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AN INSULTING GESTURE FROM 17th– AND 18th–CENTURY RURAL POLAND

Communication by gesture has long been a popular subject of research by anthropologists, ethnologists, and historians. However, Polish scholars have seldom taken up this topic. Among works by historians, one can mention only the articles by Maria Bogucka¹, Hanna Dziechcińska², Aleksander Gieysztor³, Przemysław Mrozowski⁴ and Paweł Szczaniecki⁵. The work of Polish ethnographers and anthropologists seems more substantial. The subject of gesture has been touched upon by Tadeusz Maciej Ciołek⁶, Krystyna Jarząbek⁷, Anna Krawczyk⁸, Zbigniew Libera⁹, Jacek Olędzki¹⁰ and Adam Paluch¹¹.

¹ M. Bogucka, *Le geste dans la vie religieuse, familiale, sociale, publique et politique de la noblesse polonaise aux XVI^e, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, "Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine", vol. 30, 1983, pp. 3–15; eadem, *Gesture, Ritual, and Social Order in Sixteenth- to Eighteenth-century Poland*, in: *A Cultural History of Gesture. From Antiquity to the Present Day*, pub. J. Bremmer, H. Roodenburg, Cambridge 1991, pp. 190–209 and a respective chapter in the later book of this author: *The Lost World of the "Sarmatians". Custom as the Regulator of Polish Social Life in Early Modern Times*, Warszawa 1996.

² H. Dziechcińska, *Gest w staropolskim systemie komunikacji (Gesture in the Old-Polish System of Communication)*, in: *Kultura żywego słowa w dawnej Polsce*, ed. H. Dziechcińska, Warszawa 1989, pp. 39–55, as well as the latest work in this domain: eadem, *Ciało, strój, gest w czasach renesansu i baroku (Body, Dress and Gesture in the Period of Renaissance and Baroque)*, Warszawa 1996.

³ A. Gieysztor, *Le cérémonial du couronnement des rois de Pologne: le sacre d'Henri de Valois en 1574*, in: *Le Sacre des Rois. Actes du colloque international d'histoire sur les sacres et couronnements royaux*, Paris 1985, pp. 119–127.

⁴ P. Mrozowski, *Genustation in Medieval Western Culture: the Gesture of Expiation — the Praying Posture*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 68, 1993, pp. 5–26.

⁵ P. Szczaniecki, *Gest modlitewny w późnym średniowieczu (The Gesture of Prayer in the Late Middle Ages)*, in: *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. B. Geremek, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk 1978, pp. 41–51.

⁶ T. M. Ciołek, *Materiały do "alchemii gestu" (Materials for "the Alchemy of Gesture")*, "Etnografia Polska", vol. 17, 1973, fasc. 2, pp. 59–79.

⁷ K. Jarząbek, *Kinetyczne formy powitań i pożegnań (Kinetic Forms of Greeting and Farewell)*, "Etnolingwistyka", vol. 6, 1994, pp. 65–81; eadem, *Gestykulacja i mimika: słownik (Gesticulation and Facial Expression: A Dictionary)*, Katowice 1994.

For obvious reasons, research into the old-Polish gesture has focused on the nobility. Studies in this field are after all very fruitful because of the unique nature of Sarmatian culture suspended between East and West, also clearly distinct and original in its non-verbal communication. Hanna Dziechcińska contrasts the specific, extended and expressive “language” of gesture of the Polish nobility with the ceremonial gestures in the courts of Western Europe which focused on the person of the king¹². She agrees with Maria Bogucka’s thesis that a Polish nobleman’s gesture, apart from its communicative and ritualistic function, was to distinguish the social estate of the nobility, while the ability, or perhaps also the gift, of proper behaviour was the best external confirmation of good birth¹³.

Naturally it was difficult to decree the exclusiveness of the nobleman’s language of gestures. The appeal of the privileged stratum’s culture to other social groups led them to adopt elements of the nobleman’s way of life, including the gesture as well. This phenomenon is most evident among rich burghers, but peasants also adopted some of the nobility’s behaviour, undoubtedly gestures as well¹⁴. In 1698, in an inn at Kusięty, the drifter Jan Dziura, while getting to know another tramp, Stanisław Podleski, consistently used the polite form “sir”, until they finally said to one another, “Let’s go on together, my lord and fellow tramp”¹⁵. It is quite probable that they complemented this verbal gallantry with gestures imitating the Polish nobility. And they did so despite the enormous social gap between a vagrant branded for theft and a nobleman whose behaviour they emulated.

