



Erasmus+

Regionalne Centrum Edukacji  
Zawodowej in Nisko



*Folk traditions  
in Poland*





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## **Origins of folk traditions in Poland**

Each culture develops ways of ritualization of public and personal life in the form of specific holidays, rites, and customs. They become cultural symbols of a given community.

Since the earliest times, the annual folk rituals in Poland have been closely related to the change of seasons. Another factor which shaped Polish folk traditions is the fact that Poland has always been an agricultural country, so the symbols related to nature are strongly represented in our culture and customs. As time passed, the initially pagan customs, such as the celebrating of the winter solstice, were adopted by the Christian tradition and have been cultivated until today.

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# Winter



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## Christmas Eve supper

Christmas Eve supper (wieczerza wigilijna) is one of the most favourite traditions cultivated in Poland. In the past, there used to be an odd number of dishes served on that occasion. Interestingly, according to the Etymological Dictionary of the Polish Language by Aleksander Brückner, the number of dishes was related to social class: the peasants' supper consisted of 5 or 7 dishes, the gentry usually had 9, and the aristocracy 11 dishes, but finally the even number 12 was adopted to commemorate the 12 disciples. It is obligatory to try a portion of all of them. Some traditions specify that the number of guests cannot be odd. Also, there is a custom of preparing an extra seat and plate at the table for an unexpected guest. Traditionally, some hay is placed under the tablecloth during the supper.

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**Examples of dishes:  
Pierogi with cabbage  
and mushroom filling.**



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**Fried carp with potatoes**  
**Borscht with dumplings**



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## Nativity plays / Jasełka

A **Nativity play** or **Christmas pageant** is a play which recounts the story of the Nativity of Jesus. It is usually performed at Christmas, the feast of the Nativity. The creator of Christmas pageant is Saint Francis of Assisi, who put up the first performance in 1223 in Greccio. Its content were some scenes from the life of Jesus.

Many Polish schools prepare Christmas pageant before the Christmas break begins. Schoolchildren dressed in special costumes act as the human and angel characters, and often as the animals and props. The infant Jesus is sometimes represented by a doll, but also played by a real baby. All families, schoolteachers and sometimes the church community in general form the audience.

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## Jasełka



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## Jasełka performance at a church



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# Spring



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## **Drowning of the Winter Goddess**

Drowning the Winter Goddess (in Polish referred to as Marzanna) is a popular Polish tradition celebrated in spring. The celebration consists in creating a dummy which represents Marzanna. It is usually made of all kinds of rags, colorful fabrics and other materials, artificial flowers and various types of decorations. The figure is brought to a river, where it is drowned. People believe that in this way they will defeat the winter and the long-awaited spring will come.

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## **Children drowning Marzanna**



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## **Painting Easter eggs**

The custom of painting eggs was born in Persia. As far as the Slavic tradition is concerned, the oldest Easter eggs in Poland come from the end of the tenth century. In many cultures around the world, the egg is the symbol of a new life. In the process of christianization, Easter eggs were included in the elements of Easter symbolism. Painted eggs are to be a symbol of the reviving nature, and in Christianity they also refer to the faith in the resurrection of Christ.

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## Easter eggs



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## Guards at Christ's tomb / Straże wielkanocne

Another tradition related to the period of Easter is guarding the tomb of Christ. Guards, sometimes referred to as "Turks" keep watch at the tomb of Christ, assist in the ordination of water, fire and food, take part in services and processions on the first and second days of Easter. Each branch of the "Turks" has its own uniforms. In some places, uniforms are decorated with Turkish ornaments until today, and the unit is commanded by a pasha. The "Turks" costumes are characterized by high headgear, called chuks, richly decorated with tissue paper and feathers. In many places, the costumes refer to historical military uniforms. Some units wear typical Roman costumes.

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## Guards at Christ's tomb

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## **Easter Monday / Lany Poniedziałek / Śmigus-dyngus**

The custom of people pouring water on each other on Easter Monday has a long tradition in Poland. The origins of folk customs celebrated on Easter Monday are associated with the practices of the Slavs who expressed their joy after the end of winter and the arrival of spring. The custom consisted in hitting a person's legs with willow twigs and pouring cold water on each other. This symbolized the spring cleansing of dirt and disease, and later also of sin. The initially Slavic custom was later added to the Easter traditions.

