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Between Ritual and Performance. Humanist Marriage Ceremonies in Poland

Abstract: Poland is currently experiencing a growth in the number of humanist marriages: strongly individualized, mostly secular unions. So far, the described phenomenon has been analysed mainly through the prism of many different dimensions like secularity, class stratification or the resistance of minorities against the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church. It seems that the nature of humanist ceremonies has been taken for granted, and that researchers, in their analyses, merely considered these to be rites of passage. In this paper, I ask questions not only about the content of the ceremonies, but also about their forms. I consider these two elements as integral. I put forward the claim that humanist marriages are a hybrid phenomenon, and thus the category of ‘social performance’ added to the category of ‘ritual’ opens up new analytical tracks and enables, to a greater extent, a more precise identification of the innovative character of these ceremonies.

Keywords: humanist ceremonies, ritual, social performance, rite of passage, marriage ceremony, secularization.

Introduction

Humanist—strongly individualized and mostly secular—weddings are a relatively new phenomenon in Poland (the first marriage was conducted in 2007¹) and their popularity is on the rise.² According to their proponents, humanist wedding ceremonies are an alternative not only to religious, but also civil marriages (which, by the proponents of humanist rites of passage, are deemed as ‘devoid of ideological content’ and ‘template,’ where actors are subordinated to constrained, rigorous requirements).

So far researchers have studied humanist ceremonies through lenses of materiality (Engelke 2012), secularisation (Engelke 2014; Kasselstrand 2018; Tyrała 2009); individualisation (Aston 2014; Kasselstrand 2018) or class stratification (Majdecka 2018). In conducted analyses, ‘the logic of design’ (Handelman 1998) of these events was rather taken for granted. Most often, researchers mentioned merely that humanist ceremonies are rites of

¹ The first documented humanist marriage ceremony in Poland was conducted by the Polish Rationalist Association with the assistance of the Humanist Society Scotland.

² According to estimates of the celebrant from one of the companies that organise humanist weddings, in 2016, the total number of humanist marriage ceremonies carried out in Poland was around 140 (C7_m.Pz). In a conversation conducted in 2018, the celebrant from the same company stated that in comparison to the previous year (2017), they conducted approximately 20 weddings more (it is a considerable increase, because this number accounts for around one third of the total number of weddings organized by them in 2016).

passages and referred mainly to the concept of Arnold van Gennep (1960).³ They focused more on the content than the form, although there are approaches within ritual studies which emphasise that both can be considered as equally important (Handelman 1998). Neglecting the analysis of the form of these events did not allow a full understanding of the innovative character of humanist ceremonies. Therefore, I focus on both: the content of humanist marriages, but also their forms (or ‘the logic of design’). The aim of this paper is to indicate that, regarding the analysis of such a hybrid phenomenon as humanist marriage, the category of ‘social performance’ is perhaps a better analytical tool than the category of ‘ritual,’ and it provides a new vantage point. I refer mainly to the concept of Jeffrey Alexander (2006). According to him ‘social performance’ is a ‘social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation’ (Alexander 2006). I have completed this somewhat vague definition by adding Ronald Grimes’ perspective, for whom performances, in comparison to rituals, are ‘more audience oriented, and they are not really believed in’ (Grimes 2014). Additionally, I analyse how ‘the logic of design’ of humanist marriages affects their performativity (understood in the Austinian sense, as transformative and causative potential).

State-of-the-Art

Until now, researchers have analysed humanist marriages and funerals through the prism of the category of ritual. The focus has mainly been on such dimensions of analysis as materiality, individualisation, secularisation or class stratification.

Individualisation and the highly personalized nature are the most often highlighted features of humanist weddings (Aston 2014). Due to the individualistic character of humanist ceremonies, they are practices most popular among the middle class (Majdecka 2018). Therefore, ‘the creative possibilities’ seem to be a key characteristic of humanist weddings. However, this feature leads ‘to a tension between tradition and innovation’ (Aston 2014). This contrast between ‘the old’ and ‘the new,’ has been noted in several research projects on humanist ceremonies (Aston 2014; Engelke 2012; Kasselstrand 2018; Majdecka 2018). Some young Polish couples who decided on a humanist wedding expressed the conviction that religious ceremonies are ‘non-reflective’ because they are ‘traditional’ (Majdecka 2018). Yet, humanist ceremonies do not function in a historical vacuum; indeed, they draw inspiration mostly from the Christian tradition (Aston, 2014). The fact observed by Matthew Engelke (2014)—his analysis primarily concerned the material culture of humanist funerals in London—may explain the ambiguity regarding (especially religious) tradition. As he noted:

secular humanists often want to sever ties with the past (...), with what they understand to be Christianity’s religious elements. At the same time, they want to preserve those aspects of Christianity they understand to be human, not religious.

However, such a dialectical tension between repetitions and alternations could possibly be seen in every ritual (Tambiah 1979), and newly invented rituals are often constructed

³ According to van Gennep, rites of passage are ‘the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another’ (Van Gennep [1960] 2004:10).

in such a way that the ‘repetitions of form or content make it tradition-like’ (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). Thus, Grimes (2000: 214) is sceptical about the innovative potential of such alternative weddings, perceiving them as ‘culturally constrained.’