Research into the Polish nobility’s gesture may thus tell us a lot about the gestures of other social groups among the population, the more so as there was a common set of gestures understandable to the whole society. Previous studies have shown that the Church was the source of the most legible gestures. The oratorical gesture of a priest was used to reach all of

⁸ A. Krawczyk, *Frazeologizmy mimiczne i gestyczne (na materiale gwarowym) (The Phraseology of Facial Expression and Gesture (on the Basis of Dialect Material))*, “Socjolingwistyka”, vol. 5, 1983, pp. 137–144.

⁹ Z. Libera, *Rzyć, aby żyć. Rzecz antropologiczna w trzech aktach z prologiem i epilogiem (“Arse” in Order to Live. An Anthropological Piece in Three Acts with a Prologue and an Epilogue)*, Tarnów 1995.

¹⁰ J. Ołędzki, *Gesty nadziei. Gest Kozakiewicza, zacieranie rąk, “figa” (The Gestures of Hope. Kozakiewicz’s Gesture, Rubbing One’s Hands, “A Fig”)*, “Polska Sztuka Ludowa — Konteksty”, Y. 45, 1991, № 1, pp. 35–46.

¹¹ A. Paluch, *Etymologiczny atlas ludzkiego ciała i chorób (An Ethnological Atlas of the Human Body and its Diseases)*, Wrocław 1995.

¹² H. Dziechcińska, *Ciasto, strój, gest*, p. 124.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 127; M. Bogucka, *The Lost World of the “Sarmatians”*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

¹⁵ The court book of the village Pieskowa Skala from the years 1597–1791, Library of the Polish Academy of Arts, Cracow, MS 1875, p. 339 (1698).

his listeners. An often cited example of this phenomenon was Giovanni Francesco of Arezzo's sermon delivered in Cracow in 1707. Although speaking in Italian, Giovanni Francesco was warmly received by his audience due to his intonation and gesticulation. Various devotional gestures common to the entire congregation were also developed in church, for example, those of prayer, penitence, etc. To be sure, grasping the sword at the sound of the Gospel during Holy Mass was a knight's gesture, however slapping one's cheeks for Elevation crossed the boundaries of all social estates.

Nevertheless, all of the similarities among the gestures of various social groups should not overshadow their differences. Especially distinct was the peasant language of gesture, which is difficult to identify in the sources. Its forms were probably more archaic and conservative, while the nobleman's gesture was to a large extent subject to fashion, foreign influence and autonomous creation.

The picture of old gestures reconstructed by historians is determined by the content of the sources, thus probably, they focus on the affirmative gesture. Insulting, scornful, resentful and angry gestures were seldom recorded. Therefore, researchers have not devoted much attention to them. Of course, it is difficult to establish the ratio between affirmative and unfriendly gestures made several hundred years ago, but according to Jacek Ołędzki's recent research on Murzynów and its environs (the historical District of Dobrzyń), there are merely a few or dozen-odd gestures demonstrating goodwill or friendship. At the same time, there are two to three times as many gestures (about 30) expressing unfriendliness, animosity or hostility. Moreover, affirmative gestures are less frequent and more perfunctory, while unfavorable gestures are made more frequently, with much exuberance and emotional involvement¹⁶. This ratio may, of course, stem from the dominant, contemporary conviction of the impropriety of excessive gesticulation and too much exuberance in showing one's feeling. Symptomatically, violent gesticulation appears as an element of a stereotype of scorned peoples. Poles will attribute such a gesticulation to Jews and Arabs, Frenchmen to Italians, and Englishmen both to Italians and Frenchmen.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the ratio between affirmative and unfriendly gesture was still balanced. Transformations in European culture after the 16th century did not diminish the importance of gestures, but rather aimed only to submit them to some form of discipline.

¹⁶ J. Ołędzki, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

The reform of gesture, however, did not embrace all of Europe. In Italy, for instance, traditional, spontaneous gesticulation prevailed¹⁷. Furthermore, in some countries, there emerged autonomous norms in this respect. So it was in Spain, and also in Poland, where making numerous emotional gestures belonged to the canon of normal human behaviour and even signified proper upbringing.

