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The transcendental side of life. Aquatic demons in Polish folklore

Urszula Lehr

A human being seeks in his life something that transcends him,
wishing to either use it, or to pray to it.
Van der Leeuw

Abstract: The paper analyses water demons in the context of beliefs associated with water and describes the fate of human souls after death. Based on the empirical analysis of Polish folk texts, the author differentiates between two fundamental types of aquatic beings – female and male. In the latter group, two types of water demons were distinguished: the aquatic spirits and the drowners. The characteristic property of folk beliefs preserved in folk tales originating from the 19th and 20th centuries are the elements of old, possibly primary versions of the motifs dealing with aquatic creatures. They include: 1) the creative power of water, transforming a human soul into a demon; 2) an association between aquatic demons and the moon; 3) fear of thunderbolts; 4) zoomorphic motifs; 5) the red and green colour; 6) traces of "feeding" the element of water; 7) making offerings; 8) a ban on bathing on specified days; 9) a ban on rescuing a drowning person.

Changes in the worldview of rural inhabitants are reflected in folk beliefs, which is also visible in the transformation of the character of aquatic demons. They have evolved from nameless spirits of water[1] (*duchy wody*) through mythical water maidens (*panny wodne*), aquatic spirits (*wodniki*), drowners (*topielcy*) to aquatic devils (*diabły wodne*) and harmless devilish creatures (*postacie diabelskie*).

Keywords: aquatic demons, variants, Polish rural community

[1] The 'spirit of water' (*duch wody*) is not identical with the 'aquatic spirit' (*wodnik*), although the former demonstrates certain similarities to the latter. The 'spirit of water' is closer to a personified, pagan god (see below: chapter *Water*). The 'aquatic spirit', presented by folklore as an antropomorphised being, is an evolved demon similar to the 'drowner' (*topielec*).

Introduction

Phenomena occurring in the nature and human life that are perceived as psychophysical have accompanied mankind at every stage of the development of civilization. Cultural representations of perceptions of the reality indicate the immanent need for substantiating and "taming" of what is incomprehensible, and this has for a long time been a driving force behind mystical thinking. The sources of diversified sensations and emotions towards nature as well as the unidentified fear of something unknown and menacing were verbalised and personified. Such representations provided the foundations for the emergence of various concepts of transcendental nature that are specific to *homo sapiens*. These concepts give special attention to natural phenomena, treating objects as animate and invested with power (animism). The sense-based and direct attitude to natural phenomena was not – as it may be surmised – the only stimulus that ruled human imagination. After people became more interested in matters concerning life and death, irrational thinking shifted to the "newly discovered" non-material element of life – the soul[2], the driving force of human existence. The externalised consequence of comprehending the reality surrounding man was a belief in supernatural powers ascribed to spiritual beings, namely demons, pagan gods, spirits[3] and souls of dead men, as described by Émile Durkheim (2010: 24).

The creation of putative powers that established and maintained the order of the world explained the causality and effects of such phenomena as good and evil, order and chaos, life and death. If the homeostasis was disturbed, people attempted to appeal to the personified powers to gain their favour (by prayers, offerings), or else oppose them (by magical practices). After some time, the consequence of perceiving the world through the prism of dualistic (animistic and manistic) sensations and reflective thinking was the creation of religion, which shaped a new facet of human existence – *homo religiosus* (Zdybicka 1977: 16). This in turn was a decisive element in the successive transformation of old beliefs into the Christian religion, which gained strength over centuries.

The subject matter of the present paper is the belief in demonic beings associated with water. Commonly known to all the Slavs, including the West Slavonic people (the Poles), folk texts about water demons constitute a relatively numerous and diversified group of motifs originating in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some relics of pagan beliefs found in such texts have been preserved in folklore until the present day, although both the form and the scale of such behaviours raise much doubt among researchers of the subject.

[2] Understood as a medium through which human beings perceive the world.
[3] The notion describes the spiritual part of the human being that allows for contacting and relating to pagan gods or God (the vertical line).

Water demons in the literature – an outline

In the minds of primitive men, there was only one mystic world. Thus, they perceived the world – as it is explained by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1991: 65–67, 93) – as an undifferentiated unity that constituted an integral part of collective representations. The world was seen as supernatural from the perspective of their contemporary perceptions based on the principles of logic and empiricism. The elements that explained the functioning of the world of mystic representations were basic forms of primitive beliefs derived from polydoxy (i.e. magic, the cult of nature and the cult of the dead) shaped in the course of evolution. The secondary manifestation of this world view can be found in demonology that encompassed the sphere of independent spiritual beings which emerged from tangible objects and natural phenomena and were called idols or demons[4] (Łowmiański 1979: 25). In folk beliefs, these supernatural beings generally appeared in groups, and did not have proper names or individual properties. In the majority of representations these beings were projections of ideas associated with the existence of the afterlife, similarily to the notion of the human soul that survived the death of a human being. Initially such projections were not very elaborate and became manifested in the cult of the dead (Urbańczyk 1991: 56–61; Gierlach 1980: 150–151). In some beliefs, the non-material soul later acquired demonic properties, thus contributing to the creation of the world of demonic beings, including water demons.

Polish demonic beliefs known to researchers present only a tentative image, which was formed in the past under the influence of several factors, such as: 1) hardly reliable sources (such as sermons, chronicles and reports by non-Slavic travellers: Germans, Danes, Greeks, Arabs), which were not based on scientific foundations (Pełka 1987: 11–12); 2) traces of adopted, culturally alien motifs and their contamination (both as far as terminology and content is concerned); 3) clearly visible influence of Christianisation of the Slavic people on the content of pagan beliefs.