In the Polish context, researchers have analysed humanist marriage ceremonies especially through the prism of secularisation (Tyrała 2009; Tempczyk 2012). Their appearance is treated as a testimony to the secularisation of the ritual sphere (Tyrała 2009). Such ceremonies are even regarded as ‘a serious alternative to religious rituals’ in Poland (Tyrała 2009), which appears rather exaggerated.

Analysis concerning Poland has also exposed the aspect of social power. Humanist ceremonies are deemed as a way by which Polish non-believers can claim their rights (as a cultural minority in Poland (Tyrała 2018)). Although civil marriage ceremonies can serve as a secular alternative for non-believers, the propagators of humanist marriage regard its civil counterpart as ‘depersonalized’ and ‘directed towards the mass audience’ (Tyrała 2009). In line with this narrative, civil marriage ceremonies ‘lack the classical meaning of the *rite of passage*’ (Tyrała 2009). It is perceived as ‘a contract’ rather than ‘a ritual’ (Tyrała 2009). However, so far, the civil ceremony is the only legally recognised option for non-religious couples who do not want to be married by any religious authority. Hence, because humanist marriages in Poland do not have legal recognition, (contrary to other countries like Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, and some parts of the United States (Kasselstrand 2018)), if couples wish to have a legally valid wedding, an additional civil ceremony is required. Due to the fact that in the Polish context, homosexual marriages are not legally recognised, and there is no institution of ‘registered partnerships’ neither for heterosexual nor homosexual couples, same-sex partners are another group who, through humanist marriages, try to overcome inequalities in Poland (the first homosexual humanist marriage ceremony in Poland was conducted in 2008).

It seems that the nature of humanist ceremonies was taken for granted, therefore researchers have simply regarded them as rites of passage, which is why I ask the questions not only about the content of humanist ceremonies, but also about their forms. I consider these two elements as integral. I claim that humanist marriages are a hybrid phenomenon (they combine elements from various traditions, including both religious and secular themes), and thus the category of ‘social performance’ when combined with the category of ‘ritual,’ opens up new analytical tracks, offering ‘a new descriptive vantage point’ (Bell 2009), and enables to a greater extent a more precise analysis of the innovative character of these ceremonies.

Between Ritual and Performance

Most classical anthropological theories emphasize that ritual is ‘stereotyped’ or ‘sequestered’ (V. Turner 1977), ‘homeostatic’ (Goody 1986), ‘repetitive’ (Leach 1972), ‘invariant’ (Rappaport 1999) or ‘replicable’ (Handelman 1998).⁴ The content and arrangement of ritual is (to varying degrees) formalized (conventionalised), stereotypical (rigid), condensed (fused) and redundant (repeatable) (Tambiah 1979). These features also apply to the language of ritual (which is also more formalized). Maurice Bloch, who analysed the

⁴ I present the overview mainly following Alexander (2006) and Grimes (2014).

articulation of ritual, contrasted ‘everyday’ and ‘formalised’ speech acts, and listed among others such features of the latter as: ‘partial vocabulary,’ exclusion of ‘some syntactic forms’ or ‘fixity of sequencing’ (Bloch 1989).

Numerous classic anthropological studies (Goody 1986; Evans-Pritchard 1976; Assmann 2002) also indicated that the ritual ‘stands on guard’ for the current institutional order, often protecting the status quo. Ritual is closely linked with social order, which is always ‘the source for strategies of ritualisation’ and provides ‘immediate imperatives’ (Handelman 1998). Ritual, as a highly formalised and structured action, can be treated as an ‘extension of social power’ (Bell 2009) or ‘the handmaid (...) of political authority’ (Tambiah 1979). However, most of the latest anthropological works emphasize that ‘performance can work within a society precisely to undermine tradition [in order—A.R] to provide a site for the exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behavior’ (Carlson 2017).

Theorists have also observed that ritual, as a formalised symbolic activity, involves ‘conceptions’ rather than ‘emotions’ (Langer 1951; Tambiah 1979). Because of its rigidity and conventionality, it suspends interpersonal negotiating—one person ceases to modify his or her behaviour in order to respond to the reactions of others (audience, observers) (Handelman 1998). Ritual is seen as something external to the individual, and as previously established and stipulated: ‘In adopting the ritual stance one accepts (...) that in a very important sense, one will not be the author of one’s acts’ (Humphrey, Laidlaw 1994). Ritual’s acts and utterances are ‘not entirely encoded by the performers’ (Rappaport 1999). Therefore, it seems to represent ‘the old’ rather than ‘the new’ and its action is ‘automatic rather than thought out’ (Goody 1977).

On the one hand, the formal and repetitive character of ritual leads to continuity, but on the other, formality and repetitiveness can also mean culture lag and ‘loss of meaning’ (Goody 1977) or ‘drifting out of meaning’ (Bloch 1989). The question ‘How should this [the ritual—A.R] be done?’ implies an attempt to reproduce previous acts performed on this occasion as accurately as possible. When the attempt is successful, it becomes a repetition of acts associated with the previous ceremony. However, as observed by Goody, ‘the social situation may have changed, and (even in the most “static” of societies) the meaning will certainly have done [become obsolete-A.R]’ (Goody 1977). Hence there is a need to reform rituals, so their meanings will be relevant to the current social situation.⁵ Therefore, the category of ritual, with its emphasis on invariant and rigid structure, may not be able to grasp these dynamics and changes. On the contrary, performance, which is less focused on the ‘right order,’ and more on conveying the meanings of an actor’s social situation, appears to be a more appropriate analytical category.