Among the rural population, unfortunately, few records of non-verbal communication have been preserved. One can try to reconstruct gestures expressing respect and greeting, those connected with religious ceremonies and those connected with legal usage, such as swearing an oath or the sale of real estate. Insulting gestures are hard to track down.

It seems that the simplest non-verbal way insulting somebody was to refrain from showing due respect. In other words, failing to make a gesture dictated by social norms of co-existence — for example, not answering a greeting — was in itself a sufficient demonstration of animosity. Although there was no case of seeking redress before a court of justice for such an insult, the deliberate neglect of social norms was nevertheless an aggravating circumstance in cases of civil litigation¹⁸.

One can surmise that a relatively well-developed system of communication by gesture gave many occasions for deliberate social indiscretion of various intensity and meaning. Merely by making a traditionally friendly gesture in a perfunctory or off-hand way, one could offend somebody. Thus, even the very imputation of not observing etiquette was an insult. For example, Jakub Kron sued Piotr Wit in 1744 for "*rationae calumniae* and mocking him as well as slighting his person, since [Kron] refused to drink with him"¹⁹.

In the sources, the question of not showing due respect appears mainly in connection with the village elders. On the one hand, the latter claimed the right to special reverence and, on the other hand, focused on themselves the community's hostility, becoming the object of envy and accusations of abu-

¹⁷ P. Burke, *The Language of Gesture in Early Modern Italy*, in: *A Cultural History of Gesture*, pp. 79–81.

¹⁸ See e.g. Records of the Court of Benedictine Nuns of Jarosław 1729–1774, Library of Polish Academy of Arts, Cracow, MS 873, pp. 83–84 (1730) — where in a litigation over the payment of the deserts of service the court sentenced one of the parties to a penalty also for "refusing to speak to the plaintiff for about 12 years i.e. not reciprocating the signs of mere common friendship".

¹⁹ The assessors' books of Starogród 2, 1740–1747, State Archives Toruń XV.2 (cited further on as Starogród 2), p. 178 (1744).

se of power, embezzlement, etc. Hence, the recurring decrees of the village councils ordering the show of due respect under fine²⁰.

The court at Kasina issued a decree in 1629 that a six groschen fine would be imposed on a person “who, appearing before the court, would not show due respect and reverence or waved his hand or made some other improper sign in his action or manners”²¹. The clear emphasis on “waving the hand” stands out among the otherwise general statements of this decree. It was not a matter of excessive gesticulation. The legislator probably had in mind a concrete gesture and used a formulation that was fully understandable to the decree’s addressee. We are unable to reconstruct this gesture on the basis of this reference, however, it shows that there was a concrete gesture of the hand considered insulting, clearly rising above other gestures, which were described only in a collective formula (“improper” actions).

This is the only insulting gesture that found a place for itself in rural legislation. Unfortunately, it is not mentioned in any other rural statute, nor have any unambiguous records regarding the application of the Kasina decree been preserved.

Apart from this case, only one other insulting gesture can be found in rural sources and though there is little information on this subject, it is the best documented case to date. The gesture in question is that of showing one’s backside — often in combination with its stripping — to the person insulted. This gesture is also presently understood and is international in character, not peculiar to the old-Polish countryside. Still, it is worth investigating this gesture’s social function in the 17th and 18th century. But before discussing this problem, one should investigate its origin and meaning.

The origin of this gesture cannot be explained on biological grounds since among the other primates, it signifies submissiveness and is a typical gesture of appeasement. Apes of both sexes present their bottoms to dominating members of their species in order to demonstrate their subordination. By doing so, they usually avoid attack. The stronger ape responds by either ignoring the ape subordinating itself or by jumping on its back for a moment

²⁰ E.g. the court book of Miejsce (Piastowe) village 1500–1769, State Archives Przemysł, Records of Miejsce Piastowe Village N° 8, p. 74 (1707); also: *Księgi sądowe wiejskie (Rural Court Books)*, pub. B. Ulanowski, *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki*, vol. XI–XII, Kraków 1921 (further cited as B. Ulanowski), N° 7012 (1672); *Księgi sądowe wiejskie klucza łąckiego II 1744–1811 (Rural Court Books of Łącko Estate II 1744–1811)*, pub. A. Vetulani, *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki*, series II, section 2, fasc. 3, Wrocław 1963 (further cited as *Klucz łącki*), N° 867 (1753); Rural court book of Rajbrot 1728–1800, State Archives Cracow MS Dep. 268 (further on cited as Rajbrot), p. 19 (1751); Court book of Piątkowa village 1627–1798, State Archives Rzeszów, Records of Błażowa Commune, N° 98, p. 139 (1655).

