“Unkempt Attire Does Not Befit Us”. How Polish Identity Was Demonstrated Through Clothing

Abstract

There are very few European countries with a tradition of national costume. Local, folk, and regional costumes are common. One can even define an outfit topographically in terms of its historical features. However, national dress, which is the identifying mark of a country, a symbol of national identity, well-established through centuries of tradition, is a rather unique phenomenon. Although in several instances the emergence of national attire has an older history (for example, in Switzerland, Spain or Denmark, the trends have been noticeable since the 18th century, while Gustav III in Sweden in 1778 promulgated a decree on the wearing of national costumes), the greatest explosion of trends to promote national attire occurred in the 19th century. This is related to the widespread national or national liberation tendencies that swept through Europe during this period. Nineteenth-century aspirations to return to some fashion, to look for historical designs or to create national costumes took place especially in smaller countries (or those that did not exist on the maps at the time), which wanted to preserve and assert national identity in this way.
From this point of view, it will be interesting to look at the tradition of promoting patriotic and national liberation ideas through clothing in the Polish lands.

**Keywords**

the kontusz, national costume, national mourning, black dress, Krakow costume

Besides the obvious function of protection from the weather, clothing also has a semantic significance and function: it is a sign, a message, a symbol, sometimes a declaration, etc. Communicating specific messages through clothing may or may not be intentional, but it is always embedded in a cultural, religious or social context. It should also be noted that both the entire garment and its individual elements, such as color, jewelry, hairstyle, etc., can have a semantic character.

This function has been used time and again over the centuries to convey religious, political, social or patriotic messages. In the latter case, clothing, which could be observed on the streets of Polish cities through the centuries, shows a certain uniqueness. National and patriotic beliefs were manifested through clothing in many corners of Europe and the world, but on Polish soil this tradition had a long history and widespread influence (Biedrońska-Słota, Molenda, 2023; Rotter, 2017; Rotter, 2023).

One of the forms of manifesting one’s beliefs was wearing the so-called “national costume” during important ceremonies (social, national, religious, as well as completely private). The kontusz and żupan are widely regarded as such in Poland. This outfit is often referred to as the attire of the nobility, but it should be remembered that the kontusz was worn by kings, magnates and nobility as well as by urban patricians (Wolska, 1998; Turnau, 1967; Rotter 2023).

It was also worn as a ceremonial garment and to symbolize membership in fraternity structures, by the Longbow Fraternities both in the period before independence and between the wars. During World War II, the Brothers often kept it as a relic. After
the war ended, they continued to protect it – this time from the communist government, which saw the kontusz as a symbol of the “rotten bourgeoisie.” The custom of using the “kontusz costume” in the so-called longbow fraternities has survived to this day (Rotter, 2012b, pp. 119–140; Rotter, 2012a).

During World War II, longbow brothers actively participated in the defense of the Fatherland. Many of them sacrificed their lives. They suffered death at the hands of the occupying army in concentration camps and gulags, in street executions, and in the Gestapo and NKVD’s execution houses. Many died in partisan battles and on the Western and Eastern fronts.

After the war, the communist regime banned the reconstruction of fraternity structures in Poland and the assets of the fraternities were nationalized. The use of fraternity garb, especially the kontusz, was also banned. Only the Krakow fraternity can boast of uninterrupted operation. The chance to rebuild fraternities in the Polish lands only occurred in the 1990s. Thus, a number of brotherhoods, especially in central and northern Poland, are resuming their activities by returning to their proud traditions. Precious documents, banners, and fraternity insignias, which have so far been carefully kept by members of pre-war fraternities who are still alive, or by their families, are coming to light (Gwóźdź, 2008).

The żupan is the principal item of clothing that is generally recognized as traditional Polish attire. It became common in the Polish lands in the 16th century, although the name itself crystallized only at the end of that century. It could be worn as both an undergarment and an outer garment, with the latter being worn in less formal situations. It was possible, for example, to wear the żupan in the privacy of one’s home and even to receive unannounced guests dressed this way. According to eastern customs, the right half of the counterpart of żupan was placed over the left half (Rotter, 2011; Bartkiewicz, 1974; Turnau, 1991).

