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Folk Dress Revitalization as a Component of Language Revitalization

The Case of Wilamowice

Abstract

Although the main goal of language revitalization is keeping a language alive, the expression of ethnic identity and belonging is not exclusively limited to the linguistic phenomenon. In the case of Vilamovians – a small ethnic group living in the town of Wilamowice on the border of Upper Silesia and Lesser Poland, language revitalization has been supported by a group of people wearing the Vilamovian folk dress. This was accompanied by greater engagement of young people learning the Wymysorys language as well to other elements of Vilamovian culture, including the folk dress. In this case revitalization does not mean copying old patterns, but reviving its importance for local community. The Vilamovian folk dress is not limited to the costume of local dance ensemble, it is crucial for ethnic belonging of Vilamovians. The patterns, styles or words (in the case of the language) were less important for them. The reconstructed elements or even whole sets of dress, e.g. the mourning dress, different types of wedding dress and the whole male dress do differ from the historical ones. The ethnographers should not criticize this situation, as it used to be in the past, but focus on their choices and motivations connected to their ethnic belonging. In this text, I have tried to show that the reconstruction/revitalization of a folk dress could proceed in a specific way if combined with language revitalization.

Keywords: language revitalization, Wilamowice, Wymysorys, folk dress, reconstruction



Introduction

In the world's history, languages have appeared and disappeared.¹ However, according to linguists, “the rate of decline in linguistic diversity is probably unique to our time”.² David Harrison, the author of “When languages die”, placed such an emotional paragraph at the beginning of his book:

“The last speakers of probably half of the world's languages are alive today. As they grow old and die, their voices will fall silent. Their children and grandchildren – by an overwhelming majority – will either choose not to learn or will be deprived of the opportunity to learn the ancestral language. Most of the world's languages have never been written down anywhere or scientifically described. We do not even know what exactly we stand to lose – for science, for humanity, for posterity – when languages die. An immense edifice of human knowledge, painstakingly assembled over millennia by countless minds, is eroding, vanishing into oblivion.”³

The problem of vanishing languages has been acknowledged by many linguists and anthropologists. Many of them did not confine themselves to language documentation, and consequently, there have been many language revitalization programmes established and supported by different organizations and public institutions. Language revitalization was the topic of many academic papers and research projects. Many of them tend to describe languages “as abstract entities, embedded in specific communities of speakers but behaving, evolving and responding according to their own rights”.⁴ Yet, a language revitalization programme could be more successful if not only the language but also the culture were revitalized⁵.

The findings discussed in this paper were collected using qualitative methods, including participant observation in *Wilamowice* (lasting for twelve years) and in-depth and semi-structured interviews with informants living in *Wilamowice*. The interviewees represent several generations, their ages ranging from

¹ This paper is the result of a research project “From Flanders, via Germany, to Poland. An analysis of theories of ethnogenesis of Vilamovians” founded by National Science Centre (Poland) in frame of “NCN Preludium” program. The grant is affiliated at the Institute of Slavic Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences.

² Grenoble–Whaley 2006: 1–2.

³ Harrison 2007: 1.

⁴ Olko–Wicherkiewicz–Borges 2016: 9.

⁵ Tsunoda 2006: 172–174.

16 to 99, which is crucial for presenting the current situation of the community. In this paper, I focus on the current (2004–2021) actions of local activists concerning folk dress revitalization and its connection to language revitalization. The following paper discusses the difference between the revitalization and the reconstruction of attire, and whether we can speak of the revitalization of this particular attire which has been used in *Wilamowice* for the last two hundred years, even if it changed with time.

The local context

Wilamowice is a town of three thousand inhabitants, located on the borderland of Upper Silesia and Lesser Poland. It was established in the 13th century by a group of settlers who came to the area from Western Europe. They spoke *Wymysorys*, a Germanic language, although their specific origins remain unknown. According to oral tradition, Vilamovians consider themselves to be the descendants of the Flemings who brought their own language and culture to the region. We do not know much about history of Vilamovians in the first centuries after the settlement. At first (i.e. in the first decades after the settlement) they were farmers but in the 16th century, many Vilamovians became weavers and merchants, who distributed and sold their fabrics across Europe. The Reformation (Vilamovians became Calvinists in 1550) could have been an important factor for changing of profession. Even after the time of Counter-Reformation, as the most of Vilamovian became Catholic (in the 2nd half of 17th century), trade was an important source of revenue and it is still today an attribute of Vilamovian identity.

Their wealth increased due to successful trade and in 1808 they bought themselves out of serfdom. Ten years later, *Wilamowice* received town privileges. Probably in 19th century began for Vilamovians the process of becoming an ethnic group. Ethnic groups need indices of their identity according to the anthropological literature about ethnicity.⁶ In my opinion Vilamovians are an ethnic group, and the most important indices for them as an ethnic group are culture (especially folk dress and language), the belief in a common origin, common history, and the awareness of their distinctiveness. These attributes of their belonging did change with time. Today the most important is the feeling of belonging to Vilamovians as a group. Some of them consider themselves a separate nation, as opposed to the Poles and the Germans, who live or lived

⁶ Barth 1969; Michna 1995; Obreński 2005; Eriksen 2010.

in this region. One of the most important means of expressing their identity was and still is the Vilamovian female dress.⁷

Due to the affluence of Vilamovians, their female dress belongs to one of the richest and most varied costumes in Poland. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it was worn only in the small town of *Wilamowice*. In the first half of 20th century almost every Vilamovian woman had more than a dozen skirts, shawls, aprons and headscarves, which she inherited from her mother, mother-in-law or godmother. Each component was dedicated to a different occasion and choosing appropriate outfits was strictly obeyed⁸. The differences between them as well as the special value of Vilamovian women's dress result from the diversity and the archaic elements but also from their selection, which, although unwritten, was rigorously observed by the women of this small community.