²¹ B. Ulanowski, N° 3105 (1629).

and making several movements simulating copulation in order to stress his predominance²².

Among human beings, the symbolism of this gesture is ambiguous. One can detect traces of its submissive meaning (for example, in the traditional posture of a child being corporally punished), however, it is most often associated with various kinds of aggression. The relatively universal awareness of the exceptional nature of buttocks in human beings compared with other creatures could have played some role in changing the meaning of this gesture. Buttocks were even denied to the devil, who was otherwise able to assume an almost perfect human form. In this connection, baring one's buttocks might have been used as a defence against evil powers. For example, in Germany, this was a means of protecting oneself from evil spirits during violent thunderstorms²³.

The defensive value of sticking out one's buttocks could have also resulted from its insulting and mocking function. Showing disrespect to and making fun of a foe was one of the earliest and most universal, magical means of defence²⁴. However, it seems that in the modern era, this gesture has largely lost its defensive meaning, becoming above all an insult.

In 18th-century Poland, showing one's backside to somebody can in fact be taken only as an insulting gesture. However, it maybe uncompleted picture due to the type of sources used, i.e. records from village courts. The only occasion for keeping records of such gestures are courtroom records concerning neighbourhood quarrels. The magical use of such gestures calls for the pen not of a courtroom scribe, but of a student of folk customs. Such students, however, appeared only in the 19th century. Furthermore, the unequivocal obscenity of this gesture deterred folklorists from describing it.

Courtroom scribes, however, had a duty to record the cause of insult between parties. They acquitted themselves of this task, for better or for worse, by formulating blunt or euphemistic descriptions. In the sources, this gesture has been described as "baring privy parts"²⁵, "sticking out the bare bottom"²⁶, "exposing to light" or "presentation" of the "sad", "inferior" or

²² D. Morris, *Körpersignale. Bodywatching*, München 1986, pp. 205–206.

²³ Z. Libera, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

²⁴ One can find many examples for that — for the given era one can refer to J. Taźbier's article *Obrazheretyka i diabła w katolickiej propagandzie wyznaniowej XVI–XVIII w. (Images of a Heretic and the Devil in the Catholic Denominational Propaganda of the 16th–18th c.)*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny", vol. 88, 1981, fasc. 4, p. 947.

²⁵ *Klucz łącki*, № 889 (1773).

²⁶ The assessors' books of Starogród 1, 1721–1738, State Archives Toruń XV.1 (cited further on as Starogród 1), p. 35 (1721); similar Rajbrot, p. 17 (1751).

“dark” face²⁷. The same gesture is probably described by the more euphemistic expressions: “lifting in scorn the skirt on one’s back”²⁸, “sticking out one’s behind”²⁹ or “shameless sticking out off one’s buttocks to the magistrate”³⁰.

This gesture was sometimes complemented by words. Anna Biernacka, in a quarrel with her neighbour, “while lifting her skirt demanded to be kissed”³¹, and Iędrzej Kubicz, while drunk, called to Iózef Wolczykowski: “what a nobleman you are, and having ruffled his robes at the back, here is your nobility, you churl, scoundrel”³². Most often, however, the verbal element of the insult was not mentioned, indicating that it was considered secondary in comparison to the gesture itself — eloquent enough and certainly standing out from the acceptable norm of neighbourhood quarrels.

However, the verbal equivalent of the gesture sometimes became independent, performing the role of its substitute in quarrels. For example, Jan Fedorczyk told a vicar’s housekeeper “to sweep out his behind with her tongue”³³ and Ans Wit, having illegally imprisoned a lord’s horseman in an inn, “railed at him, sang songs about him and told him to kiss his back below”³⁴. At Rajbrot, Jakub Drąg was told by a neighbour’s daughter, “although she was a little girl, to kiss her arse 3,000 times”³⁵. Of similar character could also be Wojciech Smiech’s invectives addressed to a parish priest: “Rector, you better look after your pigeons as a fancier of pigeons should, for I bear you in my a...e”³⁶.

Desmond Morris believes that the association of the gesture of showing one’s buttocks with the abusive act of kissing it ensued from the spreading of depictions of the witches’ sabbath. According to folk beliefs, it was one of the more frequent rituals of the witches to kiss their master, the devil, on his lower face. This gesture of Satan’s worshippers would thus be especially insulting to Christians³⁷.