Today, śmigus-dyngus is a movable holiday, treated as a folk game. In contrast to the original traditions, everyone is poured with water, even strangers in the street. The custom generally involves playing with water and it is popular especially among children and adolescents and has little to do with traditional practices.

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## Getting wet on Easter Monday



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## Pentecost / Zielone Świątki

The celebration of Pentecost (the alternative name is Whitsun or Whit Sunday) was a great opportunity to celebrate the arrival of spring. The rural population combined Pentecost with various pastoral and agricultural holidays, and some of these habits have survived to this day. Throughout Poland, the custom of decorating houses, fences and gates was widespread. The farm was usually decorated with birch twigs, and a thick layer of calamus was laid in the backyard and on the floors of cottages. The plant layer was not only to serve as spring decoration, but also protected the house from insects.

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Farmers believed that new and fresh vegetable and plant juices would ensure the success of the whole farm and would cause abundant harvest. Decorating (in Polish the word 'majenie' is often used in this context) was also supposed to prevent plague, illnesses, evil spells, charms and all the evil that could have fallen on the house and its residents.

Pentecost is a religious holiday, one of the oldest in Christian tradition, initially strongly associated with Easter. However, since the 4th century, Pentecost has been treated as a separate holiday. Whit Sunday falls on the Sunday and Monday fifty days after Easter, between May 10 and June 13 which is the period of the greatest flowering of plants and the fullness of spring.

## A chamber decorated for Pentecost



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## Corpus Christi / Boże Ciało

Initially, the celebration was established in Belgium in 1246. The feast of Corpus Christi came to Poland in 1320, when the liturgy of Corpus Christi was celebrated in Krakow by Bishop Nanker for the first time. The Corpus Christi processions were introduced 200 years later, Poland is the only country where parishes have held processions from the fifteenth century to the present day. After leaving the church, the processions walk to four outdoor altars, and at each of the altars, the Gospel of one of the four Evangelists is read or sung. There is also the habit of breaking off the birch twigs with which the altars are traditionally decorated. It is believed that these twigs have protective properties. The twigs are brought home, clogged behind sacred paintings or door frames and are believed to protect households from lightning.

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## Corpus Christi procession



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## An outdoor altar decorated with birch trees



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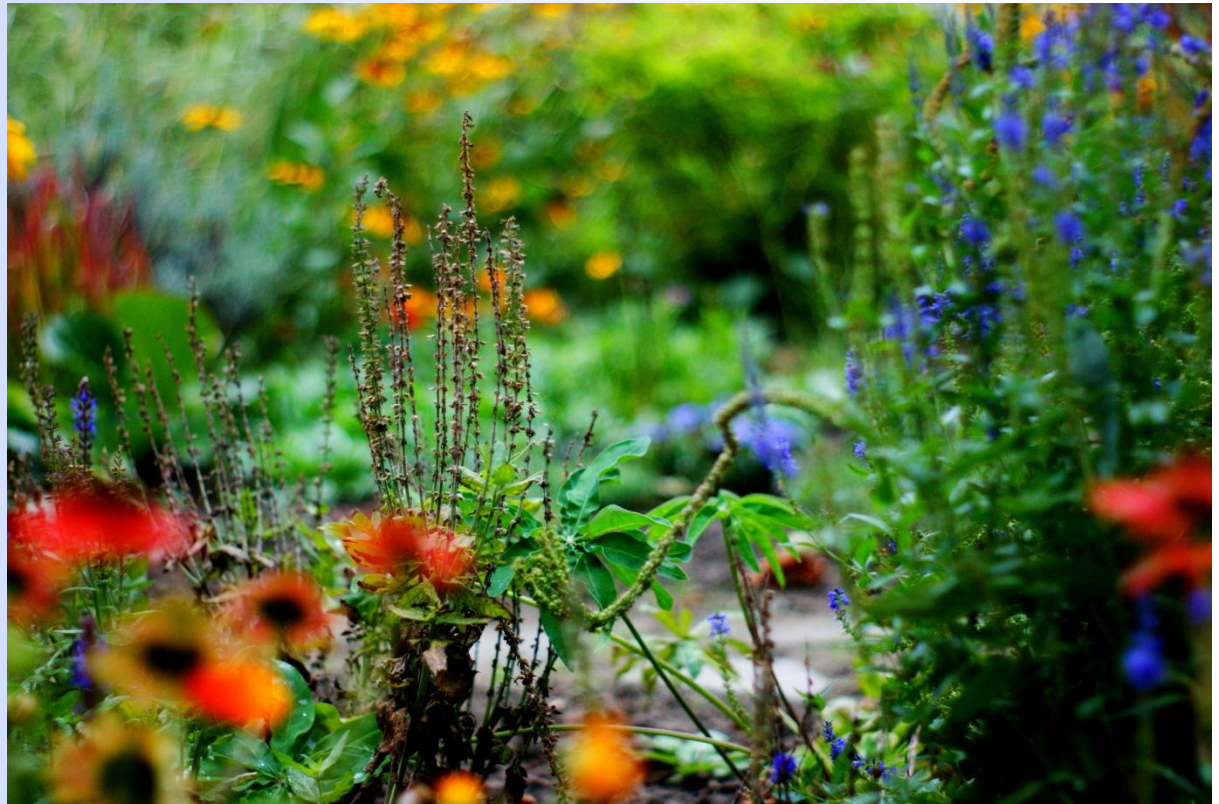