The growing nationalisms at the turn of 19th and 20th century had a big influence on the life of Vilamovians. At that time both German and Polish activists saw Vilamovians as part of their nations and tried to convince Vilamovians to German or Polish identity. The authors applied nationalistic discourse especially in texts concerning Vilamovian folk dress, as a visible symbol of Vilamovian distinctness. As Benedict Anderson wrote, a nation is “an imagined political community [...] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”⁹. Polish nationalists imagined Vilamovians as part of their nation because they believed, that Vilamovians live on a “Polish land”¹⁰. At the same time German nationalists imagined their nation as all people with German(ic) roots. Vilamovians speaking *Wymysorys* were in their opinion a part of the German nation, even if they were not aware of it.¹¹

The Vilamovian dress was the every-day dress until the ban of use of the specific language and culture, issued by the local Polish authorities in 1945. At that time, there was an intense hatred against *Wymysorys* culture and language. On the one hand it was because it was associated with German culture and Germans were at that time associated with aggressors, who caused the World War II. On the other hand, many Vilamovians were imprisoned or ex-

⁷ Contrary to women, business contacts caused certain limitations in the clothing of men, who subjected themselves to the urban fashion of that time. Majerska–Sznajder 2020a.

⁸ Chromik–Król–Małanicz-Przybylska 2020.

⁹ Anderson 2006: 6.

¹⁰ Latosiński 1909.

¹¹ Kuhn 1940.

pelled from their houses, which were confiscated by Poles. In opinion of my interlocutors, all these actions were caused because of greed of their Polish neighbours, who wanted to take their properties. The intergenerational transmission of the *Wymysorys* language was stopped. The local folklore and folk dress became a target of anti-ethnic policy.¹² The women who wore the dress were stripped and beaten by Polish activists: „*My mother was stripped, she had to go back home from church wearing just her undershirt*”¹³. It is no surprise that after the war the dress slipped rapidly into obscurity. According to my respondents and archival photographs, the women who had no other clothes and wanted to blend in, wore less worthy dresses, so as not to make themselves conspicuous. The use of married women’s headgear, such as bonnets, kerchiefs and “*drymlas*”¹⁴ was also restricted and ordinary “Polish” scarves were worn instead.

However, in 1948 a local dance ensemble was established and started to use the local folk dress as a stage costume. The dress elements which had been hidden started being used again, this time on stage: “The twelve ladies that initially constituted the group decided to use the traditional costumes, but their songs repertoire was exclusively Polish”¹⁵.

This started a change in the functions of the dress in the Vilamovian community. Despite the persecutions, there were still some women who kept wearing traditional dress until their death. The last one died in 2002.

At the beginning of the 21st century, a group of Vilamovian teenagers started to research the local language, folk dress and culture and document it. Then, in 2011 a language revitalization programme started, which has been supported by the University of Warsaw since 2014. *Wilamowice* became a kind of laboratory for numerous researchers, academics and language activists interested in language revitalization. Many conferences, meetings and events, such as Mother Tongue Day, were organized, most of which were financed by numerous grants and projects led by Justyna Olko (director of the Center for Research and Practice in Cultural Continuity) and other researchers connected with the Faculty of “*Artes Liberales*”. There are many publications about the activities of the last 10 years¹⁶. The most important feature of the language

¹² Wicherkiewicz 2003: 12.

¹³ Interviewee: a woman aged 87, recorded in 2009.

¹⁴ It is a kind of white linen scarf, decorated with some colorful embroidery and white or purple laces.

¹⁵ Wicherkiewicz 2003: 12.

¹⁶ Mętrak 2016; Olko–Wicherkiewicz–Borges 2016; Król–Olk–Wicherkiewicz 2017; Mętrak 2019.

revitalization for the current paper is the emphasis on the connection of the new speakers with the older native speakers and intergenerational activities of organizations like the Regional Song and Dance Ensemble “Wilamowice” and the Association “Wilamowianie”. Today only about 10 native speakers and 20 new speakers can speak *Wymysorys*, and had it not been for the activities mentioned above, the *Wymysorys* language would have probably become extinct by 2010, as predicted by some linguists at the beginning of the 21st century¹⁷. It is a typical bottom-up activism, because the *Wymysorys* language is not recognized by Polish State as a regional language, so it is not protected by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The existence of such group of young activists, according to Anthony Smith, was possible, because even small ethnic groups could “emerge a strong sense of belonging and an active solidarity, which in time of stress and danger can override class, factional or regional divisions within the community”¹⁸. As Silesian folklorist Jan Kajfosz wrote, members of one community of communication share the image of a world which they perceived as real¹⁹. Hence, the later support of external institutions as the University of Warsaw and many academic from all over the world visiting the town has influenced the attitudes toward the *Wymysorys* language and local culture. As a result, more young people joined the activism.