I would like to emphasise that I treat ‘performance’ as a ‘tool of analysis,’ rather than ‘a feature of the object’ (Bell 2009). As many theorists have highlighted, there is no clear dividing line between ritual and performance: ‘all performance has at its core a ritual action’ (Schechner 1987) and ‘all ritual has at its core a performative act’ (Alexander 2006). Thus, ritual and performance exist on the same continuum and the difference between them is ‘a matter of variation, not fundamental type’ (Alexander 2006). Events ‘display *degrees* of ritualization’ and different ‘genres of action’ (e.g. ritual, performance, spectacle, game) can

⁵ Such attitude can be also seen within Christianity. Attempts to reform the Christian liturgy suggest that some old symbols lost their meaning and reformers try to find new symbols or revivify the old ones (Douglas 1996).

‘bleed into one another’ (Grimes 2014). Due to the contextuality of social actions it seems more appropriate to use ‘*relative* contrastive distinctions’ rather than ‘*absolute* distinctions’ (Tambiah 1979). In a similar vein, there were attempts to expose the internal differentiation of ritualised events, by distinguishing two types of ritual: ‘performance-centered’ and ‘liturgy-centered’ (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Rituals of the first kind are quasi-theatrical and are more oriented towards the issue of whether the audience is convinced (or at least appears to be convinced) than on following ‘a stipulated sequence of actions’ (Grimes 2014). Performance-centred rituals are more audience oriented, and more open to improvisation (in terms of structure, as well as new content), and are as a result, less formalised. It is worth noting, however, that Humphrey and Laidlaw (and Rappaport similarly) seem to suggest that performance-centered ritual is a ‘weaker’ or ‘less pure’ form of ritual (Grimes 2014), which still means that there is some ‘ideal type’ of ritual, characterized by the features mentioned above (e.g. rigidity, immutability) and ‘other occasions that can be called ritual. (...) All that *other* ritual is somehow something else, something not as authentic as ritual. But, it too is representational. Therefore we treat it as ritual’ (Handelman 1998). Taking all this into consideration, it seems that adding the category of ‘performance’ will be beneficial for my analytical purposes. This will enable us to go beyond such discontinuous binaries as ‘ritual’–‘non-ritual’ and to more effectively distinguish the specific features of humanist marriage ceremonies.

As mentioned above, I suggest that the ‘social performance,’ which I understand following Jeffrey Alexander as ‘the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation’ (Alexander 2006)—in the context of humanist marriages and for my analytical purposes—is perhaps a more appropriate analytical category. According to Alexander, performance is composed of six elements: Systems of Collective Representations, Actors, Audience/Observers, Means of Symbolic Production, *Mise-en-scène*, and Social Power. Although these elements have a high analytical and empirical utility, his definition of performance is rather vague. For this reason, in my analysis I complete Alexander’s view with Grimes’ perspective. According to the latter, when compared to rituals, ‘performances are more audience oriented, and not really believed in’ (Grimes 2014). The audience-oriented character means that questions such as ‘how should this be done?’ or ‘have we got it right?’, which imply an attempt to reproduce some pre-established order, are losing their importance. Therefore, the question ‘has it worked?’ becomes more significant. The issue of whether the audience is convinced (or at least appears so) is more crucial than whether the actors have followed the proper sequence of actions. The success of the performance is achieved if the audience *regards* it as ‘authentic’ (Alexander 2006).

The effectiveness of symbolic action is intertwined with its ‘performativity’ (‘causativity’ and the potential to transform), which I understand in the Austinian sense: saying something (‘the illocutionary speech act’) is also doing something (however, this includes gestures as well as words, which can also be performative). As stated by John L. Austin (1962), performative force is used ‘not to report facts, but to influence people.’ Such acts can be tested in terms of felicity or legitimacy, and not with rational or logical tests of truth and falsity (Tambiah 1979). Ritualised events are performative acts, because they induce changes in the social sphere. In this sense, classical rites of passage (including marriage

ceremonies) are ‘events-that-model’ (Handelman 1998); they are teleological and create purposive change. The future condition does not yet exist, so ‘such an event contains futures within itself’ (Handelman 1998). ‘Events-that-model’ have a strong transformative dimension. Their aim is to do ‘transformative work within themselves’ (Handelman 1998) and this does not simply consist of a confirmation of changes that have happened elsewhere. Such transformative work is possible because of the involvement of ‘higher-order premises (...), that themselves are not embedded in the usual features of the phenomena to be transformed’ (Handelman 1998; see T. Turner 1977). However, in humanist marriage ceremonies, these ‘higher-order premises’ are mainly privatised and may affect the perception of their transformative and performative potential.