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# Summer



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## Kupala Night / Noc Kupały

Kupala Night (known in Polish as: "Noc Kupały" or "Noc świętojańska") is the night between 6 and 7 July. It is cultivated in Poland, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. At Kupala Night, people celebrate the coming of the summer. The whole celebration relates to the shortest night in the whole year.

Some early mythology scholars, such as Sir James Frazer, claimed that the holiday was originally Kupala; a pagan fertility rite later accepted into the Orthodox Christian calendar. There are analogues for celebrating the legacy of St. John around that time of the summer solstice elsewhere, including St. John's Day in Western Europe. The Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian name of this holiday combines "Ivan" (John the Baptist) and Kupala which is related to a word derived from the Slavic word for bathing. The latter is reinterpreted as John's baptizing people through full immersion in water (therefore his biblical title of the Baptist). However, the tradition of Kupala predates Christianity.

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Due to the popularity of the pagan celebration, with time it was simply accepted and reestablished as one of the native Christian traditions intertwined with local folklore.

On this very special day, we can see such traditions as young people jumping over the flames of bonfires in a ritual test of bravery and faith. The failure of a couple in love to complete the jump while holding hands is a sign of their destined separation. Girls may float wreaths of flowers (often lit with candles) on rivers, and would attempt to gain foresight into their relationship fortunes from the flow patterns of the flowers on the river. Men may attempt to capture the wreaths, in the hope of capturing the interest of the woman who floated the wreath.



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## Kupala Night celebrations



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## **Kupala Night celebrations**



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## Harvest festival / Dożynki

Harvest festival, Holiday of Crops (in Polish – Dożynki) is a folk holiday connected with thanksgiving ceremonies for finishing the harvest and the work in the field. In pre-Christian times it was a celebration cultivated on the autumnal equinox - 23 September, now it is usually celebrated in the late summer. The earliest harvest festivities were probably associated with the cult of plants and trees, then with the original agriculture. With the development of the manorial and court economy in the 16th century, the harvest festival took place at the courts of land estates. It was held for reapers (farm service and wage workers) as a reward for the work done at harvest and for the crops.

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In the harvest ceremony, the wreath is the most important. A harvest wreath was called a crop because it symbolizes all the harvested crops. Traditionally, it is woven by women. Wreaths have various shapes, sizes and decorations. Sometimes the harvesting wreath is decorated with ribbons or a bunch of corn.

Today harvest festivities have both folk and religious character. Harvest celebration is not only a celebration of thanksgiving, but also an opportunity to reflect upon how the rhythm of life, its variability and diversity are changing: birth and death, the end of winter and the arrival of spring, sowing and harvesting.