Language revitalization in Wilamowice

According to Józef Obrębski, one of pioneer of ethnicity studies, language and folk dress used to be the most important markers of cultural dissidence for many groups.²⁰ Petr Bogatyriew wrote that people have the same intimate connection with their dress as they do with their language²¹. A dress, especially a festive one, is a sign, therefore a complicated system of sets and elements of a folk dress, dedicated to special occasions, is a system of signs. For some people the loss of the symbolic folk dress system is no less painful than the loss described by Harrison in the passage quoted at the very beginning. However, not so many initiatives for the revitalization of folk dress have been

¹⁷ Wicherkiewicz 2003.

¹⁸ Smith 1986: 30.

¹⁹ Kajfosz 2021: 33.

²⁰ Obrębski 2005.

²¹ Bogatyriew 1975: 89.

undertaken. Those which do exist focus on the material aspect: the reconstruction of particular elements and patterns rather than their functions in society. A reflection on the connection between language and folk dress in local communities could be helpful both for language revitalizers and for ethnographers investigating or revitalizing folk dress.

Tasaku Tsunoda claims that “there are two types of the relationship between language and culture in revitalization activities: revitalization of language *and* culture and culture *for* assisting language revitalization, e.g. by creating a natural context in which to speak the language”²². The folk dress is used in the *Wymysorys*-speaking theatre²³ as well as during language teaching and language documentation. The institutional *Wymysorys* revitalization programme represents the second type where the folk dress supports language revitalization. Yet, for my interlocutors, their dress was equally or even more important than the *Wymysorys* language, most probably because it was more vivid at the beginning of the 21st century. One of the reasons of the visibility of Vilamovian folk dress was the official narration at the time of People’s Poland (1945–1989) as folk culture was instrumentalized and used by politics. But the bottom-up revitalization activities in *Wilamowice* focus on revitalizing both the language and the folk dress. The main goal of this text is to present the process of reconstruction/revitalization of the latter one.

According to Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska, language practices are a kind of cultural practice. Languages should not be presented “as entities abstracted away from a cultural context, but as one of the elements and manifestations of reality in which subjects are immersed and which they at the same time construct”²⁴. Language revitalization, as an effect of language policy, “has an impact on the young representatives of minority cultures, on their attitudes towards language and culture and on their language and cultural practices”²⁵. Dołowy-Rybińska mentions several tensions, implied by her interlocutors²⁶ in the process of minority identity construction²⁷:

1. The tension between using two languages and participating in two cultures, i.e. the dominant and the minority one.

²² Tsunoda 2006: 173.

²³ Szlachta-Ignatowicz–Wicherkiewicz: 2019.

²⁴ Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 24.

²⁵ Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 24–25.

²⁶ Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska’s interlocutors were young minority language (Sorbian, Kashubian, Breton and Welsh) activists.

²⁷ Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 25.

2. The tension between unconscious and unorganized participation in a minority culture on a daily basis, and institutionalized participation oriented towards creating this culture and securing its position.

3. The tension between feeling nostalgic for strictly delineated communities, free of identity dilemmas, in which every individual knows their place, and joining groups in which identity has to be sought and shaped by participation, both at an individual and collective level.

4. The tension between images of minority culture presented in public discourses, both by minority activists and by outsiders, and the lifestyle of the young and their understanding of belonging to a minority.

5. The tension between the tradition in which a minority culture is rooted and on which it draws, and modernity implying unification but at the same time offering a chance to release minority cultures from the confines of folklore.

The study of these tensions in the context of wearing or revitalizing folk dress would be very interesting and useful, but it cannot be presented in this short text. The conclusion is that the young people engaged in the revitalization activities

“continuously make choices that affect the construction of their language, culture and ethnic identity. What these choices concern is not only language but also their friends, hobbies and participation in minority cultural life. Such choices are crucial for young people’s identity since minorities’ mode of functioning has evolved from community life based on direct bonds and clearly delineated language and ethnic boundaries to institutionalized participation. Belonging to a minority has nowadays become an individual’s choice, with the ethnic boundaries being set arbitrarily”²⁸.

Wearing folk dress, or choosing a particular set of elements, is a choice too. If the folk dress of an individual differs from the “norm” standardized by some folk dress investigators, it does not mean that the person does something against the tradition. It could be their choice what kind of tradition they choose. As Stanisława Trebunia-Staszal, a researcher of Polish Highlanders, mentions:

“Various attitudes towards dress and language no longer determine the rules of participating in the local culture. These cultural practices [...], until recently re-

²⁸ Dolowy-Rybińska 2020: 25.

served for the insiders, are also becoming the experience of outsiders, gaining new meanings and references. They are not linked to the local affiliation anymore, but are a sign of identification with the cultural tradition of the region”.²⁹

According to Linda B. Arthur, “dress provides a window for viewing culture, because it visually attests to the salient ideas, concepts and categories fundamental to that culture”³⁰. Yet, the folk dress of *Wilamowice* as well as the language were banned in 1945 and started to disappear fast. In her opinion, the term dress “is used in the most global sense to refer to all of the ways the body is used in the expression of identity”³¹. Therefore, the dress could be revitalized not as an everyday outfit, but rather as an expression of identity. This identity does not need to be connected to the origin anymore. The research results of Dolowy-Rybińska and Trebunia-Staszel show that people who wear the folk dress or speak the local language construct their own culture, making choices and selecting particular elements of the “traditional culture” rather than reconstruct its past form. The goal of folk dress revitalization could be making it a part of such modern culture.