Research Methodology

The category of ritual especially captures a rigid, pre-established character of ritualised action. Thus, using merely this one tool would not enable us to effectively grasp the distinctive features of humanist weddings. Therefore, as previously mentioned, I completed the category of ritual with the category of ‘social performance’ (Alexander 2006; Grimes 2014). The latter is used as an analytical tool, to distinguish features of humanist marriages and indicate their innovative character (in terms of structure, as well as their content). I have looked at humanist ceremonies from two perspectives: firstly, through the prism of the features of ritual that are most often indicated by theorists (e.g. formality, conventionality, stereotypy, rigidity or redundancy). Secondly, I take into account the aforementioned features of social performances: e.g. a subversive attitude toward tradition and the established social order, openness to improvisation, or a more audience-oriented character. The aim of the paper is to examine to what extent the above features can be seen in the analysed ceremonies. I would also like to analyse how these features of humanist marriages affect their performativity (understood in the Austinian sense: saying something—‘the illocutionary speech act’—is also doing something), hence I want to focus on the transformative potential of ceremony. Taking into consideration the common belief that couples can do ‘whatever they want’ in a humanist wedding ceremony, it is also worth examining whether there are any constitutive rules⁶ to which the wedding ceremony as a performative act should be subject.

The article is part of broader research on humanist marriages in Poland that I have been conducting since 2015. The analysed data comes mainly from interviews (10) with humanist celebrants, the qualitative content analysis of the humanist ceremonies’ scripts (46), and the observations from humanist marriage ceremonies (8) as well as from narrative interviews (15) with the main actors of marriage ceremonies (the couples).

The interviews with celebrants were semi-structured, and concerned, among other things, their opinion of people’s motivations when opting for humanist marriages, how humanist weddings are constructed, and the sources of participants’ inspiration (I report only these issues which refer to marriages, although interviews also concerned funerals and naming ceremonies).

⁶ They regulate ‘the activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules’ (Searle 1969, cited in Tambiah 1979).

The interviews with couples were divided into two stages: the first part of the conversation was carried out jointly and concerned only the event itself, its conception and construction, course and reception (I refer to the analytic scheme developed by Barbara Myerhoff (1984)). In the second, biographical part, I intended to talk to spouses separately, however, due to the constraints posed by the interview locations, this was not always possible. Although a comparative study was not my aim, I referred to other types of marriage ceremonies common in Poland, in order to highlight the peculiarities of humanist ones. Due to the domination of Catholicism in Poland and the treatment of Catholicism as the norm (both by Catholics and non-Catholics in Poland (Pasieka, Sekerdej 2012: 56)), when we talked about religious counterparts, this creed was the main reference point shared by my interviewees. Therefore, in this analysis, when I discuss more ritualized and formalised religious marriage ceremonies, I mean Catholicism (unless otherwise stated).

Most of the interviewed couples were in their mid-thirties (however, the youngest participant was 28, and the oldest around 60). Most of them lived either in Polish or foreign cities: Krakow, Warsaw, Silesian Metropolis (Tychy and Zabrze), London, Vienna and Melbourne. In each wedding, at least one of the spouses was a Pole. Among other nationalities there were: American, Australian, British, Canadian and Moldovan. The majority of interviews took place as a face-to-face conversation, however those with couples from Vienna and Melbourne were conducted via Skype. All my interviewees came from a middle-class background and seemed to share a common denominator—namely, a kind of ‘creative’ profession. There were, among other jobs, graphic designers, architects, musicians, photographers, managers, programmers, as well as a bio-energotherapist, illustrator, sculptor and a wedding coordinator.

All interviews were audio-recorded and have already been transcribed verbatim. I used two techniques of categorisation in constructing a tool of analysis (Charmaz 2006; Guest, MacQueen, Namey 2011). By using the first technique, I related to the pre-existing themes and already acquired knowledge. I focused on subcategories identified by myself in the process of conceptualisation (e.g. formality/informality or creativity/conventionality). The second approach involves unplanned for, emerging themes grounded in data, such as ‘the need for authenticity.’

The analysis of the collected material focused on such dimensions as:

- The structure of ceremony and its formality—is it open and flexible or predetermined and rigid? Conventionality and typicality—is the classical structure of rite of passage preserved? Are there borrowings from more formalised ceremonies? Rigidity and redundancy—are spontaneity and emotions acceptable? Does a fixed and respected (by couples) pattern of ceremony exist? What are the requirements toward ceremony (authenticity/consistency with order)?
- The language of ceremony—what kind of speech acts (formal/everyday) are performed during the ceremony? What kind of performative utterances are used in the oaths?
- The transformative potential of ceremony—how do the structure and language of the humanist ceremony affect its performative power? To what extent does ceremony emphasize the transformation from one state to another?

‘Has It Worked?’ or ‘Have We Got It Right?’

