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EXPERIENCES IN SEARCHING FOR THE IDENTITY OF A NATION

Searching for identity has never been straightforward – not at any time nor at any place. Our doctoral program “Searching for Identity: Global Challenges, Local Traditions” did not define a priori the concept of identity, nor the meaning of searching for it. Despite these doubts, our joints efforts and searches, discussions and disputes, proved to be helpful in building our research project. That is why for the topic of my final reflection I chose my own experience in searching for the identity of a nation, specifically the Polish nation. I wish to explain how I have reached a systemic conceptualization of the matter – and what results from it.

National identity is sometimes understood as belonging – that is, a feeling of participation within a community that is a nation. Members would thus accept their national identity from the community – regardless of whether ethnic-natural roots are posited for the nation’s identity, or if the community was simply imagined. These identities are accepted and imagined in diverse ways, depending on the changing circumstances, and scientific disciplines have developed differing approaches to the matter

(Dyczewski and Wadowski 2009; Borowik and Leszczyńska 2008). Ultimately, we encounter individual and collective, social and national, religious and cultural identities (Boksański 1989). This multiplicity advises caution, particularly in the case of national identity, a community suspected of being both primordial and concocted. In what follows, my approach is systemic, not disciplinary. I have written about the matter many times (J. Kieniewicz 2014, 68–70), therefore I shall confine myself to the elements required to understand my intention.

24 A systemic conceptualization of national identity indicates its capacity to exist. At the same time, it spotlights the dialogical character of such a community. And by that I understand that the national community exists owing to decisions made by individuals who are inclined to build mutual relations and are ready to treat them as a result of their free choice. These choices coalesce into “the dialogic,”¹ that is a dialogue of contrary logics, where synthesis does not take place, and a retroactive impact continues (Morin 1987, 127). Thanks to this, the nation can be an autonomous system that clearly differs from other communities. Here I particularly underline the distinctive ability of humans to conduct dialogue (Grygiel 1982; Grygiel 1988, 33; Tischner 1992, 19–22; J. Kieniewicz 2003, 67).

Thus, I have proposed to “go beyond the cliché of stating that the identity of individuals does not combine into a whole, as it is not derivative in itself of the whole” (J. Kieniewicz 2016, 37). National identity is one matter, the nation’s Identity another.

¹ According to Edgar Morin, “Le terme de dialogique veut dire que deux ou plusieurs logique, deux principes sont unis sans que la dualité se perde dans cette unite.”

The nation's Identity in my conceptualization refers primarily to an ability to regulate processes guaranteeing the existence of its structures and of conducting transformations. I recognize the reality of a voluntary association of free individuals assuming the preparedness to act for a common future. National identity is, in turn, an expression of affiliation, meaning the participation of the individual in a community which is able to act on behalf of the nation's existence. Poland is therefore a community of people convinced that they want to be Poles and consistent in the way of considering themselves a nation. The Poles' national identity is Polishness, resulting from an individual choice and from a sense of common duty (Łepkowski 1987).

My research experience indicates two circumstances. Firstly, nations are not universal, and there are still communities bound on different bases, creating their structures differently. Secondly, as any form of a community, nations are not eternal. Nations are formed by people convinced about their affiliation, about their will and ability to create a community. Many sundry benefits result from this, such as national pride, and individuals are ready to make sacrifices for the community understood in this way. There is a feedback loop between people and the community, yet it does not boil down to the person acquiring the ability to exist owing to affiliation to their community. Paradoxically stated, Poland cannot exist without Poles, but Poles can exist without Poland (Czapliński 2013).²

² Poles like to deny this, since they are interested primarily in excluding others from the community.

The Polish nation is a historically shaped community of people considering themselves Poles. The nation's Identity is the capacity to exist as a community; it is a set of characteristic variables. I wish to present a correlation between the defense of identity and the continuation of existence even at the price of structural changes. In systemic categories, defending identity is a set of actions undertaken in order to sustain the system's structures. A change of structure requires new mechanisms controlling the changes (new transformations). In my understanding, Searching for Identity is namely the conscious effort towards sustaining existence, as well as the effort to continue existing despite structural changes.³ All of this has happened over the period of at least two centuries, in real relations as well as in concepts.

The issue of defending identity first arose for me in works on the history of India. While writing about the precolonial society of Kerala, I had to grasp the problem of the society's existence, and its ability to independently continue in rapidly changing circumstances (J. Kieniewicz 1975). I wished to imagine the continuity in circumstances of very powerful external stimuli, ones lasting for millennia. The world of the Indian Ocean was not the only thing that had impact on this society. Kerala remained in economic relations with economies spread from East Africa to China, being a country supplying others primarily with pepper (J. Kieniewicz 1989a). This had a strong impact on forming the environment, where land under food cultivation

³ An extreme case is the new identity of a community resulting from an adaptation of its surviving part.

could be limited in favor of gardens. The deficit of rice, a basis of the Malayalam people's diet, was easily complemented by import. Under the influence of intensive connections with the world overseas, Kerala society shaped itself as a "littoral oriented" one (J. Kieniewicz 1986b). The Portuguese confronted this reality, and later on so did other newcomers willing to establish their trading posts and fortresses there (J. Kieniewicz 1970). I searched for an explanation of the effectiveness in resisting foreign expansion, not only military and economic. This also concerned the civilizational pressure which had with utmost clarity revealed itself in a multigenerational conflict between the local Christians of the Syrian rite and the Roman Church (J. Kieniewicz 1990, 2001). In order to understand this case, it was not enough to simply abandon Eurocentric concepts (J. Kieniewicz 2007). The theory of systems allowed me to understand the mechanism of development that sustained these societies in equilibrium. Societies like these I defined as stationary.

Kerala was a part of the world which Europeans called India. It was not easy for me to grasp its identity as a society in a way that did not refer to European terms. Keralans had a common language, a caste social order, and lived between the ocean and the mountains. To some extent they were connected by remembering their past. They differed in religion, shared state loyalties, and had divergent interests. This was a country open to others: Jews, Greeks, Arabs, and the Chinese. Kerala in its diversity fell within something that could be called the Indian civilization, though not much else can be added here,