A folk dress or a costume? The case of Vilamovian attire

According to the Russian folklore researcher Petr Bogatyriew, traditional folk dress used to have the following functions 1) festive, 2) aesthetic, 3) ceremonial, 4) regional or national affiliation, 5) state affiliation, 6) practical³². He claims that particular dress has particular functions, some of which can be dominant. For example, if the national function is dominant and the practical one is minor, the person wearing the dress can endure discomfort or even physical pain³³. Ryszard Kantor, a Polish ethnographer inspired by Bogatyriew’s work, developed the definition of a costume. In his opinion, folk dress changes to a costume when objective conditions make people abandon it but it is worn by a particular group or person³⁴. We can distinguish two situations of revitalization: 1) folk dress used in a particular region becomes a costume in this region, 2) folk dress of another region or a reconstructed dress

²⁹ Trebunia-Staszel 2020: 317–318.

³⁰ Arthur 1999: 1.

³¹ Arthur 1999: 1.

³² Bogatyriew 1975: 35–37.

³³ Bogatyriew 1975: 27.

³⁴ Kantor 1982: 106.

becomes a costume in this region. In the first case the “costume function” is an additional one to the dress, in the latter circumstance – it is the only one³⁵.

Kantor’s research was carried out over four decades ago. Since that time, the folk dresses and costumes in Poland have changed, and so have their functions. The understanding of the definition of “costume” and “dress” has changed as well. In this paper, I will use the concept of “stage costume”, which is worn by members of some dance or song ensembles or as a national symbol (representing the Polish state or the dominant Polish nation, not a minority group living in Poland). In this case, the aesthetic function is important as well, sometimes even more important than the function of regional and national affiliation. Sometimes it is a stage costume of “folk art”, not linked to any specific region and consisting of various elements. But even if the costume is not linked to the festive dress traditional for a particular village anymore, it constitutes a collective identity of the members of an ensemble or organization³⁶. The costume of each group member should be identical, to show in the presence of other folk dance ensembles that they belong to their specific group³⁷. The stage costume has educational, commercial, cultural-animation and other functions³⁸. In the case of the dress, the festive, aesthetic, ceremonial and regional or national affiliation functions are the most important ones.

In the case of the Vilamovian folk dress, the change of its perception from a folk dress to a stage costume was extremely important, even more so than in the case of other regional folk dresses in contemporary Poland. At that time (the 1950s), it meant the end of associating this clothing with “Germanness”, which was to be stigmatized and destroyed, and the beginning of a stage costume that was presented as “a Flemish-Scottish-Ukrainian mixture, completely blended in the sea of Polishness”³⁹.

Most authors of publications on the folk dress of *Wilamowice* wrote that it is a phenomenon belonging to the past and they mostly described its condition before World War II. Some of them⁴⁰ even said that it started to disappear after World War I. They claim that the future or even the present of the Vilamovian folk dress is a stage costume, which is used by two folk dance ensembles in *Wilamowice*.⁴¹ The new elements of the folk dress, even if they do not differ

³⁵ Kantor 1982: 106–107.

³⁶ Kurpiel 2018: 150.

³⁷ Tymochowicz 2020: 10; Król 2020b: 241.

³⁸ Tymochowicz 2020: 9.

³⁹ Chromik–Król–Małanicz–Przybylska 2020: 156–159.

⁴⁰ Bazielić 2001; Filip 2000.

⁴¹ *Zespół Regionalny “Wilamowice”* and *Zespół Regionalny „Fil-Wilamowice”*.

from modern, urban clothes, should be investigated by a researcher, if they are considered to be a folk dress by a given ethnic group⁴². The research question should be how its functions have changed.

The folk dress which used to be worn in surrounding villages or by Poles living in *Wilamowice* is not used anymore. Even if there is a dance ensemble in almost every village in the area, they use folk dress from other regions as their stage costume, e.g. Cieszynian or Cracovian costumes in *Dankowice*⁴³, because they are more colourful than those that were used by the former inhabitants of the area.

Yet, as my research has shown, the stage function is only one of the few, and its importance differs strongly depending on individual persons. After a long participant observation and many interviews with Vilamovians wearing the folk dress, I am inclined to state that one can see people's attitude towards their dress by looking at the choice of elements of the dress⁴⁴ and that it results from the choices of members of ethnic minorities, as described by Dołowy-Rybińska⁴⁵.

For some of my interviewees, the aesthetic function was very important but it followed a strong national or regional affiliation function. One of my respondents said: *"I love our Vilamovian folk dress because it is the most beautiful dress in the whole Europe or even in the whole world. I have seen so many dresses and ours is the most beautiful one"*. When I asked what she liked most about it, she answered *"It's the most beautiful one because it's ours"*.⁴⁶

As already mentioned, the regional or national affiliation function is very strong. Many Vilamovians stated that they wear identical clothes to the ones worn by the first settlers in the 13th century: *"We have been wearing these skirts and shawls for 700 years"*.⁴⁷ Sometimes it is used in opposition to other folk dresses in Poland: *"Look, we are so colourful and beautiful and the others are so grey and boring"*⁴⁸. However, the national function, in opposition to Polishness, is rather strong: *"Our dress is so beautiful and colourful, you see that we are Vilamovians and the Poles are so dark and shoddy"*⁴⁹. One of the oldest Vilamovian women told me directly:

⁴² Bogatyriew 1975: 91–92.

⁴³ Majerska-Sznajder 2020b: 326.

⁴⁴ Król 2013.

⁴⁵ Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 25.

⁴⁶ Interviewee: a woman aged 75, recorded in 2016.

