach uczestników uczyty wigilijnej, która ma charakter religijny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zwyczaje, obrzędy, wierzenia, tradycja, wieczerza wigilijna, potrawy, opłatek, składanie życzeń, śpiew kołęd.

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