The kontusz, for example, could serve as an outer garment. In Polish culture, since it appeared at the beginning of the 17th century, it has become known as the most recognizable, representative and most popular attire. The cut is the most characteristic element of the kontusz. While the sleeves (openings), which are slit at the
front and thrown back, are commonly believed to be the trademark of the kontusz, they were not its exclusive feature, but were also found in other garments, always constituting a highly decorative element. Instead, the kontusz features a one-piece back in the form of a vertical stripe, and flared sides sewn to it, gathered in folds at the waistline. The kontusz could be lined with fur or have decorative frogs, but was always about mid-calf length. It had no buttons, and therefore needed to be tied with a sash (Biedrońska-Słotowa, 1986; Tyszycka, 1995; Jeziorkowski, T., Jeziorkowski, A., 1992; Biedrońska-Słota, Molenda, 2023; Turnau, 1991).

The czamara decorated with frogs and buttons was another type of outer garment. In the 18th century, this attire, which had a tradition of being worn in Poland for several hundred years, was commonly worn and considered to be the national Polish dress on a par with the kontusz. The role of the czamara increased especially after 1863 when it functioned as an insurgent garment. People who wore it, even if they were not directly associated with the uprising, were seen to display patriotic feelings (Czamary, 1861; Gutkowska-Rychlewska, 1968; Sieradzka, 2003; Zachuta, 1992).

Undeniably, however, it was the kontusz that made the greatest “career” and became known as the national costume of Poland. In 1776, a law was passed defining the manner of dress of all social classes. It also addressed the attire that the nobility should wear when acting as representatives of the regions at sejmiks and during public speeches. The regional uniform otherwise known as the uniform kontusz was instituted. Admittedly, the law did not say that it absolutely had to be a kontusz, but it was the one that emerged somewhat naturally as the standard cut of the regional uniform. In 1777, the colors of regional uniforms were precisely defined. Those colors began to be used (not always universally and not without some resistance) in the kontusz outfit. However, the alternative was to use the same colors in other garments. Thus, it was more the color than the cut that consequently became a distinguishing mark for representatives of certain provinces. By design, the introduction of a distinctive uniform was a clear use of the outfit for a symbolic message. True, at first due to the ornaments that were gradually introduced and the splendor of uniforms the symbol was not clearly
legible, but the law of 1780 was quite effective in curbing the urge for superfluity.\(^1\)

During the partition period, wearing a kontusz became a substitute for Polishness. However, it was not entirely possible in all three partitions. Injunctions issued by the authorities in the Russian partition prohibited wearing this outfit. Sometimes Polish people tried to bypass this ban but only during family celebrations. In Galicia, on the other hand, the kontusz was worn readily and universally, especially after the tsarist bans in the neighboring partition were issued. To a certain degree, this was justified by the social battle waged since the 18th century between the tradition of wearing clothes in the Polish style (i.e., the kontusz) and shorter and tighter men’s clothing from the West. It was thought that a man who dons an ultra-tight culotte, wears his hair too long and shaves his beard is incapable of defending his homeland. He also upsets the natural division between the sexes with such attire: in that period and in that social perception, long hair was an exclusive female attribute, while removing facial hair (that is, an attribute of masculinity) only solidified the “effeminate” overtones of the entire outfit. With changing fashions throughout Europe, however, from the 19th century onward, the kontusz ceased to be an everyday garment and became more of a formal outfit, but one still readily worn during moments of importance for the nation, country, society or family, invariably performing, of course, the important function of a symbol (Woźnowski, 1971, pp. 27–47; Turnau, 1991, p. 161; Sieradzka, 1992, pp. 96–105; Nalewajska, 2010, pp. 177–183, Orlińska-Mianowska, 2012, pp. 211–219).