⁴⁷ Interviewee: a woman aged 85, recorded in 2007.

⁴⁸ Interviewee: a woman, aged 90, recorded in 2017.

⁴⁹ Interviewee: a girl aged 15, recorded in 2017.

“Our clothes are more beautiful than the ones of the Poles because we are different people”⁵⁰.

The Vilamovian folk dress has never fully changed into a stage costume because most people who wear it on stage, also wear it or used to wear it as a festive or ceremonial dress during worship in church, or to weddings or parties. The Vilamovian identity, in strong opposition to other ethnic or even national groups (like the Polish nation), still supports the distinguishing function of the folk dress.

The changes that concern the folk dress which evolved into stage costumes such as e.g. using fabrics or cuttings that make the clothing more comfortable⁵¹, are not so common in the case of the Vilamovian dress because of the strong Vilamovian identity.⁵² As a researcher, I cannot say that the Vilamovian folk dress has not changed over the last 100 years, as my respondents assured me repeatedly. Even if somebody says that some parts of the dress are impractical, there is strong social control applied mostly by a group of older women⁵³ who insist that no element of the Vilamovian dress must be changed or skipped.

The practical function, which is so important for the stage costume (where the clothing should be comfortable and enable the dancer to move freely), remains obscured by the other ones. An important factor is that most of the elements of the Vilamovian dress are a particular person’s property and not the dance ensemble’s, even if the person belongs to this organization. In the case of most stage costumes, they are ordered by organizations and they belong to them⁵⁴.

Regarding the folk dress of *Wilamowice*, the conflicts about its form, a strong regional/national function and other factors mentioned above show that it is not reduced to a stage costume but it is a traditional folk dress:⁵⁵ “a tradition should still be discussed and redefined. Without being reflected on, it is dead”⁵⁶. For Vilamovian women, the ideal type of their dress (even if used as a stage costume) is not a folklorized “classical type”⁵⁷, but the dress of their mothers and grandmothers.

⁵⁰ Interviewee: a woman aged 96, recorded in 2018.

⁵¹ Tymochowicz 2020: 11.

⁵² Król 2020b.

⁵³ Kurpiel 2018: 151; Król 2020b: 226–244.

⁵⁴ Tymochowicz 2020: 12.

⁵⁵ Król 2020b: 244.

⁵⁶ Małanicz-Przybylska 2018: 346.

⁵⁷ Smolińska 2015: 14, Kurpiel 2018: 151.

The folk dress in Wilamowice. Reconstruction or revitalization?

The notions of “reconstruction” and “revitalization” of folk dress are used in various contexts under different meanings⁵⁸. Stanisława Trebunia-Staszal wrote about the dress of Polish Highlanders:

“So far, the ambitious attempts to restore the forgotten attire have not gained wider support among the Highlanders. It is limited to a narrow group of devotees of the Highlanders’ culture and regional activists. The reconstructed dresses, based on the specimens from the 19th century, despite being carefully crafted and maintained in the character of the time of their origin, are treated with caution by the Highlanders.”⁵⁹

Reconstruction is the production of an element of clothing to present it on the stage or in an exhibition. Revitalization, in turn, is an act of encouraging people to use an element of clothing as the folk dress. It could be an artefact which had been forgotten and then found in the attic of an old house, as happened in other regions⁶⁰ or a reconstructed element introduced to an existing folk dress.

Both reconstruction and revitalization could concern some elements of as well as a whole costume/dress. Below, I present some contemporary issues connected with introducing new or old elements to the Vilamovian folk dress in the context of former attempts of revitalization or reconstruction. Doing so, I focus less on the material aspect of the dress and more on its users because, according to Ryszard Kantor, the material aspect of the folk dress is just the beginning of research: “What would even the most perfect descriptions of a folk costume’s form be worth – or a dress itself collected in a museum if we did not know anything about its users and the circumstances of its use.”⁶¹ In his opinion, the analysis of dress must be based on an analysis of the whole cultural context in which it exists.⁶²

⁵⁸ Brandt 2018. Teresa Smolińska used even the word “reanimation”. Smolińska 2015: 15.

⁵⁹ Trebunia-Staszal 2020: 315.

⁶⁰ Kurpiel 2018: 152.

⁶¹ Kantor 1982: 76.

⁶² Kantor 1982: 77.

The Vilamovian male folk dress

As already stated, the Vilamovian folk dress and its users were persecuted after the Second World War. But in 1948, when the local dance ensemble “Wilamowice” was established, the local folk dress started to be used as a stage costume.

An important fact is that due to its diversity there were plenty of sets of female dress. The male dress had disappeared a hundred years earlier, so there was a need to create something that could replace it. The dress worn by men was not visually attractive or comfortable to dance in, so it was avoided in the reconstruction. The new male dress, created by Jadwiga Stanecka the leader of the Ensemble, was not linked to the traditional dress. It was something like the “ideal type’ of a folk costume, which should reflect the idea of a traditional men’s dress, expected by the audience”⁶³. Some of its elements could have been used in a similar form by Vilamovian men before the Second World War. However, this was probably because of the uniformization of the male attire in the whole region rather than the result of research on traditional Vilamovian clothing. During the whole time of the Polish People’s Republic (until 1989) and even a couple of years later this attire was used as a stage costume, occasionally (but very rarely) as a festive dress in church. In the photos from the 1980s, one can see many girls and women in Vilamovian folk dress during various Catholic processions and ceremonies, especially at Corpus Christi, where they carry procession floats and flags, but the boys are suited up.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the male dress started to be used by the members of dance ensembles as a festive dress in church during special occasions, when women wore it too. According to some ethnographers, the religious function is still a common feature of a costume⁶⁴ but soon it started to broaden its set of functions, especially the regional/national identification function.