²⁷ B. Ulanowski, № 4021 (1744); *Akta w sprawach chłopskich hrabstwa tarnowskiego z połowy XVIII wieku (Records of Peasant Cases of the Tarnów County off the Middle of the 18th c.)*, pub. S. Grodzicki, *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki*, series II, sec. 2, fasc. 7, Wrocław 1970 (further on cited as *Akta tarnowskie*), № 31, 75 (1756).

²⁸ B. Ulanowski, № 4365 (1698), similar № 4290 (1777), № 7241 (1763).

²⁹ *Ibidem*, № 7204 (1757).

³⁰ *Ibidem*, № 7167 (1756).

³¹ *Ibidem*, № 4290 (1777).

³² *Ibidem*, № 7241 (1763).

³³ *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego 1600–1762 (The Court Book of the Klimkowa Borderland 1600–1762)*, pub. L. Łysiak, *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki*, series II, sec. 2, fasc. 4, Wrocław 1965, № 1252 (1784).

³⁴ Starogród 2, p. 178 (1744).

³⁵ Rajbrot, p. 131 (1799).

³⁶ B. Ulanowski, № 7278 (1785).

³⁷ D. Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 200–201.

This is probably a misinterpretation. The offender, while comparing his antagonist to a sorcerer, at the same time would be putting himself on the same level with the evil spirit, which, even if not blasphemous, would certainly not be safe. Second, the depiction of a witches' sabbath is a distorted reflection of reality, the world turned upside down. Hence, it parodies religious ceremonies or dances at inns, showing them in reverse: these public functions are seen from behind, objects are used in an inappropriate way, meals consist of inedible stuff, the attributes of character and appearance are assessed in an abnormal way. Thus, the gesture of kissing somebody's buttocks also changed from an insult into a mark of tribute. However, in order for it to appear in the reality of a witches' sabbath, it had to appear in the real world first. The genuine roots of this gesture should be sought instead among sexual taboos³⁸. One of Mikolaj Rej's *facetiae* makes a case for this interpretation:

A man saw that linen was washed by a wench
 Who from her fat buttocks her shift could not wrench
 He said: "Your tail is greedy, your shift will eat quick!
 If you wanted to hit it, I could give a stick".
 Said she: "Nay, my master, to wipe it I meant,
 As I thought that to kiss it you were all intent".
 There was a lot of laughter as he jumped aside,
 For to such a question, the answer was right.³⁹
 (Poem translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

The relationship of the gesture of sticking out one's bottom to that of kissing it, remains ambiguous. Although they often appear together (the latter, of course, only in a postulative form⁴⁰), their combination is not necessary. Sticking out one's buttocks could also signify other things, for example, an act of symbolic defecation. Thus, here we have rather to deal with two autonomous means of insult, which, however, to a certain extent overlap with one another because of their common objective.

Among the perpetrators of this gesture, there is a significant number of women⁴¹. They constitute as much as four-fifths of those accused of this act, although resorting to this gesture is by no means determined by sex.

³⁸ Cf. Z. Libera, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

³⁹ M. Rej, *Figliki (Fun and Pranks)*, Warszawa 1970, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Therefore according to the terminology of Anna Krawczyk we have to deal in this case with the phraseology of bodily expression, which only seemingly is a record of gesture: A. Krawczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁴¹ See: M. Staszów, *Sprawy o "zabranie sławy" w sądownictwie wiejskim Małopolski XV–XVIII wieku (The Cases of "Detriment to Reputation" in the Rural Judiciary of Little Poland in the 15th–18th c.)*, "Lud", vol. 46, 1960, p. 161; similar conclusions may be drawn from ethnographic research: Z. Libera, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

When a married couple became embroiled in a neighbourhood quarrel, despite the participation of both persons, only the woman resorts to this argument, while the man confines himself to verbal insults⁴². The simplest explanation for this may be the convenience of making this gesture—it is easier to lift one's skirt than to drop one's trousers. The latter also makes it difficult to run away if need be.