Christianity embraced the state inhabited by the Polans in the second half of the 10th century (966) which provided an official beginning to the decisive turn in the spiritual reinterpretation of the primordial order and pagan beliefs. The change was not fast, as seen in the 15th century sermons revealing often inaccurately Polish demonic beliefs. As stressed by Henryk Łowmiański (1979: 276–277), preachers mainly focused on eliminating pagan practices associated with the realm of cults but not on those that dealt with the worldview. According

[4] In the sphere of religious studies and Polish colloquial language, the notion is synonymous with 'a spirit of darkness' (a fallen angel, Satan, the prince of darkness) (Kowalewski 1960: 148–149). It is conveyed by the Christian and folk term 'devil' (*bies*) (Łowmiański 1979: 148–149).

to Aleksander Brückner (1985), beliefs and prejudices associated with water demons were known at that time. A mention can be found in "The lecture on catechism" (1579) by Father Paweł Gilowski, who referred to a mythical being called 'aquatic drowner' (*wodny topiec*). Beliefs in 'nymphs of the banks'[5] (*wiły, brzeginie*, i.e. representatives of the cult of water, rivers, springs, forests and mountains) which were revered among the Slavs, most likely including the Poles, were also common (Brückner 1985: 232–233, 181, 50, 44).

Fighting pagan beliefs, an attempt sometimes met with strong opposition, prompted the propagators of the new religion to embrace an adaptive strategy. In this way, some pagan ceremonies and rituals became incorporated in the Christian calendar year, thus assuming the character of religious ceremonies (on Polish ritual year see also Lubecka 2013, this volume). In the case of water demons, however, there are no clear indications of this kind. We could also consider an indirect connection between paganism and Christianity, where the association of the demon and the soul is revealed in the context of the Christian rite of baptism. Such associations are strongly accented in contemporary folk belief. Other traces of primitive belief in water demons may be found in some recently observed profane activities and bans, as well as in the prohibition of church holidays which were associated with magic. It is also important to note that water demons were assigned to the category of sinister forces defined as "devils".

The policy of selective acceptance of the pagan belief system adopted by the Polish clergy resulted in the survival of the elements of mythical consciousness as well as in the pertaining belief in creatures from the supernatural world (including numerous motifs depicting water demons). Such motifs were recorded in the exhaustive collections of Polish folklorists, such as Oskar Kolberg (19th century) or Kazimierz Moszyński (1930s). These motifs, considered a marginal element in Polish folk culture (including spiritual culture), can also be found in studies undertaken after the Second World War and published later as monographs. These studies were mostly regionally oriented (see among others Baranowski 1971, 1981; Brylak 1970; Dekowski 1987; Gaj-Piotrowski 1993; Gerlich 1989; Pełka 1987; Simonides 1977, 1984; Szyfer 1976)[6]. The monographs are supplemented by rich collections of oral folklore (fairy tales, folk tales, legends; for such collections, see Malinowski 1900, 1901; Lompa 1965; Przywara, Pośpiech & Pośpiech 1967; Kadłubiec 1970; Jaworska 1973).

[5] No earlier data on sea demons are available; they are also not mentioned by Brückner (1985).

[6] The author has done research on folk demonology in Carpathian villages of Beskid Śląski and Podhale (mountain regions of south Poland) in the years 1975–1980. The material became the basis of her doctoral dissertation and numerous monographic papers (see among others: Lehr 1983, 1984, 1988a, 1988b).

Water

The cult of water demons

In the numerous variants of the belief in water demons, the dwelling place of these supernatural beings was all kinds of water reservoirs. Their association with water is backed up by the culturally determined, multi-faceted symbolism of the element of water. In beliefs, myths and religions of the world, water, the primordial matter, designates such notions as chaos, changeability, instability, transformation, restoration of body and spirit, resurrection, fertility, power, purification, and baptism, among others. Presented as a borderline zone between life and death, water denoted the concentration of power of primitive thinking. Sacred properties ascribed to water, resulting from its emerging *ex nihilo* marked with supernatural powers everything that originated in water or had contact with it. It was believed to be a dwelling place of gods, demigods, heroes, demons and monsters. In almost every mythology, water had many representatives in the pantheon of water gods, one of the most powerful of them being the Greek god Poseidon and his Roman equivalent Neptune (Na początku 1998). In the Slavonic mythology, where water reservoirs and creeks, especially springs, were places of cult (a fact supported by archaeological findings), no mention is made of significant aquatic beings of the rank equal to the above-mentioned gods. It is also difficult to find traces of them in historical or folkloric material.

Aleksander Gieysztor (1982: 225) is of the opinion that "The Slavs were far from anthropomorphising and deified the water-mother, revered among the Fenno-Ugric people". The belief is shared by Kazimierz Moszyński, who emphasised that both in the Slavonic cult and beliefs, water was less important compared to its opposite element – fire (Moszyński 1967: 504–506; Gieysztor 1982: 134–136). Nevertheless, although there are no adequate sources that might suggest that aquatic pagan gods existed in the distant past, numerous examples from the Slavic areas indicate interesting manifestations of water cult. Here one should mention numerous magical activities occurring among Western Slavs – offerings made to water (bread, salt, hens, lambs) which are similar to the custom known in cultural anthropology as "feeding the elements". Such offerings were dropped into water in times of drought, or flood, when travelling, or when constructing a dike or a bridge. This was done in order to secure safe relations between man and water. The ban on rescuing a drowning person was also until recently associated with the magical conviction that water might be "weakened" by pulling that person out of water (Moszyński 1967: 506–510).