The results show that the individualised and personalized character of humanist marriages is the feature that my interviewees emphasised most. However, in humanist ceremonies there are still some ‘constitutive rules’ which cause a particular set of actions to be perceived as a wedding. Common elements of humanist and religious ceremonies include the structure, presence of oaths, and exchange of wedding rings as the culmination. Yet, it is worth noting that the old forms (e.g. conventional structure of rites of passage) are topped up with new, alternative content. Therefore, we can observe that a humanist ceremony is structured by analogies and antipathies. The analysed events contained oaths, yet love is increasingly more often declared by less binding phrases (such as ‘long-lasting as possible,’ or ‘as long as we decide to walk through life together,’ than stronger expressions such as ‘until death do us part’). The sermon is replaced by the story behind how the couple met or by a speech about love, which one of the celebrants justified by the fact that couples usually *do not want to listen to this* [sermon—A.R], *they want us* [celebrants—A.R] *to say something about them* (C7_m.Pz). Moments for speeches/readings (formerly religious ones) are preserved, but filled with new content: cultural texts, often with secular provenance (e.g. passages from Kurt Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* or the renowned love monologue from *Crave* by Sarah Kane).

Action in humanist ceremonies is less ritualised and not previously stipulated. Young couples become the actors and the authors of their acts (unlike in most conceptions of rituals). However, conveyed meanings always possess a ‘citational’ quality, and are a kind of citation of background culture that still has a ‘structural effect’; otherwise, a performative utterance would not succeed (Alexander and Mast 2006; Derrida 1988). The requirements towards the form and content of the humanist ceremony are not very rigid; the wedding should just be ‘authentic’ and convincing. Authenticity (sometimes contrasted with ‘ritualisation’ and ‘formalisation’) is the motive that was most often reiterated. Interviewed couples confessed that they had decided on a humanist wedding because they wanted ‘something of their own.’ At the same time, they criticised the conformism and lack of reflexivity of people who are choosing (Catholic) church ceremonies, even if they were not religious. According to most interviewees, such a marriage is *based on a lie from the first day* (YC20_w_Kr⁷). In this sense, humanist marriages as performances have a subversive character and critical potential (although this is rarely expressed explicitly during the ceremony): they undermine tradition and expose the superficiality of some rituals. According to Alexander’s theory, the performance is effective when it is viewed as ‘authentic’ by the audience (then the question ‘has it worked?’ becomes more important than ‘have we got it right?’ (Grimes 2014)). The filling of a ceremony with less formalized and more personalised elements causes such an action to be perceived as emotionally involving and hence, more convincing, even for people who were previously sceptical. As one celebrant said, after ceremonies she conducts, *even the most Catholic daddies* (C9_w_Wa) come up to her to say how much they were moved by, and how proud of their children they were

⁷ Interviews have been coded according to the following system: C(celebrant)/YC(young couple); x(interview number); sex(w-woman/m-man); City(BB—Bielsko Biala; Kr—Kraków; Kl—Kielce; Kt—Katowice; Pz—Poznań; W—Warszawa; Wr—Wrocław; Zb—Zabrze).

during the ceremony. The language of ceremony is one of the spheres in which the previously mentioned deformatization is visible. As one of the celebrants emphasised: *We try to speak more freely and less formally during this ceremony (C7_w_Pz)*. Very often, everyday speech acts are used instead of formalized ones (see Bloch 1989). The code of the message changes. It enables to a greater extent the expression of emotions: *It is this everyday language that I think brings them together. They feel that they are really talking to each other, to the person (C7_m_Pz)*. The less formal nature of humanist marriages enables the involvement of emotions and release of feelings. In ritual, it seems to be possible to a lesser extent, as formalized behaviour creates distance, which ‘separates the private emotions of the actors’ (Tambiah 1979). Therefore, in most cases, even if emotions are visible, they are conventionalised—the institution of ‘professional mourners’ is an illustrative example. Due to the formalised and predictable structure of ritual, reactions are automated and therefore devoid of emotions and reflection. One of the interviewed spouses claimed:

I noticed that people at a normal wedding in church were bored. (...) they are waiting to just get it over with. (...). A plus of a humanist wedding was that people were fascinated, because they didn't know what would happen next (YC21_m_Wa).

The openness of a humanist ceremony to improvisation and spontaneity enables emotional expression, which, as one of the interviewees argued, *is not appropriate in the church (YC21_w_Wa)*. In order to prove the emotionality of their ceremonies, many couples mentioned that ‘even men were crying,’ which contradicts taken-for-granted patterns of behaviour.

In the conducted interviews, both celebrants and couples mentioned that any established and required pattern of the humanist marriage ceremony does not exist. Of course, some templates or ‘proposals’ are possible, but they are aimed at facilitating the work of celebrants and young couples. They do not play the role of model in force. However, despite the fact that, as one interviewee said, humanist weddings may be created *from the very beginning to the very end (YC13_w_Kl)*, this is *bricolage*, rather than creation *ex nihilo*. Sometimes, a humanist marriage ceremony can resemble a patchwork, made from several scenarios proposed by celebrants. The fact that a humanist wedding does not function in the historical vacuum additionally justifies this *bricolage*. As already noted (Aston 2014; Engelke 2014), they draw inspiration from the local cultural context, and in Poland, that would be the Christian heritage (especially given that humanist tradition is rather poorly recognisable in Poland). Furthermore, such a tension between ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ can be seen perhaps in every ritual, as the structure of ritual is never settled once and forever (Handelman 1998). However, such elements of the mosaic are arranged less rigidly than in more formalised events (which, for example, at one of the weddings I observed, enabled the choir to perform Saint Paul’s Ode to Love and a theme song from ‘The Lion King,’ one right after the other (observation Brzesko)). Moreover, in the case of more deeply structured rituals, mistakes or changes in order often result in people deeming the ritual to be invalid and ineffective (i.e. the marriage was not ‘done properly’), and the question ‘have we got it right?’ becomes more crucial than ‘has it worked?’