Landowners in particular felt obliged to wear it during major events and national and historical celebrations. This was the case, for example, during the celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald. These celebrations were announced in Marian Dubiecki’s article in the pages of Czas in 1902. Soon the National Committee for the Celebration of the Grunwald Anniversary was set up. The Grunwald Congress in Krakow took place from

July 15 to July 17, 1910, and all the accompanying events (such as the unveiling of the Grunwald monument in Matejko Square) were an opportunity to manifest Polish nationality and aspirations for liberation (Kongres..., 2000). This is how Kinga née Trzecieska Moysowa remembers her father at the anniversary celebration:

He was wearing a żupan made of silver silk fabric, a dark blue kontusz with sleeves of white satin, a red Marocco leather shoes, a beautiful belt and a delia coat with a sable collar and matching calpack. He looked dashing in it and wore this lovely outfit well. ... The last time I saw him speaking to the crowd was at the celebration of the 500-year anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald on July 14, 1910, in the market square in Dynów, when the monument to King Władysław Jagiełło, which still stands there, was unveiled. He was wearing the beautiful kontusz in the colors of the Sanok region at the time, which I described earlier here (Moysowa of Trzecieski, 1954).

Kontuszes were also seen during the festivities marking the 250th anniversary of the relief of Vienna at Kahlenberg on September 13, 1933. The same was true during religious ceremonies. In 1938, during the celebrations associated with the restoration of the relics of St. Andrew Bobola, Andrzej Lubomirski appeared in a tasteful kontusz. It should be noted at this point that religious celebrations, especially in Galicia, often took the form of special patriotic manifestations. Anniversaries were cherished and celebrated with all diligence. The traditions of wearing the kontusz were upheld on these occasions, and became a demonstration of Polish identity (Estreicher, 1932, p. 17; Estreicher, 2012; Krzywka, 1984, pp. 65–79; Rotter, Legutko, 2023).

The greatest “explosion” of Polish people manifesting their beliefs and patriotism through clothing took place between 1861 and 1866, i.e., during the time of national mourning after the Uprising, but it should be noted that such a way of defining oneself was practiced in the Polish lands much earlier, and many years later as well. Besides the national costume, Poles also demonstrated their beliefs by wearing mourning attire (or in some circumstances white attire, which was a symbol of hope for freedom). They dressed this way widely across the country and throughout the five years of national
mourning. The ubiquity of black clothes on the streets of cities and villages did not subside even despite the restrictions and prohibitions of the partitioning powers. Fashion journals and the offer of stores and showrooms followed the preferences of the “street.” “Clothing today is of such simplicity that a casual light dress [barażowa], which used to be worn every day, seems to be very ornate to us. One need not even mention silk ones, for they are not seen either in magazines or on the street” (Magazyn Mód, 1863), fashion press reported. There were also descriptions and preferences in keeping with the spirit of the times and patriotic connotations.

The skirt was smooth and long, the bodice was round without a bavette, fastened with ebony buttons, laced like a czamarka, with five thick plaited ribbons... The bodice was girdled with a Polish belt of broad black ribbon, finished with a double tassel. On top you put an almost figure-hugging fur-trimmed coat, rounded at the bottom, open at the top just enough not to cover the decorative fastening; at the waist, it only fastened with four ebony buttons. The front was decorated with pleats of black fabric, and the same pleat went around it. The straight long sleeves with slits, trimmed with silk cuffs, were made in such a way that they could be put on or thrown back at will (Magazyn Mód, 1861).

But the same magazine from the same year also reports:

Speaking of mourning clothes, let us add one remark here. In our opinion, mourning clothes should be characterized by great simplicity and solemnity. If grace is an indispensable requirement in a woman’s attire, mourning must not preclude it; but nonetheless, grace does not consist in artificial contrivances and ornaments, which clothes expressing profound suffering should be free from (Magazyn Mód, 1861).

The authorities of the partitioning powers strove to eliminate this popular demonstration in various ways. This was proving challenging, however, as Victorian fashion was prevalent throughout Europe during this period, so black clothing was simply preferred and considered fashionable. The Kurjer Warszawski of November 2, 1863, for example, printed the following instruction for the occasion:
The hat should be colorful, but if it is black, it should be decorated with flowers or ribbons of color, but under no circumstances should it be white. Black and white feathers are prohibited with black hats. Hoods with colored lining may be black, but not white. It is forbidden to use black veils, gloves, black umbrellas and black and white umbrellas, as well as black scarves, kerchiefs, scarves and neck wraps, as well as black dresses and black and white dresses. Capes, burnouses, furs, overcoats and other outer garments may be black, but with no white (Kurjer Warszawski, 2 November 1863).