The offerings were solely of a protective character, meant as gifts for supernatural beings living in the water. Thus, they were a manifestation of the cult

of water demons rather than water as such (Gieysztor 1982: 225; Moszyński 1967: 509). It is hard to accept, however, that the Slavs, including the Western Slavonic people, did not create or adopt the anthropomorphic image of water, nor did they acknowledge water as an element with the properties of a deity[7]. Primitive thinking, suffused with mysticism, lent god-like or demonic properties to all manifestations of nature, including the four elements. Hence, I am of the opinion that the belief in water spirits might have been preceded by beliefs in some personified pagan aquatic god, later degraded to a spirit of water, which was indicated in the Polish folklore materials. Later, this seems to have evolved into the belief in a demon of human provenience, visible in contemporary folk tradition. Thus, presuming that a pagan aquatic god existed among the Slavs, offerings made to beings dwelling in water might be regarded as a more recent interpretation, secondary to their primary purpose – a gift for the anthropomorphised aquatic god.

Water demons

Polish beliefs about water demons are characterised by a multitude of variants. They vary in regional concentration and terminology: e.g. the drowner (*topielec*) and its derivatives (*topnik, topiec, utopek, topich,* as well as *pływnik, wirnik, wodnik, Wassermann, podlodńik, nëčk, mořkulc* and others) are used in different parts of Poland (Karłowicz & Kryński & Niedźwiedzki 1919: 81, 399, 673; Kowalenko & Labuda & Lehr-Spławiński 1961: 336*;* Dźwigoł 2004: 162–163). The most commonly employed term, accepted also in the literature on the subject, is *topielec*, one of the two subgroups of water demons within the category of supernatural beings. The other, relatively small group is represented by aquatic spirits (*wodniki*). A separate class of water demons in view of their gender are female beings, represented in infrequent motifs that are dubious with respect to their Polish or even Slavonic origin.

[7] Some trace may be found in the Great Russian (eastern Slavic) prayers, where the element is referred to as the "oldest tsarina" (Moszyński 1967: 508).

Aquatic maidens, water nymphs (living in either the sea or a river)

Beliefs in female water demons are concentrated in northern Poland (the Kaszuby region)[8] and north-eastern and eastern Poland (the regions of Suwalszczyzna, Podlasie, and Polesie).

Among supernatural beings that allegedly dwelled in the sea there were sea maidens, otherwise called sea nymphs. They were represented as mermaids – half-woman and half-fish – of extraordinary beauty. They were adorned with wreaths of morning glory worn on the head and amber bead necklaces around their necks. With their singing and graceful movements they charmed sailors and fishermen, leading them into water. The lakes in the Kaszuby district were inhabited by the malicious spirits of drowned girls that caused the boats to capsize and carried the fishermen into the depths of the lake. These spirits were called *jeziorńice*. The inhabitants of the Kaszuby region also believed in the female version of the aquatic spirits – the *wodnica* dwelling deep in Raduński Lakes. Described as an equally fair maiden, the *reduńica* was supposed to feed on human blood (Dźwigoł 2004: 166–167). A striking feature of the presented variants is the similarity of these creatures to Greek mythical beings such as mermaids. They are also similar to German river nymphs, e.g. undines and other characters originating from Scandinavian beliefs. The Kaszubian themes may thus be borrowings or reproductions of mythological tales known already in the ancient times (Drapella 1976: 51–66). If they are mirrored in the Polish folklore, as exemplified by a mermaid called *Meluzyna* in Silesian folk tales, they are an example of a conceptual transformation of themes, which affected folk beliefs through literature (Dźwigoł 2004: 168).

In folklore sources dating back to the late 18th century and originating solely from the Silesian region (in south-west Poland), one may find a terminological counterpart of sea-maidens – water maidens or female drowners (*topielice*; Malinowski 1900: 420). Although scarce in details, the tales indicate that they differed from their sea "cousins" mostly by not having any zoomorphic properties. In folk tales, they appeared in the background as beautiful daughters of male drowners. They attended village parties, beguiled young unmarried boys and sometimes led the bathers to deep waters to "suck out the blood, youth and life of their unlucky victims" (Zawada 1932: 119). Yet, they were also capable of showing good-heartedness. In the Silesian region, there were tales where the daughter of a drowner gave life back to a boy who was captured by her father,

[8] People dwelling in this region are indigenous Slavs. Unyielding throughout centuries to strong German influences, they have preserved their culture and language together with numerous archaisms and relicts of old beliefs.

as well as stories where water maidens took young boys to their underwater dwellings and gave them rubbish, which later turned into money (Lehr 1988a: 334, 344; see also Kalda 2013, this volume).