Apart from practical considerations, the answer could also be sought in the lower social and legal position of women. Proper, dignified behaviour was supposed above all characterize the village elites. More unrestrained behaviour indicated people of lower standing in a community's hierarchy: the young, dependents, those charged with less responsibility for their acts⁴³. Women made up a socially handicapped group because of the defective nature of their sex⁴⁴. Thus, the demands made on them (even on the wives of prominent farmers) were lower, and even the gesture of sticking out one's buttocks was considered more suitable, or perhaps less unsuitable, for women than for men. Moreover, it should be remembered that improper behaviour was to a certain extent justified by the very *status imbecillis mulieris*, which sometimes appeared as an extenuating circumstance in cases of infringement on morality⁴⁵.

Misunderstandings, slander and neighbourhood quarrels often ended up before the court of assessors, owing to which we have the available information on their subject-matter. The anger and obduracy of the parties in conflict led them to become indiscriminate in their choice of words. Courtroom scribes scrupulously recorded whole lists of sometimes very far-fetched epithets. Both sides abused the entire family of their adversary and defamed the memory of the dead. They recalled sins and peccadilloes and even dared insinuate such crimes as theft and witchcraft. Quarrels often ended in fist fight. Violent behaviour certainly also embraced animated gesticulation of an aggressive and insulting character, however, it is not mentioned in any descriptions of quarrels. The only exception is the aforementioned gesture of stripping and sticking out the buttocks. The significance of this gesture, which at present seems more grotesque than hostile, had to be really impressive. Not only was it an aggravating circumstance on the part of participants in a quarrel, but it was often separately punished as well. Hence, the stripping and sticking out of one's buttocks was definitely a severe infringement of the norms of coexistence. One

⁴² E.g. B. U l a n o w s k i, N° 4290 (1777), Starogród 1, p. 35 (1721).

⁴³ It is interesting to note that precisely such men were accused of making this gesture.

⁴⁴ Starogród 2, p. 150 (1743).

⁴⁵ E.g. The Book of Records of Żywiec Castle 1761–1763, State Archives Cracow, IT 263 b, p. 132 (1762).

should emphasize that this was the only gesture which the village assessors felt justified to punish separately. Thus, it was the only non-verbal means of insult so grave that it could be prosecuted — other gestures could not arouse such a reaction. The gravity of this universally understood gesture found expression in court rulings and probably influenced the frequency of resorting to it.

The most frequent means of punishing a perpetrator was flogging consisting of fifteen⁴⁶ or thirty⁴⁷ lashes. In some especially drastic cases, however, the punishment could be much higher. Wawrzyniec Uriga was sentenced to 50 lashes of a whip and penitence at church. In his case, an additional aggravating circumstance was that he had made his gesture on Our Lady's Day, in the presence of believers leaving the church after Holy Mass, "without observing the church and churchyard and the passion that is in the window of the sacristy", while the owner of the village, St. Clara's convent of the city of Sącz, not only considered this gesture blasphemy but also an act of disobedience⁴⁸. However, the most severe punishment was that of Iędrzej Kubicz: a week in prison and three times 100 blows. His case, however, was not so much that of the gesture, but of the vulgar condemnation of Józef Wołczykowski's nobility⁴⁹.

The justifications of sentencing for "shameless bending" are interesting, especially those detailing the punishment for this offence. What is emphasized above all is the insulting character of such an act: "abuse of the elders" by Wawrzyniec Uriga⁵⁰, "contempt of office"⁵¹ or "disgraceful insult"⁵².

It seems that indecency of that gesture played no less important role in its punishing. Katarzyna Pasiutka "stuck out her buttocks" to Michał Krasieński "creating a scandal among the people present at the inn"⁵³. The court also charged Jakub Gabryś with "creating a scandal"⁵⁴. Anna Biernacka received 15 lashes for "incontinence"⁵⁵, while the wife of Marcin Sieradzki was punished for "venturing to lift her robe and show her body to Andrzej, the young plaintiff, something unbecoming to a married woman"⁵⁶.

⁴⁶ B. Ulanowski, № 4290 (1777).

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, № 7167 (1756); № 7204 (1757).

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, № 4021 (1744).

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, № 7241 (1763).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, № 4021 (1744).

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, № 4365 (1698).

⁵² *Akta tarnowskie*, № 75 (1756).

⁵³ *Klucz łącki*, № 889 (1773).

⁵⁴ *Rajbrot*, p. 17 (1751).

⁵⁵ B. Ulanowski, № 4290 (1777).

⁵⁶ *Starogród 1*, p. 35 (1721).