Bypassing these prohibitions, Polish women began to incorporate purple elements into their mourning attire, which are, of course, colored – so they neutralize the possibility of restrictions, but simultaneously in Polish culture purple is the color of mourning – so they did not depart from their beliefs and manifesting them (Moźdżyńska-Nawotka).

It is worth mentioning one more costume which is a cultural phenomenon. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under the influence of the Young Poland fascinations, it became popular to manifest Polish identity using the Krakow (less often also Podhale) folk costume or outfits or costumes stylized as folk clothing. Especially people from the higher social strata would wear the so-called folk costumes. Such styling was also popular among artists. The Krakow costume was a model for dressing up for balls or sleigh rides. There was also a fashion of dressing servants in livery with a cut patterned after Krakow costumes. The fashion for Krakowian dress was associated not only with the belief that the national revival should be sought in the peasant strata; it also had its associations with the Kosciuszko tradition, i.e., the national liberation struggle. It was this version of costume that was a sign of Polishness that became the most popular after World War II. The kontusz but also, to a certain extent, the “black dress,” were not entirely politically correct. In the first case, the association with the bourgeoisie, landowners and other “enemies of the people” was too close. In the second case, the mourning was for the uprising, and the uprising, let us not forget, was against Russia... For the modern political system, the associations could be unpredictable.
The Krakow costume, on the other hand, being a folk outfit, fit into the narrative of the system. Unfortunately, on this occasion, the Krakow outfit began to be extensively abused and its original beauty was lost. Any men’s outfit began to be called Krakowian as long as it included a white shirt and a “cap with a peacock feather,” while any corset and a flower wreath was automatically defined as a Krakowian woman’s outfit (Kamocki, 1976, pp. 75–78; Kowalska-Lewicka, 1976; Burszta, 1974).

Jewelry is an integral part of an outfit. The tradition of patriotic jewelry in Poland dates back to the 18th century. Its first widespread use is associated with the Bar Confederation. For example, rings with an octagonal eye made of yarrow, which bore the inscription “Pro lege et patria” and “Pro fide et Maria” have been preserved from this period. These were slogans of the confederates rejecting the motto of the Order of the White Eagle (“Pro fide rege et lege”) (Gintowt-Dziewałtowska, 1980; Gorzkowski, 1864).

Patriotic jewelry came in many forms. Usually, these items were not ultra-expensive. Their value was rather in the sign, the symbol. Along with pendants, watches, earrings, bracelets and rings, signets and wedding rings, one could also find belt buckles, cufflinks or lapel badges. White and red bows or rosettes were also popular. A ring or wedding ring, however, occupied special importance in this type of jewelry. Since ancient times, the ring was thought to be a special element, almost a magical one. It was attributed with the power of healing, protection or power. In patriotic jewelry, the ring became a decoration for meritorious service to the fatherland, an identification sign for conspiracy organizations, as well as a national emblem, a symbol of patriotic slogans and thoughts. It was a form of commemoration of patriotic events, historical anniversaries or national aspirations. Thus, you could encounter not only rings or wedding rings with the emblem of Poland or portraits of national heroes, but also with engraved inscriptions, such as “Fides manus,” “Motherland to her defender,” “God support those faithful to the Fatherland,” “Poland is alive,” “Prince P. Józef Poniatowski” and a number of others. There is a large group of rings with symbolic motifs. Apart from the popular symbols on the rings, one could also find more covert messages. For example, the signets of secret unions.
in the 19th century had a scale or an eye, ear and mouth engraved on them as a kind of command to watch, listen and keep silent. After the November Uprising, it became fashionable to wear signet rings with a hidden compartment in which a patriotic symbol (the emblem of Poland, a symbol, such as the figure of a scytheman or some kind of maxim) was placed (Bigoszewska, 2003; Polska biżuteria patriotyczna..., 2011; Gintowt-Dziewałtowska, 1980; Gorzkowski, 1864).