Another inhabitant of the water world, a supernatural being ascribed to Polish and Slavonic folk beliefs, was called a water nymph (*rusałka)*. Genetically, it belongs to the same category as the water demon, as they both are born from the soul of an individual who died a tragic death. Nevertheless, treating a *rusałka* as similar to the water demon seems to be an unjustified overinterpretation in spite of their similar origin. As it was pointed out by Witold Klinger (1949: 15) and later by Stanisław Urbańczyk, the name *rusałka* was originally unknown among Polish people, although as Urbańczyk claims, the Slavs most likely did believe in demons arising from the souls of maidens (Urbańczyk 1991: 52–53). According to Brückner (1985: 306), an early counterpart of the *rusałka* might have been the Slavonic nymphs living on the banks, in trees, mountains, springs and water, called *brzeginie* or *wiły*. Brückner (*ibid.*: 306–307) sees traces of the *brzeginia* in the Polish wild woman (*dziwożona*)[9] that appeared solely in the folk tales of the Podhale region (the mountainous region of south Poland). Without entering into polemics with the author above, I am basing my observations on the data evident in the literature on the subject and the analysis of material I have collected. According to this, *dziwożony* had little in common with water. In my opinion, regardless of whether they are located on the banks of mountain streams, in forests or mountains, or whether they are fond of dancing or stealing children, including these beings in the category of water demons is not justified.

Male aquatic spirits (*wodniki*)

The etymology of the first group of water demons points not only to their association with water. It may also be a clue suggesting that at some time in the past, there existed a supernatural being whose rank was much higher than that of a demon, namely an old deity, a ruler of water, or a water spirit – a personified essence of the element of water. This type of a variant is found in old dictionaries, as well as in numerous papers on folk demonology. Under the heading *wodnik*, the authors of the pre-World War II "Dictionary of the Polish language" provided an unambiguous explanation: 'water deity, water spirit' (Karłowicz & Kryński & Niedźwiedzki 1919: 673). In turn, Tadeusz Wróblewski,

[9] In Polish folklore, the semantics of the name *dziwożona* is derived from the etymology of the Polonised Slovak term *diva žena* = *dzika kobieta* = wild woman. In the Polish language, the equivalent of *dzivo* is the dialectal term *dziwy* = wild (Moszyński 1967: 682).

while analysing the rich folklore of Wielkopolska (central Poland), was of the opinion that the dual nature of belief in water demons preserved traces pointing to a continuation of primitive animistic notions of pagan aquatic deities that ruled the waters (Wróblewski 1967: 442). This is also supported by statements of Henryk Biegeleisen about the world of folk demonic beliefs (1929: 514–540). Biegeleisen writes that *wodniki* or aquatic men (*ludzie wodni*) are characterised by the properties of the element of water. He also emphasises their being the rulers of the waters. While presenting the properties of these beings, the author clearly stresses that water spirits were the personification of the element of water (*ibid.*: 522). In these statements, two issues become apparent. One of them may confirm the assumption of a different primary genesis of these beings because it refers to an anthropomorphic presentation of water: they are "the rulers of water". The other is in my opinion associated with the fact that there is a separate category of aquatic men, treated by Biegeleisen as a synonym of *wodniki*. Apart from the name, found solely in the Mazury region (north-central Poland), which might suggest the past existence of a different kind of supernatural water beings, there is no other evidence to support such an opinion. I am mentioning the fact because outside the circle of the Slavonic culture, beliefs in aquatic men dwelling in underwater world existed as well[10].

In the two basic types I have distinguished (an "aquatic man" and a "drowner", or *wodnik* and *topielec*), the former seems to be an older form of belief, rarely encountered either in the literature or in folk tales. This may be supported by its origin in an unidentified spirit, also seen in the name. It is confirmed by statements contained in folklore records, mostly from the area of south-west and north-east Poland, where aquatic men are defined as "primeval spirits, rulers of the water" (Koczwara 1911: 70); "a spirit dragged him into water" (Arch. III/1).

Wodnik (the aquatic man) lived in an elaborate palace built of water or – in other versions – crystal (Przywara & Pośpiech & Pośpiech 1967: 24). The dwelling place of the Kaszubian *podlodńik* was an ice palace heated with ice. His presence was demonstrated by air bubbles rising from the blowhole. He fed on fish and frogs, but he also ate children (Dźwigoł 2004: 167). Outside the Kaszuby region, no such variant was observed. In other Polish regions, the *wodnik* was reputed to pull people into water as a kind of an offering to himself (Szyfer 1976: 429). He did it in order to acquire human souls, which he kept in tightly closed upside-down pots. The souls held captured in the underwater realm could only be released by a man who would dare to venture under the

[10] Fairy tales and folk tales originating from various cultures provide information on the so-called sea men, beings similar to human beings but not entirely human due to some body-deformities and the fact that they lived under water. Such motifs, derived from Celtic folklore, are preserved in their purest forms in Ireland and Bretagne (Drapella 1976: 153–161).

water. The souls of innocent drowners[11] were represented as white doves. The motif of a soul depicted as a bird undoubtedly points to its zoomorphic origins, while the demon is in the role of an overseer and decision-maker with respect to the souls, thus attributing him a higher rank in the hierarchy of supernatural beings compared to a drowner (Krzyżanowski 1965: 417; Biegeleisen 1929: 522; Gaj-Piotrowski 1993: 149). The *wodnik* allegedly possessed a magical wand, with which he caused the water to part, and when he moved (even without using the wand), water was replaced by dry land. His rule over the world of men lasted – as in the case of demons in general – until the first crowing of a rooster (Biegeleisen 1929: 522).

Drowners (*topielcy*)

The most common and versatile group in folk belief is the drowners (*topielcy)*. In numerous variants of such beliefs, their common origin is the metamorphosis of the human soul after death. This was said to happen after their death in water: an unfortunate accident, suicide, or being an alleged victim of a water-dwelling demon. In all cases, the consequence of drowning was the "birth" of a demon. People believed that "the soul of a man that drowned became a drowner" (Arch. I/1), similarly as it happened when a man plunged into water with the intent to take his life: "if one drowned, one became the drowner" (Arch. II/1).