What is particularly interesting is the case of *ibervijer* – a heavy woollen coat of Viennese origin, which used to be worn by richer Vilamovians at the end of the 19th century until the Second World War. This element of the Vilamovian male dress was not used in the postwar reconstruction because it was neither practical nor colourful. In the late 1950s and 1960s, some coats were made yet they were not based on *ibervijer* but on jackets of non-Vilamovian origin “reconstructed” in 1948. In 2009, one of the young activists found an old *ibervijer*

⁶³ Kurpiel 2018: 151.

⁶⁴ Smolińska 2015: 14.

in the attic of an old house and started to wear it after he realized that it was originally part of the male dress. At first, some men were against it because as one of the older men said: “This coat covers up the whole dress”⁶⁵, because it was too different from the recent canon and it was considered a foreign element. But other young men started to look for old *ibercijers*, they ordered some from tailors and started to wear them. One of their motivation was the need of wearing “the original Vilamovian dress, not the low-quality reconstruction from 1948, which is actually a mixture of various Polish folk dresses”.⁶⁶ For this man, it was the national affiliation function which was most important: he wanted to wear something “really Vilamovian”, in opposition to a “Polish” reconstruction. Some Vilamovians attending secondary schools in other towns used to wear the *ibercijer* “to show the Poles, that we are Vilamovians”.⁶⁷

For many men, the most important function of the dress was the aesthetic one. When I asked why they wore *ibercijers*, especially the younger ones said: “Because they look so fancy and elegant”⁶⁸. Teenage boys used to wear them to church, even for regular Sunday service, not wearing other elements of Vilamovian dress.

For many men, the practical function was also important: “Because in jackets it’s cold, and the *ibercijer* you can wear in winter, and you don’t feel the frost”.⁶⁹ This feature of *ibercijer* was soon noticed by older men, who ordered *ibercijers* or borrowed them from the younger men when it was cold and they had to go to church in the Vilamovian folk dress, even if they had earlier criticized the first boys wearing *ibercijers*, including the man who said that *ibercijer* covers “the real dress”.

As mentioned by Smolińska, in opinion of many ethnographers a reconstructed dress becomes a costume⁷⁰. However, as we can see in the examples I mentioned above, in the case of the Vilamovian male dress, we could speak of it being a stage costume and becoming a folk dress in the 21st century. This process had already been discussed in various texts⁷¹.

⁶⁵ Interviewee: a man, aged 55, recorded in 2010.

⁶⁶ Interviewee: a man, aged 18, recorded in 2011.

⁶⁷ Interviewee: a man, aged 15, recorded in 2014.

⁶⁸ Interviewee: a man, aged 19, recorded in 2018.

⁶⁹ Interviewee: a man, aged 17, recorded in 2016.

⁷⁰ Smolińska 2015: 15.

⁷¹ Król 2013; Majerska-Sznajder–Król 2019; Majerska-Sznajder 2020a; Majerska-Sznajder 2020b.

The Vilamovian female dress

Regarding the female dress, we cannot talk about its total disappearance. Vilamovian women, despite the ban on the use of the dress in 1945, have kept many of its functions. Even though it was also used as a stage costume, for many women it remained a festive dress and a carrier of their ethnic or national Vilamovian belonging.

The first element which was reconstructed in the 21st century was *drymła*⁷². It is a kind of white linen scarf, decorated with some red or purple⁷³ embroidery and laces. Relying on classic ethnographic descriptions, this embroidery used to be prepared by some Vilamovian women, but nothing new was produced in the 19th century anymore⁷⁴. As these kinds of *drymła* were used only as the most festive dress, they had been preserved in good condition, so they did not need to be reproduced. In 2000, as the Dance Ensemble “Wilamowice” was reactivated, there was a big need for new *drymłas*. The Vilamovian embroideresses started to make some new ones, and about 30 of them were produced in the 21st century.

Is it reconstruction or revitalization? The case of *drymła* does not fit any of these definitions. No external actors as ethnographers or even local activists were involved. There were only the women who wanted to have a *drymła* and who embroidered it for themselves and then for their friends and neighbours as well. I think they did not realize that they were the first embroideresses who made red *drymłas* since the 18th century. Maybe we can learn from that case that an element of dress can be alive when it is worn, and not when it is being produced. Therefore, the perception of the *drymła* being alive (as well as other elements, which could be produced by Vilamovian women again) does not encompass the words “reconstruction” or “revitalization”, even if the *drymła* has not been produced in last 200 years. However, this kind of situation is rather rare.

Another elements worth mentioning are winter jackets called *kačabajka* and *faldajak*. Their story is very similar to the one of *iberijers*. They were found in some old houses and then made by local seamstresses. Their most important functions were the aesthetic and practical ones: “*I don't like how the black coats or modern jackets look on our Vilamovian dress. And when it's cold, you would freeze*”

⁷² Król 2021.

⁷³ There are many other colours or kinds of decorations but in this case, there were only four colours. You can find a wider study of *drymła* in Król 2021.