National symbols, the Polish Eagle and the national colors, were the most common motif recurring in patriotic jewelry. The image of the eagle changed, of course, depending on the times, either representing the current Polish Emblem or referring to its historical forms, especially from the heyday of the Republic. In the 19th century, a shield with the emblem of Poland and Lithuania (eagle and mounted armored knight) or Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia (eagle, mounted armored knight and Archangel Michael) was also a common motif. It was quite typical to combine the image of an eagle with a motif referring to the enslavement of Poland or the struggle and hope for its liberation. This was, for example, an eagle breaking the chains or an eagle wearing a crown against a background of a cross and a laurel branch, which symbolized fame, victory, freedom, truth and peace. Motifs associated with national liberation also included shackles and chains (bracelets or necklaces in the form of a chain were often worn), a scythe (or a scytheman), which was associated with the Kosciuszko Uprising, or an anchor, which was a universal symbol of hope for victory for many centuries. Placing portraits of national heroes on jewelry was a particular display of patriotic beliefs. The image of Tadeusz Kościuszko is, of course, the most prominent of these. However, one can also find portraits of Józef Poniatowski, Jan Dąbrowski, Józef Sowiński, Adam Czartoryski, Adam Mickiewicz and even King Jan III Sobieski. Later images or initials of Józef Piłsudski could also be found (Dreścik, 2006, pp. 103–106; Dolczewscy Z., B., 2003, pp. 86–93; Bigoszewska, 2003, p. 10; Rotter, 2023, pp. 81-100).

Religious symbols were equally popular. Of course, the cross was the most common, but other symbols were also present, such as the crown of thorns, a sign of both Christ’s suffering and suffering with Him, or the palm leaf, symbolizing martyrdom. Religious symbols
relating to the Passion or martyrdom were combined with the idea of a tormented Poland and a suffering nation. Mariological symbols and images of the Virgin Mary were also a fairly common motif. As the Marian cult was very deeply rooted in the Polish lands, images of Our Lady of Czestochowa or Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn were practically considered national symbols. Quite popular were also symbols referring to the theological virtues: faith, hope and love. They usually included a cross, an anchor and a heart. It should be noted that these images referred not only to religious themes, but also to patriotic ones, e.g., hope or faith associated with the hope of regaining independence and love associated with the love of the homeland. Thus, one can easily see the inseparability and dualism of national and religious symbols, which, while being mutually complementary, convey the right symbolic message embodied in perhaps the best-known slogan “God – Honor – Homeland” (Chmielewski, 2003, pp. 80–84; Okoń, 2003, pp. 128–129; Piwocka, 2006, pp. 117–128).

After the fall of the November Uprising, jewelry with relics embedded in it became popular. An example is the crosses from Olszynka Grochowska. They were made of alder wood and delicate borders of gold or less precious metal. Most often they had an inscription, for example, “from Olszynka – February 25, 1831.” After the January Uprising, jewelry pieces that served as a type of relic also appear. They were most often made by political prisoners from the Citadel, Olomouc or by those exiled to Siberia. These were, for example, rings made of bristle with the inscription “Memento of Captivity” or “Memento of the Polish Revolution of 1863.” They could also be crosses made of wood, animal bones or even straw. The tradition of patriotic jewelry survived for decades to come, as did treating it like a relic at times. We should remember that virtually all patriotic jewelry has acquired the characteristics of relics over time. As mentioned, it was rarely materially valuable jewelry. Katyń buttons have grown to the status of a symbol. During martial law, on the other hand, resistors made a spectacular career. They were pinned to the lapels of jackets, sweaters, blouses, etc. The name “resistor” was so ambiguous and so defining of the person wearing such “jewelry” that, for example, students were punished for wearing resistors by suspension, and adults, by arrest. However, these are priceless
mementos, and many families keep them to this day to cherish the memory of their ancestors, who gave their strength, labor and even their lives for the good of the Republic (Bigoszewska, 2003, pp. 61, 109; Zblewski, 2000).

National aspirations, national liberation, and politics are usually associated with debates, deals, and struggle... But, after all, manifesting pride in tradition and history with one’s attire is equally important. It is worth remembering that by wearing national costume or even jewelry itself, one can not only demonstrate one’s national belonging but also cultivate patriotic attitudes, tradition, culture, etc. After all, this is what both women and men in the Polish lands and beyond have been doing for centuries.

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