Ceremony and Its Performative (Causative) Power

As celebrants reported (and conducted analysis confirmed their observations), in humanist weddings, the performative *I vow* is increasingly being replaced by *I promise*, *I swear* or *I will be for you* (C5_m_Pz, C7_m_Pz), all of which are, to an extent, less symbolically binding and therefore less powerful (in the sense of performative power). Two interviewed couples even confessed that they had asked a celebrant not to use such expressions as ‘bride’ and ‘groom.’ As one of the spouses explained:

I didn't want anyone saying that I was the bride, and he was the groom, I wanted to treat it a little differently. (...). I didn't want this, I rather wanted him to say something like 'lovers,' something of this kind, so that it didn't refer to what people usually said about weddings, about brides (YC13_w_K1).

The promise of fidelity, as well as love lasting ‘until death do us part’ is increasingly being removed, which affects the transformative potential of ceremony. One of the celebrants interprets these changes as follows: *Some young people are afraid of this word, they associate it with the Church, they associate it with a more traditional approach to the whole ceremony (C5_m_Pz).* In his opinion these expressions can *simply be closer to life, I promise is more appropriate than I swear; I swear is not an everyday statement (C5_m_Pz).*

For some interviewees, the fact that the commitment is made directly to the other person, without the reference to a ‘higher power,’ actually does not mean that its importance is lower. However, one of the interviewees, who had both a humanist and Catholic marriage, confessed that in the case of the religious marriage, the oath is uttered more resolutely: *everything is said quite bluntly, and there is the “so help me God, Almighty Father” and all (YC13_w_K1).* Yet, she later added: *Even though we had a church wedding, perhaps from my perspective, this resulted more from tradition, rather than some kind of faith that God had joined us.* The formalised words of the oath uttered in church therefore sound more powerful, yet for some people, they are a matter of tradition and not belief. It leads to an impression of continuity, but also to the ‘loss of meaning’ (Goody 1977).

According to the conducted interviews, young couples often doubt the transformative or creative power of ceremony. Such an attitude could be described as ‘anti-ritualism’ (Douglas 1996) and in this sense, performances are ‘not really believed in’ (Grimes 2014). As Alexander (2006) noticed, the key aim of the performance is to display for others the meaning of the actor’s social situation. Indeed, couples’ attitudes are ‘audience-oriented.’ They want to confirm and communicate to their families and loved ones, the change that has already taken place. One of the interviewees admitted: *The ceremony was more for the use of people than for our use (YC_12_m_Kr)* — they wanted to make their family feel a part of their relationship. In this sense, the ceremony has a stronger confirmative purpose than a transformative dimension. Importantly, during many humanist weddings, this utterance can be heard: ‘It’s not the ceremony that forms, or creates marriage A and B, but the young couple does this on their own, through the love and support they give each other’ (observation Tomaszowice; Oblęgorek; Brzesko scenario.2;6;11;14;19;34). One of the interviewees admitted that he had been counting the duration of their marriage not from the time of the ceremony, but in fact much earlier:

Our wedding was an event in the first year of our relationship, when Joanna decided that it would be ok. There is a big age gap between us (...). At a certain point, Joanna found that she had to think about it. And she did; we have been counting the years of our marriage since then (YC_12.m_Kr).

Importantly, the transformative aspect and the need for ‘being recognised’ was more strongly emphasised by the homosexual couple:

Because Agnieszka’s parents unfortunately didn’t... I mean, her family wasn’t there, because they said it wasn’t a wedding. (...) I mean, now it’s all okay, but the wedding actually did clear up a lot of things, it made things change. So, this wedding was an incredible event, (...) the wedding itself changed a lot in the environment, a lot. People just didn’t expect it, that’s what I think. That it would be so complete. I think a large portion went there taking all this lightly: it’s not just that there were two women, it was a humanist wedding. (...). I think that this wedding was of great importance for these guests. (...) they said that it had given them a lot. So, the wedding was really an amazing event for us, it was different than I had expected (YC11_w1_Wa).

In Poland perhaps, especially in the case of same-sex couples, communication of the meaning of the social situation often comes to the fore:

Also, the fact that we are not straight and so on, is of great importance. (...) to put it in other words, this symbolism was still different than in a standard, let’s say, “relationship.” (...) we did it for us, but also for such a kind of closing of what was happening (...), to show others in a positive sense what it [their relationship—A.R] is and what it is about. Well, that we just could not take a wedding any other way and we would not be able to, so it would be like this one and only option (YC11_w1_Wa).