The motif of demon originating from the soul of an individual who died a violent death or died during mediatory time (i.e. rites of passage) is a characteristic property of numerous demonic beliefs. In the folk view, an unnatural death always triggered negative consequences. It disturbed the natural course of the life cycle, destroyed the order and homeostasis established at the beginning of the world. A similar situation occurred when death struck individuals who were prevented from fulfilling their role in life as their existence was suddenly and violently interrupted, especially if it occurred during the mythical transition from one state to another (children who passed away before baptism, bachelors and maids who died before the ceremony of marriage). The singularity of such an event and their suspension between the two worlds did not allow their souls to depart in peace. They roamed the world of humans as demons, awaiting salvation. Such beings also included water-dwelling creatures. Thus, their origin should be considered from three cognitive perspectives: mythical, religious and lay. These aspects explain the association between water and man, water and soul, soul and demon, as well as their interrelations, dependencies and consequences resulting from an after-death transformation.

[11] The notion of "innocent drowners" represents a variant of the theme, which emphasises that only the soul of a sinless man is transformed into a white dove.

Both in cosmology and anthropology, immersion in water – according to Mircea Eliade – is not the ultimate destruction, but a peculiar transformation. It is a momentary return to indeterminacy, followed by a rebirth of a new life or a new human being, depending on the aspect under consideration, be it cosmic, biological or soteriological (1998: 178). This may also provide a key to understanding the set of beliefs accompanying the alleged "birth" of demonic beings. An example here may be found in beliefs common in the 17th century, preserved until today. In keeping with these beliefs, the soul of a child born out of wedlock and drowned by its mother was transformed into a demon who grows under water for seven years and then his development is arrested. The same happens to a foetus after a pregnant woman commits suicide (Poniatowski 1932: 267). Thus, water, irrespective of its destructive properties, possessed the power of creation. Subsequent layers of religious beliefs relate the penance of damned souls with the element of water: "there, in that water, is hell" (Arch. II/1). Tradition portrays water as comparable to the land of death, complete with purgatory or hell. The souls of victims might stay in water forever or try to attain salvation following a prior metamorphosis of their souls and finding a replacement who will take their place.

The contents of folk tales show the adopted, unambiguous interpretation of one of the religious canons (the sacrament of baptism), through which the causes of a metamorphosis of a soul into an aquatic demon are explained. An unbaptised soul was believed to be exposed to influences of the evil spirit. The sacred power vested in water during the ceremony of baptism is not only a ritual of introducing the child to the religious community, but also cleansing the child of the original sin through purification with water. The ritual is in a way an initiation death[12], it is necessary for the child so that it can exist in the sacral dimension and its soul can be protected. The consequences of failing to be baptised were illustrated by the assumed fate of a drowned pregnant woman: "a maid that was not alone [was pregnant] when she drowned, there you had a drowner" (Arch. I/1); "an unbaptised child [...] this became a drowner. This is what they said in old times; now they say it is an evil spirit" (Arch. II/2); "drowners are the children of these mothers [...] that drown when pregnant [...] both married and unmarried. If the child was not baptised... that this was the most important, that the child was unbaptised" (Arch. I/2).

Staying in the framework of the theological interpretation, we should add that the adults who drowned by accident or committed suicide, drowning their souls, also underwent the same pattern of transformations as did unbaptised children, despite of the fact that the said adult victims had been baptised. After

[12] Understood here as the death of the soul with the original sin, and a subsequent birth of the purity of the soul.

such death, transformation was justified by the fact that the deceased did not receive the Last Rites before death (presently the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick). On the other hand, taking one's life, considered a mortal sin in the Catholic Church, condemned the individual to eternal damnation; "he had to suffer heavy penance in the depth of water for his sins and for the reckless loss of his life" (Dekowski 1987: 132). People also believed that the soul of a child that had been cursed by its mother or was simply evil (meaning sinful) turned into a drowner (variants from central Poland, see e.g. Baranowski 1981: 85–86).

In the folk tradition, these topics which I have described as variants usually filled with religious allusions are very strongly represented. The supernatural beings are classified into a common category of devils or evil beings. As a consequence, a systematic blurring of category borders between demons with respect to terminology and morphology occurred, which implies a superimposition of permanently contaminated contents of beliefs. Hence, in some beliefs, an aquatic demon is a representation of a devil or is directly believed to be a devil (Szyfer 1976: 428).

In the Silesia region, among numerous individual names that denote an aquatic demon, such as *Utopek, Rarek, Jędra, Iwan*, the latter, similarly to the name *Rokita,* are common Polish terms denoting the devil (Dźwigoł 2004: 174). In other regions, the name of an aquatic devil (*diabeł wodny*) or evil spirit (*zły duch*; Baranowski 1981: 82; Szyfer 1976: 428) also appears. This peculiar terminology may be regarded as a borrowing of the very name that was given to an aquatic demon or as a reference to the place where such a being stayed. Nevertheless, at times, the term "evil spirit" – *Jaroszek* – occurs independently of the name "drowner" (*topielec*), indicating a different being that is equal to the devil (Koczwara 1911: 70). A stronger argument in favour of the transference of religious contents into folklore (and its subsequent transformation) is found in tales directly equating an aquatic demon with a devil living in water: "they said he was a devil, that this was a drowner" (Arch. II/1); "it is an evil spirit" (Arch. II/2). Justification can be found in the most representative motif that indicates the Biblical origin of the devil: the devil as a fallen angel. People living along the Raba river (southern Poland) believed that "the drowners were the haughty angels who – thrown out from Heaven – dropped into water, where they stay to this very day"; or "they come from the evil angels who – headed by Lucifer – revolted against God" (Biegeleisen 1929: 521). Similarly, in northern Poland, people believed that in their original genesis, aquatic demons were Satans expelled from Heaven (Koczwara 1911: 70).