⁷⁴ Kuhn 1940: 123, 145.

in the summer version. So the *kacabajka* is ideal, it's warm and Vilamovian", a Vilamovian woman⁷⁵ explained. The first seamstress who started to make it still remembered the *faldajak* of her mother. The last one of them was made in 1918 because of the lack of special embroidery after the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy and the separation of *Wilamowice* from Vienna⁷⁶. Therefore, it is another element that was made by Vilamovians themselves after a long time but it remained in the memory of the older users of the dress. Perhaps, the word "reconstruction" does not fit this case either. In the case of language revitalization, sometimes "[i]t is debatable whether in such a case we deal with the continuation of the same language or the creation of a new one"⁷⁷.

Not only single elements but also whole sets of female dress, after a long time of disuse, have been revitalized in the 21st century. Such an example is the mourning dress, which is characteristic because it is colourful in opposition to the traditional black colour for used in Polish culture. The Vilamovians mourning dress varied from deep to less deep mourning, depending on the time which elapsed since the death of a person. After the war, when it was forbidden to wear the Vilamovian costume, the mourning attire was also subject to harassment, and therefore some of its elements started to be black.

In the 1950s and 1960s, some women who used to wear the Vilamovian dress every day started wearing some white elements again but the old version did not reappear. The Dance Ensemble "Wilamowice" used the festive dress at funerals of its members, so the stage costume. The dominant function was not ceremonial, but the one of affiliation – in this case to the organization. This distinction was visible for example at the funeral of Jadwiga Stanecka in 1976. As can be seen in the photographs, some older women wore the elements of the old clothes of mourning, as they had learned from their mothers. The members of the ensemble, on the other hand, dressed in festive costumes with green aprons and garlands. In 1993, some of the girls from the ensemble attended the funeral of a priest, dressed in their Sunday best. Nevertheless, they did not wear the green aprons but the "Turkish whites", "because the white meant mourning". These festive aprons were not supposed to be worn at funerals. Soon, it was only the ensemble and a dozen women who wore the festive Vilamovian costume on important national or religious holidays. It seemed, therefore, that the mourning attire was completely gone and forgotten.

⁷⁵ Interviewee: a woman, aged 65, recorded in 2015.

⁷⁶ Kuhn 1940: 121.

⁷⁷ Olko–Wicherkiewicz 2016: 650.

As the activities connected with the language revitalization developed, the situation changed. As 2009 Rozalia Hanusz died, a longtime member of the Ensemble and a person of merit to Vilamovian culture. Its members decided to attend the funeral in Vilamovian dress. Eight women wore a well-completed attire dedicated to the “deep” mourning. It sparked much controversy among the inhabitants of *Wilamowice*. One could hear comments such as “*Look, in what rags they’ve come to the funeral*”. However, there were only a few voices of this kind. The older people said: “*they went, as it was meant, a neighbour came and also praised it*”; “*She was a Vilamovian, how else should they have gone? It’s not black!*” Whereas, among the younger people, it could be heard that they had never seen the funeral, but the festive garment only. A 31-year-old woman even stated that she liked the funeral clothes more than the festive ones, “*because the latter are seen everywhere, and these are the original and it’s a shame that they are so little-seen*”⁷⁸. Yet despite the critics, the tradition of wearing the “proper” mourning dress has been maintained since that time. There were about ten funerals, in which the Vilamovian mourning dress was used. Most participants wore the mourning dress, some of them the festive one (as a stage costume). Some wore the stage costume with some white elements that should symbolize mourning, even if never worn for this occasion before the Second World War. Here, one can see the possibility of recognizing people’s attitude towards the choice of the dress’s elements.⁷⁹

The wedding dress

A single yet not less important occasion was the wedding of Justyna Majerska (Biöetuł) and Rafał Schneider (Pejter) in 2016. The last wedding in Vilamovian dress occurred in 1954. However, as two Vilamovian activists were planning to marry, they decided to organize a Vilamovian wedding. Their dress was prepared by the local seamstresses and it was the bride and groom who decided what their dress should look like. An analysis of their clothing will allow us to present their attitudes towards it.⁸⁰

The bride wore a dress based on the one from the interwar period but since the local belief says “everything for the bride should be new”, her dress was

⁷⁸ Interviewee: a woman, aged 31, recorded in 2009.

⁷⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the mourning dress in *Wilamowice* in the 21st century, see Król 2020b: 244–251.

⁸⁰ For a more detailed analysis of this wedding as a ceremony, see Malanicz-Przybylska 2019: 75–79.

entirely made for the occasion. Besides the typical elements of the wedding dress (blue skirt *blöwerök*, green apron *grinsjyctül*) all the ribbons and tapes were white. The bodice, which was silver, was trimmed with silver trimming. The embroidery of the shirt, normally yellow, was white as well. Also, the bridesmaid wore a dress which was like the historical one (with a top hat), and white ribbons and silver vest as the colours of the wedding. The groom wore a black Vilamovian jacket with velvet collar and cuffs. There were only a couple of such jackets in *Wilamowice*, so the groom borrowed all of them for two months before the wedding because, as he told me, he was the only one who was allowed to wear that special element of dress on that day.

Apart from the bride and the groom, about 60 wedding guests were wearing Vilamovian dress or its elements. There is no room here to describe all of them in detail but I would like to mention just one interesting situation. The bride's grandmother was a seamstress, who had been making the Vilamovian dress for Vilamovians and sometimes for collections for many years. Once, I have found in the Ethnographic Museum of Cracow a golden *jüpkä* – a kind of female jacket. There are plenty of festive *jüpkas* in *Wilamowice* made from velvet or wool but this one was special because it was made of brocade. We did not know how it had been used but I wanted to have such an artefact in my collection so I bought the fabric and haberdashery and ordered one at that seamstress. I intended to keep it in my stockroom and present it on some presentations or exhibitions of Vilamovian dress.