Moral aspect of penalization of this gesture, may to some extent help explain why the earliest registered case of its punishment by court dates back to 1698⁵⁷, while the other cases are from the 18th century. The lack of records does not mean that this gesture did not appear earlier or that it was not very insulting⁵⁸. Its isolation from all other examples of insulting and aggressive behaviour arising during quarrels should rather be associated with the transformations of rural customs under the influence of the missionary and re-evangelization work of the Catholic Church, which was intensified after serious remission in the 16th century. The greatest problem facing post-Trent Catholicism in the Polish countryside was not manifestations of the Reformation, but a low level of religiousness or simply surviving elements of paganism. The clergy's efforts to address this problem tended in two directions: to teach the rural population at least the basic truths of the gospel and to inculcate them with the ethic principles of the Decalogue. The latter goal was to a large extent based on enforcing the sexual morals of the Catholic Church. One of its elements was a restrictive attitude toward nudity, which started to be associated exclusively with immorality. This tendency was, after all, in line with trends in the civilizing transformation of all Europe, not just Catholic Europe⁵⁹. In the Polish countryside, this transformation manifested itself with a certain delay, which is hard to explain precisely, but as early as the 18th century, it was already dominant⁶⁰. Nudity at this time became the subject of interest for courts and cases did come up such as that of Jerzy Żołnierczyk of Brunara Wyżnia suing two shepherds "for spreading a story that they had seen his wife bathing in the river before

⁵⁷ B. Ulanowski, N° 4365 (1698).

⁵⁸ For example in 1630 one of the robbers from Sobestian Bury's band, which was surrounded by burghers from Żywiec, "having broken through the crowd, dived into Sola River and having swum to the other bank, there in disrespect dropped his clothes and stuck out his buttocks, then running away to the forest", A. Komonicki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki (Żywiec Chronography, or Chronicle)*, pub. S. Grodzicki, I. Dwornicka, Żywiec 1987, p. 159.

⁵⁹ Norbert Elias called this phenomenon *der Vorstoß der Schamgrenze*; N. Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Sociogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, Bd. 1, Frankfurt/Main 1978, p. 181.

⁶⁰ It is usually believed that the rural population in Europe started to adopt the principles of *civilité* in the 18th c., however, a breakthrough in this respect came only in the 19th c., see R. Muehlebléd, *Pour une histoire des gestes (XVe–XVIII^e siècles)*, "Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine", vol. 34, 1987, pp. 99–100, as well as H. Roodenburg, *The "hand of friendship": shaking hands and other gestures in the Dutch Republic*, in: *A Cultural History of Gesture*, p. 158. The situation in Poland was probably similar, one can even expect a greater delay. However, those elements of civilization which concern sexual ethic directly were adopted in the countryside much sooner — probably because of the pressure of the Church. In the middle of the 18th c. in France there continued a civilization gap between the upper strata and the peasants, however the sexual customs in the countryside were already in a large measure disciplined in the spirit of *civilité*, see R. Muehlebléd, *The order of gestures: a social history of sensibilities under the Ancien Régime in France*, in: *A Cultural History of Gesture*, pp. 134–135.

dawn”⁶¹. Nudity became shameful, a part of the carefully guarded sphere of privacy. Displaying it was considered disgraceful. In this way, the age-old insulting gesture of showing one’s behind took on new connotations. The gravity of this offence intensified — it became not only a matter of inflicting damage on the honour of the person offended, but also an offence to public morality.

The moral taboo of nakedness did not, however, completely stop people from performing this gesture. Probably the awareness of its extremely severe insulting function prevailed over the sense of shame at the moment of irritation, something characteristic not only of a barely “civilized” rural population in the 18th century. The gesture of stripping and sticking out one’s buttocks is still latent in the collective subconscious, waiting to be manifested at a critical moment. Are we not full of empathy for the two women in Gdańsk who in December 1970 “lifted their skirts and showed their naked bottoms” to the militiamen who were suppressing a demonstration?⁶² This event was so well-fixed in the mind of one the militiamen that a quarter of a century later, he shared it with a journalist, proving that this gesture has survived up to the present, and in an urban milieu as well.

⁶¹ The court book of Muszyna Borderland II (1761–1793), State Archives Cracow Dep. 101, p. 48 (1762).

⁶² R. Socha, *Bojownicy w niesłusznej sprawie (Advocates of an Unjust Cause)*, “Polityka”, № 51, 21.12.1996, p. 26.