Traditional folk tales that provide descriptions of the drowner list the characteristics of the physical and mental properties typical of the demonic beings. Sometimes they look like they did at the moment of death. In beliefs originat-

ing from northern regions of Poland, the drowners dwelling in the Baltic Sea boasted a green beard and long, green hair, similar to sea grass (B.W.K. 1893: 394). The drowner was also imagined as a monster with a very large, tousle-haired head, hirsute body and long limbs, thin, as if in someone afflicted with consumption (central Poland; see e.g. Dekowski 1987: 132).

In other regions of Poland, the descriptions are more detailed and relatively uniform. The demon was portrayed as short, wearing a red tunic and a red hat or, – as for example in the Silesia region, – having green hair and garments of the same colour. The red colour, characteristic of demonic beings, appeared side by side with green, standing for the colour of the element, thus emphasising its association with the demon. The association was also demonstrated in his ever-wet garments or – as in other variants – in his wet elbow or water trickling from his ear. His hair was interwoven with seaweed, his face black or bluish-red, his skin always cold and clammy – all of which stressed his otherness and alien character (Gaj-Piotrowski1993: 143; Baranowski 1981: 87).

In addition to the above-mentioned features, the demonic elements in the physical appearance of the drowner were horse hoofs or goosefeet instead of human legs. His fingers ended with long claws. Sometimes (in sporadic descriptions) he was presented similarly to the devil. In this version, he was a small, totally black creature who wore a top hat and a frock coat, and had exceptionally thick legs. In other descriptions he was hairy as an ape (the Silesian region; Lehr 1988a: 334–335). At times, he changed into a "naked, bluish-red female with webbed hands" (Gaj-Piotrowski 1993: 144). We could give countless examples of the descriptions of the demon since these are abundant in folklore (Morcinek 1962: 134; Simonides & Ligęza 1973: 65, 79, 83). I have emphasised here the most significant and common elements only. Atypical descriptions of the drowner's appearance combine anthropomorphic and zoomorphic properties: "half-fish – half-man", "man-frog" (Szyfer 1976: 428; Lehr 1988a: 335). On the other hand, zoomorphic representations are numerous, while amorphic portrayals are rather sporadic (Lehr 1988a: 335–336; Dekowski 1987: 134). In spite of the extraordinary physical strength that characterised the demon, he was believed to be afraid of thunderbolts. His fear of lightning – as explained by Moszyński (1967: 643) – resulted from his belief that thunder can kill water creatures. This belief, although rare in folk tales, was registered by the present author in the Beskid Śląski region (southern Poland) as a ban on using the word "thunderbolt" in a curse: "in order not to evoke the drowner's anger, one is not allowed to curse near the water and in particular to summon thunderbolts", or to call the drowner a "diabolical Antichrist" (Lehr 1983: 530).

Aquatic demons, as many other supernatural creatures, were attracted to moonlight. The drowners were active at night, especially with the moonlit

cloudless sky. They were fond of sitting in a haystack or on a river bank, sewing shoes or drying themselves in the moonlight. In some stories, the drowner allegedly addressed the moon in the following way: "Shine, God, I am sewing a shoe, when I am done, I will go away" or said: "Shine, moon, shine, I need the light, I am sewing a shoe that a woman needs for tomorrow's churching"[13], etc. (Simonides & Ligęza 1973: 65; Simonides 1977: 138). Also when the drowner was suddenly attacked by a human being, he would address the attacker grudgingly: "Shine, shine, you'd rather shine than beat me" (Lehr 1983: 53). The moon exerted an irresistible effect on demons in general. It lured aquatic demons out of water and incited them to activity, even outright fidgetiness. Polish folklore and literature report some variants of stories where aquatic demons satisfy their hunger with pale moon rays (Bartmiński & Niebrzegowska1996: 167). The belief that the drowner is dependent on the moon is present in folk beliefs among all Slavonic people. In the old Slavonic culture, the moon was associated with the night, earth, water and death; it was also an object of cult. In folk beliefs, the moon was regarded as the god of aquatic demons (Bartmiński & Niebrzegowska 1996: 159; Biegeleisen 1929: 525). Such demons would often speak to the moon, calling it *Błyszcz* or *Błyszczaty* ('Shine', 'Shiner'), calling on it: "Shine, God!". The moon, belonging to the world of the dead, revived them with their light. Possibly the power of creation attributed to the moon, with water as a contributing force, made it the god of aquatic demons. In the opinion of Moszyński (1967: 643), we cannot rule out the fact that such fragmentary information may obscure some "deeper mythical nodes, placing some demons into dependence from the moon as they represent the world of the dead"; such nodes, as he claims, cannot be untangled solely on the basis of Slavonic and related materials.

The fact that the aquatic demon originates from a soul that did not repent and came into being due to an unnatural death of its owner determines the function of the demon in the human world. Their function was reduced to acquiring a replacement – finding another victim was a prerequisite for the demon to complete his penance in the present incarnation.