However, the presentation of ‘the meaning of a social situation,’ is important also in the case of heterosexual couples. Due to the fact that all humanist marriages (both heterosexual and homosexual ceremonies) are not legally recognised in Poland, the complementarity of civil and humanist marriage ceremonies in Polish circumstances is inevitable (all interviewed couples who had such an opportunity also had a civil ceremony in a registry office). However, many couples highlighted that they do not deem it a ‘rite of passage,’ but rather a mundane and emotionless visit to the office, complete with the iteration of rigid formulae, and the signature: *It’s not a declaration of love for another person, it’s repeating something that someone tells you to, so they can give you a “piece of paper”* (YC17_w_Kr). This was reiterated in each interview, except in the case of the homosexual couple. What is meaningful, in all cases, is that a celebration dinner, party or reception was held after the humanist not the civil ceremony. However, the lack of legal consequences results in humanist marriages often being described as *make-believe marriages (śluby na niby)* (YC13_w_KI). For the audience, the performative power of the ceremony is often tied to the legal dimension:

Many people from the family, once we had told them about the idea (...) were really happy, but there were questions: “All right, but when is there going to be some formal document?” [when is the civil wedding—A.R] (YC17_w_Kr).

We can therefore here clearly perceive the clash between the two worldviews and logics. From the first perspective, the emphasis is put on the legal dimension: the act of marriage is performative when it is somehow ‘formalised’ and guaranteed by some authority or recognisable ‘higher order premise.’ The reference to a higher instance strengthens the message, and consequently, the lack of such references undermines the power of the words uttered. The second, deformalized approach, represented by my interviewees, focuses on the authenticity: the

act of marriage is important, as long as there is love between the spouses. There is no external authority who acts as the guarantor of the ceremony. As one of the interviewees said: *A marriage is just the beginning, not the end* (YC22_w_Wa), which means that it is not the culmination of their relationship, after which nothing will happen and change. On the contrary, this is simply the next stage, therefore, for them, the promise of love to the end of life is unreasonable.

Dramatic Structure—the Tension between the Old and the New

Such lower ‘transformative potential’ of the marriage ceremony can be explained by the fact that the ‘trajectories’ of relationships have changed, and contemporary couples now come into being by a slower ‘step-by-step approach’ (Segalen 2008). The dramatic structure of humanist marriage ceremonies still reflects the conventional structure of a rite of passage. Although, as Victor Turner (who further developed the theory of van Gennep) indicated, this tricuspid structure with a separation phase at the beginning, a liminal phase in the middle and an incorporation phase at the end, is typical not only for rituals of ‘critical moments of life,’ but is more universal, and accompanies every change or passage (Szyjewski 2006). However, it could be said that the framework of humanist marriage ceremonies is blurred, which means that well-defined phases cease to be so clear. It can be treated as a symptom of the already mentioned socio-cultural changes, regarding the perception of marriage and family life. Contemporary marriage ‘to a lesser degree sanctifies the “transformation” from one social state to another, from one home to the next (...)’⁸ (Segalen 2008). Nowadays, relationships are more often formed in a process stretched over a longer period of time. The old story of a young girl separated from her parents and immediately married to a man does not appear and it is more often replaced by the descriptions of the everyday life of couples who have been living together for quite a while (e.g. in the case of one interviewed couple, their young child of preschool age took part in the ceremony). One of my interviewees compared humanist marriage ceremonies with their Catholic counterparts. They regarded the latter as something *super important, a “gate” you pass through. While we, actually, hadn’t felt any pressure with a wedding, we lived together before and not a lot has changed* (YC22_w_Wa). For them, *marriage was just another step in the relationship, and not something that changes everything* (YC22_w_Wa), although this does not mean that the day was unimportant. Therefore, in this case, a marriage ceremony is a confirmation of changes that have happened previously, rather than a transformation and a change in itself. This is because the transformation is possible when the future condition does not yet exist (Handelman 1998).

Conclusion

Humanist wedding ceremonies are less ritualised and formalised, hence their structure is more flexible and ‘open.’ Their individualisation means that there are no attempts to repro-

⁸ Segalen refers to marriage in general (however she describes mainly the French context), but in the Polish context her statements are applicable especially to humanist marriage ceremonies.

duce a previously established order ‘as accurately as possible.’ In the case of the analysed ceremonies, neither ‘the efficacious symbols,’ nor ‘the right words’ uttered in ‘the right order’ are requested (Douglas 1996). Due to this openness, new meanings may be conveyed more effectively than in a ritual wherein meanings often undergo the process of ‘ossification’ (Bloch 1989). There is no stipulated order for a humanist marriage ceremony, however, the whole event is organised in line with the ‘constitutive rules’ of wedding ceremonies through which the whole event can be recognised as a wedding ceremony by the audience. The exchange of vows and wedding rings in front of witnesses is preserved as a culmination point in the event. Also, we observe the impact of the unspoken, cultural norm that marriage is still a bond between *two* people. However, the character of these rules is general and rather universal for this cultural sphere. This flexibility causes the analysed marriages to be deemed as ‘reflective experiments.’ Therefore, action is less automated, more thought-out and spontaneous, and enables to a greater extent the release of emotions and feelings. However, celebrants usually present possible scenarios of the ceremony to young couples. In this sense, humanist marriages preserve some classical features of ritual, such as repeatable and replicable formulae, yet, particular utterances do not have to be invariant, and even if certain ‘pre-figurations’ exist, they do not play a role of model in force.