After two years, when the seamstress had prepared most of the parts of the bride's dress, she got very engaged in it as she wanted to look very special on that occasion too, so she asked me if she could borrow that golden *jüpkä*, to wear the most festive one at the wedding. After the wedding, she said that she will not wear it anymore, because "It was only this very occasion to wear it. It is so special".

The bride, the groom and the grandmother-seamstress wore very different sets of dress, but in each one, it was the ceremonial function which was dominant. Its importance was especially expressed in the case of the groom, who wanted to make sure that it he will be the only man wearing that special kind of jacket.

However, at the same time, the national affiliation function cannot be ignored. The bride and groom wanted to express their Vilamovian identity by wearing the Vilamovian dress to the wedding. It was much more important than in the case described by Bogatyriew⁸¹ because, at that time, most people

⁸¹ Bogatyriew 1975: 36.

wore the folk dress as a wedding dress. In the case of the young Vilamovians, it was a conscious decision which provoked much criticism, even from the members of their families. And it was not the function of affiliation to the Dance Ensemble: their dresses differed greatly from the stage costumes, even from the ones used in the theatrical play “A Vilamovian wedding” played regularly by the Ensemble. In my opinion, these features support the idea of calling the activism for the revival of the Vilamovian folk dress “revitalization”, and not “reconstruction”.

Conclusions

Although the main goal of language revitalization is keeping a language alive, the expression of ethnic belonging is not exclusively limited to the linguistic phenomenon. In the case of Vilamovians, language revitalization has been supported by a group of people wearing the Vilamovian folk dress. This was accompanied by greater engagement of young people learning the *Wymy-sorys* language as well to other elements of Vilamovian culture, including the folk dress:

“Choosing a language and realizing the desire to identify with a minority culture brings specific changes to young people’s lives. More than anything, they gradually become active members of the given community and start identifying more strongly with it by participating in its culture at various levels”⁸².

According to this analysis, the case of the revitalization of the Vilamovian folk dress differs from other cases of the revival of some folk dresses described in Polish ethnographic literature⁸³. Copying old patterns does not mean copying old functions of the dress⁸⁴ like in the case of the reconstruction of some folk dresses to make stage costumes for particular dance ensembles. In *Wilamowice*, where young people started the process of language and folk dress revitalization, it was the belonging function which were revitalized first. The patterns, styles or words (in the case of the language) were less important for them.

⁸² Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 233.

⁸³ Jasińska 2013; Kurtyka 2013; Kurpiel 2018; Smolińska 2015; Paprot-Wielopolska 2020; Minksztym 2020.

⁸⁴ Salyga 2018: 101–102.

The *iberzajer* (especially the ones based on coats bought second-hand) does not differ from a regular black coat. The boys who wore it to school “to feel more Wymysorsy” did not do it to present themselves to the Polish children, they did it for themselves because, as they reported, they “felt safer” wearing it, even if they had not worn it earlier, as students of the school in Wilamowice. So the *iberzajer* did not become an “artefact, reserved only for celebrating religious festive days and emphasizing the regional identity”⁸⁵. Due to the lack of differences between them and the classic coats they cannot be folklorized and sold, as many regional or ethnic groups in Poland do with their folk dress⁸⁶. If these boys had wanted to present themselves fitting the image of Vilamovians presented in public discourse, they would have worn some more characteristic elements, like blue or purple jackets or hats with a colourful ribbon. Yet, they chose the *iberzajer* because of their understanding of belonging to a minority⁸⁷.

An important fact is that the Vilamovians who remake the old elements do not ask any professional ethnographers or professional folk costume producers about them, like in many other places in Poland⁸⁸. The old elements have been kept in *Wilamowice* and then copied or renovated by local seamstresses. But the most important thing is that they have been living in the older Vilamovians’ (also the seamstresses’) memory. For them, it was not a reconstruction because those elements were not “dead”, as long as they remembered them, even if none of them had been made during the last 100 or even 200 years. In this case, it was a continuation, not a reconstruction of a dead element.

The reconstructed elements or even whole sets of dress, e.g. the mourning dress, different types of wedding dress and the whole male dress do differ from the historical ones. In this case, it is not the question of “precision” or “errors” in remaking them, as it used to be called in Polish costume studies. It was the choice of its users which made the dress look like that. As ethnographers, we should focus on their choices rather than criticize or judge the material aspect of their dress, without asking them about their motivations. It would be important to view the revitalized Vilamovian folk dress not as a reconstruction made by professionals, which could be judged or criticized, but as the continuation of tradition or, what would be even more interesting, as expression of their ethnic belonging.

⁸⁵ Salyga 2018: 106.

⁸⁶ Klekot 2014; Salyga 2018: 104.

⁸⁷ Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 25.

⁸⁸ Tymochowicz 2020: 10–11.

In this text, I have tried to show that the reconstruction/revitalization of a folk dress could proceed in a very different way, combined with language revitalization. The case of Wilamowice is well documented but there are many other groups in Poland and all over the world fighting for recognition or keeping their languages alive and having their own dress, therefore, more case studies of this kind should be undertaken.

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