The gravest danger of an attack by a drowner was faced by individuals whose work was associated with water, i.e. rafters, barge fishermen or boatmen. The drowner also harassed – although to a lesser degree – farmers, children and women. He ambushed people passing by water basins and, taking advantage of his extraordinary strength and cunning, pulled them into water. Imitating human voice, he called on passers-by or lured them by crying like a child. Al-

[13] Churching (*wywód*) used to be a religious ceremony, observed usually forty days (or six weeks) after the birth of the child. It ended the lying-in period and at the same time the so-called period of "impurity". Nowadays, it has features of a lay ceremony and is considered a kind of purification (Bystroń 1916: 66–68; see also Gennep 2006: 68).

ternatively, he also rattled chains, made banging sounds, clapped his hands or imitated the sound of a working mill. He deceived his victims by offering to show them an alternate route, usually leading them straight into water. He pointed their attention at various objects on the water surface (as the nature of this object varied on the gender and age of the victim). Such mirages were the objects of desire of the would-be victims, a projection of their dreams. And thus, young children were tempted with flowers and ribbons; women and maidens with beads or pearls on string; men with watches, etc. (Lehr 1988a: 337, 339). In folk tales originating from central Poland, the drowner scattered red balls similar to crab apples on water surface; whoever reached out to grasp them, immediately sank under water (Dekowski 1987: 134–135). If the victim was tardy, the drowner was allegedly heard saying impatiently: "I have been waiting for half an hour and he is not here, ten minutes passed and he is not here, another ten minutes passed and he is not here" (Lehr 1983: 52).

Taking advantage of his demonic properties, he changed his shape, becoming for example a beautiful horse that, when mounted by the victim, led the unfortunate into water. He also assumed the appearance of a child in order to take advantage of good-hearted women passing by. He dragged them into water when they incautiously picked up the crying child. He sometimes changed into a giant fish, frog, crayfish, a splendid duck with a golden bill, a ram or a pig (Broda 1980: 16–20; Simonides & Ligęza 1973: 61, 66; Dekowski 1987: 131–135; Baranowski 1981: 84–90). Sometimes, he sprang out from nowhere, walking alongside a man returning home in the middle of the night, assuming the appearance of an acquaintance or a neighbour (generally, this was a deceased individual) and before the victim realised that he was tricked, he was thrown down from the bridge into the river (Lehr 1988a: 339).

A hostile attitude, even hate towards humans also resulted from envy, since the life of the demon (who used to be a human being) was suddenly interrupted by humans. Thus he took vengeance for being hit with a stone or pushed off from the oar, or for his peace being disturbed when a blessed piece of bone was dropped into the pond or lake where he dwelled. He hated being taunted or summoned only for people to see whether he really existed. He also punished people when they refused to help him or lend him some object, or else rebelled against his will, just like a farmer who refused to give the drowner his daughter's hand in marriage, in retaliation for which the demon dragged the daughter into water (or, in another version of the tale, set a mill on fire). To take revenge for being pushed off from a bridge, the drowner killed a shepherd by pulling him under water; he did likewise with a boy who was herding cows, with a man who killed his son with a whip, or with a farmhand who smeared the drowner's red cap with horse dung, or another one who in jest treated him to a pipe filled

with horse hair (Lehr 1988a: 338). He played tricks on people, urging them to swap a pipe, a hat or a walking stick with him. Then, the pipe turned into a toad's leg, the hat into a shabby straw doormat, and the walking stick into a common moss-covered cane with tangled roots (Broda 1980: 19). He was also into mischief: he knocked over stacks of hay, ate peas growing in the fields and generally tried to scare people (Lehr 1983: 51; Brylak 1970: 288).

The drowner's demonic origin forced him to be cruel and tenacious. Such was the nature of the demon in old beliefs and folk tradition, but later the image of the drowner was influenced increasingly by Christianity. After some time, his demonic features and properties disappeared, especially when the drowner started to be perceived as an aquatic devil or merely a devil that could be outwitted and overcome. Thus, people began to distinguish between two kinds of drowners – the good and the bad ones. The former caught fish for people, helped them to haul hay from the field, and warned them against storms and hail. The bad ones drowned people to acquire their souls, often attacking drunkards and girls of loose morals (Pełka 1987: 116).

The drowner, portrayed in folk tales as an anthropomorphised being, manifested also some human feelings and weaknesses. Sometimes he showed too much trust in human beings. A group of folk tales that emphasised the "human" aspects of the demon display the motif of his fondness for music (Malinowski 1901: 11; Jaworska 1973: 153).

Similarly to human beings, the demon led an ordinary human life. He frequented country fairs and country inns. He was believed to be a sociable and even friendly creature. Silesian tales mention him as being a godfather or lending money to people. At the time of autumn floods, he would get married and throw a wedding feast, inviting neighbouring drowner families; this was a bustling occasion. His children were distinguished by extraordinary beauty, in no way indicating their demonic origin (Lehr 1988a: 344).

The effect of religious thought on the notion of good and evil (in this case represented by an aquatic demon equated with the powers of darkness – an evil spirit) was clearly manifested in the defensive and protective charms implemented against the creature. Verbal and non-verbal apotropaic measures (like prohibitions, offerings and other formulas) were used, handed down from generation to generation.