In the background of humanist ceremonies, a kind of paradox appears. Propagators of humanist marriages claim that they want to create a ‘ritual alternative’ to religious rites of passage. However, some of these initiatives could be deemed as anti-ritualistic (because ritualism means the belief in high effectiveness of symbolic actions, if, of course, the symbols are used properly and the words uttered in right order (Douglas 1996)). Typically, the main actors in humanist marriages often doubt the ‘transformative’ power of the ceremony. Conducted interviews and observations indicated an interesting tendency to diminish the role of the ceremony to a mere ‘confirmation’ of changes that have already taken place, rather than a performative act that genuinely transforms its participants’ status. In this sense a performative force is undermined. During many humanist weddings, it has been heard that it is not the ceremony that forms or creates the marriage. In this sense we may say that humanist weddings as performances aim to communicate the meanings of the actors’ social situation, and they are ‘not really believed in’—for couples, their marriage is not created directly by the ceremony, but rather is the result of a process that began much earlier. Some of my interviewees highlighted that the ceremony was more of a confirmation of their relationship that had been established much earlier, in contrast to the creation of a completely new relationship. Meaningfully, only the homosexual couple, through a humanist wedding, tried to realise their need for ‘legitimisation.’ For them, the ceremony really marked a turning point on the path towards their community’s acceptance of their relationship.

The reduced transformative power of the ceremony calls to mind once again Handelman, and his statement that transformation is possible only when the future condition does not yet exist, and the event contains the future within itself (Handelman 1998). The transformational work of the ceremony is weakened by current changes in the way couples are commonly formed (i.e. more slowly over a longer duration) (Segalen 2008), and in an attitude towards marriage and its indissolubility. Due to the changes in couples’ trajectories (e.g. cohabitation before marriage, re-marriage, having children out of wedlock, or the rise of the average age of marriage), the dramatic structure of the wedding as a classical rite

of passage is blurred. The decreasing marital durability seems to be a more general trend, which may also be reflected by the increasing rate of annulments of marriages within the Catholic Church (Paprzycka, Mianowska 2020).

As my research revealed, the character of the analysed ceremonies is often auto-referential. Rites are deeply rooted in the biographies of individuals and a naturalistic, temporal frame. Therefore, 'higher-order premises,' are shrunk and privatised, and the meanings to which they refer might be unintelligible for some audiences. This feature may also undermine the transformative dimension of the ceremony. The involvement of a higher-order premise further facilitates a transformation (T. Turner 1977). On the contrary, couples highlighted that it is they who are the 'highest authority,' even if the audience might not recognise them as such. Although the audience very often perceive humanist wedding ceremonies as 'emotional' and 'personal,' the lack of legal consequences can often cause in their eyes the ceremony to be incomplete, noncommittal, and not serious enough.

The analysis indicated two ways in which couples themselves interpret the performative power of humanist ceremonies. According to the first, God ceases to be the main agent and guarantor of the ceremony, and due to the lack of such references, the strength of the oath decreases. Importantly, this was the opinion of women who had both humanist and Catholic weddings. However, for most humanist couples, the significance of the oath is actually strengthened, precisely because it is only between *them*, and no external authority is involved. Such tension between these two logics of interpretation can be treated as an effect of the 'subjective turn of modern culture' (Taylor 1991)—the external authority is increasingly being replaced with authority rooted in the individual. However, while the couples I met wanted to avoid an intrusive control and regulation exercised by formalised organisations (e.g. church, state), they still yearned for 'some' regulation exercised by informal social control, and wanted to utter (even 'softened') oaths in front of witnesses. Therefore, despite the individualisation, the humanist marriage ceremonies still preserved a communal character.

The main actors of ceremony put strong emphasis on the 'authenticity.' Therefore, very often the promises of fidelity and love 'until death do us part' are removed from the wedding vows. Love is declared with performative utterances such as 'I promise,' 'I swear' or 'I will be for you,' rather than 'I vow.' Saying something is also doing something, it constitutes a new reality, however, 'I will be for you' is less obliging and explicit than 'I will be with you till death do us part.' These changes cause the oath to become less symbolically binding and therefore less powerful (in the sense of performative power). The lack of authenticity is also the reason why humanist couples criticise people who stay in church (in Poland, primarily the Roman Catholic Church) only for the sake of the rite of passage, even if it is an ideologically foreign worldview and belief for them. Such attitudes have been labelled 'hypocrisy' and 'conformism.' In this sense, the humanist marriages in Poland may have a subversive character, which is often attributed to performances. They have the potential to undermine tradition, contrary to rituals, which are seen rather as 'homeostatic,' protecting the *status quo*, and reinforcing the established social power.

An attempt to analyse not only the content but also the form of humanist marriage ceremonies seems to be justified, firstly because 'cultural considerations are integrally implicated in the form that ritual takes' (Tambiah 1979), and secondly, because researchers, especially an-

thropologists, inspired by performance studies, have often been criticised for paying too much attention to enactment (or ‘performance’) rather than to the ‘logic of design’ of events (Handelman 1998). Focusing on the ‘logic of design’ of humanist marriages, as well as including the category of performance, gives a new viewpoint, enabling a deeper analysis and distinguishing specific features of such ceremonies. The appearance of such a hybrid phenomenon as humanist marriages might be considered as a sign of Poles’ changing attitude to love and marriage and new expectations regarding marriage ceremonies in Poland in general.

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