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## Wreaths in a variety of shapes

## Dożynki



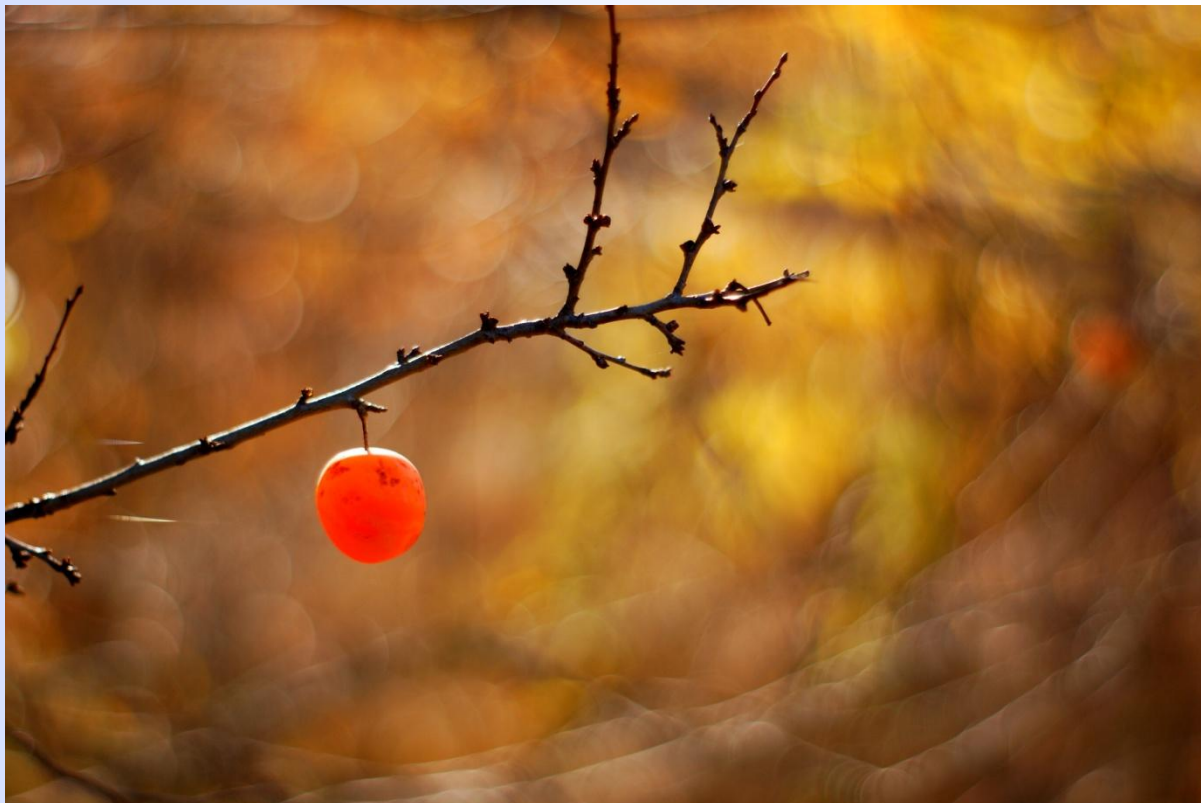
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# Autumn



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### St. Andrew's Day / Andrzejki

St. Andrew's Day is a holiday known for centuries and with a long tradition in Poland. Formerly, only girls who wanted to marry as soon as possible participated in the St. Andrew's evening celebrations. Predictions, of course, were related to the future husband - what he will look like, where he will come from and what his name will be. Bachelors did not celebrate the holiday of Andrzejki. Then it has changed, and St. Andrew's games are now focused both on men and women. However, while the custom of fortune-telling remained, the old omens were forgotten, and new ones appeared in their place. A very popular method is pouring melted wax onto water through a keyhole. Once in the water, the wax sets and from its shape you can infer something about your future. St. Andrew's Day was formerly the last moment for fun, just before Advent. It ended the usual period in the liturgical calendar, because the first Sunday after St. Andrew's Day was the first Sunday of Advent. Now, when Advent is seen as a time of joyful waiting for Christmas, it is not forbidden to play and have fun during its period.



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**St. Andrew** is the patron saint of married couples and an advocate of lovers who helps in matrimonial matters.



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## Fortune-telling

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## **Pouring melted wax onto water through a keyhole**

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[www.rceznisko.pl](http://www.rceznisko.pl)  
+48 15 841 25 06

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