The ban on bathing in water, valid until June 24 (St. John's Day) was associated with a belief that Saint John "baptised" or blessed all water in rivers and ponds, and therefore they become safe starting from this day (Gaj-Piotrowski 1993: 148). The ban was also exercised on Palm Sunday (since on that day the demons allegedly took a bath), as well as on St. Peter's Day (June 29) and on the feast of the Ascension (August 15). There were also some fixed dates before

or after these days when bathing was forbidden. In addition to the feast of St. John, such days included St. Rosalie's Day (September 5; celebrated in the Mazowsze region, central-eastern Poland; Baranowski 1981: 86; Broda 1980: 23). One was not supposed to enter water in the period between Easter and Whitsunday – at that time, the soil needed to stay damp to keep the grains growing. Water, ruled by aquatic demons, is needed for irrigation, and thus disturbing the demons at that time was forbidden (Zadrożyńska 1985: 119).

As one method of protecting oneself against the attack of the drowner in contemporary times, small coins are thrown into water which are "payment so that he would not take us" (Arch. II/1). This is equivalent to offerings made to aquatic demons in the old days, for example in north-eastern Poland as late as in the late 19th century: "There was a belief that in one of the big lakes near Augustów, somebody had to drown every year; in order to prevent this from happening, a hen would be thrown into the depths of the lake for the drowners" (Moszyński 1967: 681). Some also believed that until St. John's Day, the drowner was to be offered sacrifice of one or three people. Later, animals started to be offered as sacrifices (Biegeleisen 1929: 527).

The formulas reputed to protect best against the drowners were prayers, with the Angelus being the most important of these. One could also pray for the souls of the deceased, or by summoning the saints or the Lord for help (Lehr 1988a: 342).

In common beliefs, various types of apotropaic objects or signs were believed to be protective measures against the drowner. The first group of these included objects of religious devotion and veneration: a rosary, a medallion, holy water, a blessed stole. People made the sign of the cross before entering water and bathed with a cross or a medallion around the neck. Religious attributes, i.e. blessed objects that symbolised God's protection, were regarded extremely effective. If attacked by the drowner, a man was advised to throw a rosary at him; allegedly, this object evoked a burning sensation and the drowner would abandon his idea of drowning his victim. A blessed stole left on a haystack on which the demon liked to rest at night restricted his freedom and did not let him escape. In order to drive the drowners away from the rivers and ponds where they dwelled, the surface was sprinkled with holy water (Simonides & Ligęza 1973: 74).

Another group of magical attributes were apotropaic plants, including lady's bedstraw (*Galium vernum Scop.*) and bladdernut (*Staphylea pinnata L.*). Plants believed to be medicinal and at the same time having magical powers were carried along in order to avoid death inflicted by the drowner. In magical practices, lime tree (*Tilia platyphyllos Scop.*) was also commonly employed, since it was

believed to be a holy tree[14]. A bit or a rope made of lime phloem was thrown on a demon to change it into a horse, while hitting the demon with a lime-tree stick could save a person from being dragged into water (Lehr 1988a: 341).

Numerous beliefs emphasised that there was no effective method of protecting oneself against the drowner. If someone was destined to die by drowning, he could not escape such destiny, even when the person stigmatised with the mark of death avoided bodies of water and did not succumb to their irresistible attraction (Pełka 1987: 116–117, 119). There was also a contrary belief stating that not only could a human harassed by demon be saved from his fate, but also the very demon could be relieved of his penance. It was enough to ask the drowner what he needed and then grant his request, which – as it was believed – resulted in releasing the human soul captured in the body of the demon, whereas the drowner vanished forever.

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The presented variants of motifs describing aquatic demons (today only an echo of the mythical memory) indicate a clear evolution of notions associated with these creatures, transformed from water spirits into water maidens, aquatic spirits, drowners, and subsequently to aquatic devils and tamed devilish creatures. Traditional culture or folk culture was most abundant in such phenomena belonging to the spiritual world. This was further maintained by the isolation between the upper classes and the villagers, the latter of whom existed as if on the margins of the social life, immersed in the world of their own notions and beliefs. The rural world view, handed over from generation to generation, was characterised by a relatively distinct Christian-magical syncretism; a manifestation of a special type of folk philosophy. This carried on until as late as the beginning of the 20th century (one could even risk stating until mid-20th century). This was a philosophy that explained natural phenomena and provided models of behaviour in space and time marked by the *sacrum* and *profanum* (Lehr 1984; 1988b). The perception of reality reflected the creation of mutually complementary parallel worlds, one of them real and the other transcendental. The latter was populated with supernatural beings, creatures ascribed with diversified powers (both good and evil), acting as middlemen between the two qualitatively different realities: the divine and the human reality, the world of the living and the world of the dead. The transcendental world is gone, but it has left a permanent mark in folk traditions, folk tales and fairy tales – the elements of the Polish cultural heritage.

[14] The sacred character of the tree was a reflection of the belief that Virgin Mary lived inside it and thus all objects made of lime-tree acquired sacred properties (Moszyński 1967: 529–530).

Archive records

I/1 – village Obidza (Region of Beskid Sądecki), Archive of Kraków's Ethnographical Section, Institute Archeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, catalogue number: 1512/76[15] Arch.

I/2 – village Łącko (Region of Beskid Sądecki), APE IAE PAN: 1575/78 Arch.

II/1 – village Istebna (Region of Beskid Śląski), APE IAE PAN: 1556/77 Arch.

II/2 – village Brenna (Region of Beskid Śląski), APE IAE PAN: 1597/79 Arch.

III/1 – village Sól (Region of Żywiec), APE IAE PAN: 1697/86 Arch.

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[15] The shorter form of recording archived materials is as follows: APE IAE PAN.

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