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On the Usefulness of Aleida and Jan Assmann's Concept of Cultural Memory for Studying Local Communities in Contemporary Poland—the Case of Olsztyn

Abstract: The goal of this article is to review the possibilities and limitations of applying Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept to the study of local memory, using as an example the memory of inhabitants of the Polish town of Olsztyn. The author first briefly presents selected key premises of Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory. She then addresses the question of how the Assmanns' concept is received and interpreted in Poland. Discussion of these issues leads to an analysis of the advantages and difficulties of applying the two German scholars' theoretical proposals to the study of memory in local communities. The author refers to the case of a moderately aggregated, urban society with a complicated multiethnic past. Her conclusions concern the challenges scholars face in adopting Aleida and Jan Assmann's theoretical perspective for studying memory and local communities in this part of Europe.

Keywords: Cultural memory, collective memory, local community, town, Polish society

Although previously well-known and influential in German-speaking countries, in the past few years Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory has been receiving greater interest in Poland as well. Scholars are paying particular attention to the Assmanns' theoretical premises concerning the social aspects of memory, remembrance, and commemoration. The specific nature of the social memory of Central European societies and the challenges that researchers of such societies face means, however, that the method of interpreting individual concepts and analytical schemas, the context in which they are invoked, and their manner of use in research differ from those presented by researchers in Western European circles.

My aim is to show the possibilities and limitations of adopting Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept of social memory for research into the local aspect of collective memory. I will concentrate on the local, territorial, community memory created by inhabitants of a medium-sized town in north-eastern Poland. This case is not only the one I know best, but also reveals the problems facing scholars studying local memory in most East Central European countries (which since the nineties have been undergoing major civilizational and cultural changes).

First, I will briefly present those premises of Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory that are important for the subject at hand. Then I will address the question of references in Poland to the Assmanns' work. I will use this short discus-

sion to analyze the advantages and difficulties of applying the Assmanns' theoretical proposals on cultural memory to studying local memory in contemporary Poland.¹

The Assmanns' Types of Collective Memory—the Most Important Premises

The concept of cultural memory proposed by Jan Assmann, the Egyptologist and researcher of ancient culture, and then elaborated with Aleida Assmann, the Egyptologist, English philologist, and scholar of culture, aims to provide a theoretical framework for phenomena observed in very different cultures, times, and places.

Jan Assmann's theoretical proposals, which refer to Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, are based on distinguishing *cultural memory* and *communicative memory* within collective memory (Assmann 1988, 1992).

In Assmann's opinion, cultural memory is memory based on institutionalized mnemotechniques created 'from above' by means of institutions supervised by the authorities (Assmann 2008: 52). Cultural memory ensures the members of a given society (group) have feelings of community, unity, and connections based on a common past. In opposition to communicative memory it is supra-generational. Its goal is the transfer of selected content and interpretation of the past so that members of a given society can create a common memory and common identity on its basis. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the categories of cultural memory and communicative memory are not in opposition to one another but supplementary.

The same is true of *function memory* and *store memory*, which Aleida Assmann distinguishes within cultural memory, calling them complementary means of remembrance. Moreover, she frequently emphasizes their mutual dependence and the flow of content between them, understanding them in terms of perspectives: foreground (function memory) and background (store memory) (Assmann 1999, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2011).

Reception of Aleida and Jan Assmann's Works in Poland

In Poland (as in other countries of the former Eastern bloc), the publications of Aleida and Jan Assmann became popular only after the turn of the 21st century.² Several reasons for this 'late' interest in the Assmanns' works can be listed.

One of the most important of these was doubtless the process that occurred in all the formerly communist countries of East Central Europe. The changes called systemic transformations—the change from totalitarian systems to democratic sys-

¹ In presenting these questions I will refer chiefly to the conclusions of my doctoral work concerning the post-war cultural memory of Olsztyn's inhabitants, and also to the results and reflections of selected works of authors making use of the Assmanns' proposals.

² One of the first discussions of the Assmanns' concept appeared in *Wypędzeni ze Wschodu* [Exiles from the East] (Bömelburg et al. 2001). Their concept was presented at greater length by, among others, Robert Traba and Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (Assmann 2008; Traba 2009; Saryusz-Wolska 2009; Saryusz-Wolska 2011).

tems—provided not only possibilities for commemorating events or figures that had earlier been condemned or excluded from the public sphere, but also had far-reaching impact by initiating increasingly freer discussions, devoid of ideological limitations, on difficult issues of the still recent past (Szacka 2006).

These changes coincided in time with the growth of interest in memory issues (what has even been described as a 'memory boom') observed in Western countries since the eighties (Olick, Robbins 1998). Although this phenomenon appeared much later in the eastern part of the continent, yet it turned out to be very strong when added to the new possibilities of unhampered discussion of subjects that had earlier been controlled, avoided, or outright forbidden by the state authorities.

Both processes significantly contributed to beginning the search for theoretical solutions and tools that would make it possible to describe and analyse the new phenomena connected with memory changes in East Central Europe. Central European scholars not only willingly and in decidedly larger numbers took to reading such classics as the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, or Pierre Nora, they also concentrated on developing their own research traditions concerning references to the near or distant past and began a broader discussion on, above all, concepts popular in Euro-American circles (for instance, the concepts of Paul Connerton or Jeffrey K. Olick). The proposals of scholars writing mainly in German were referred to only sporadically.

The lack of wider reference to the Assmanns' work was also due to the nature of their previous work and to the trend of Polish research into collective memory, which, in concentrating on existing questions connected with various types of traditions and heritage,³ had great significance for the reception of new theoretical and methodological ideas. Polish scholars who cultivate and develop ideas in directions developed by their predecessors are decidedly closer to the French rather than to Anglo-American or German traditions of the humanities. This kind of domination and lack of close cooperation with German scholars in the area of social research into memory (particularly among sociologists) can be seen as one of the elements that significantly delayed consideration of our western neighbours' work in the field of memory research.

Overcoming the language barrier was also important for popularizing the Assmanns' work. In Poland, their work was known solely to a narrow circle of Germanists, who were able to read it in the original.⁴ For other scholars, the sole available presentation of Jan Assmann's ideas was for many years a portion of an article published in 2003 in the journal *Borussia*. This lacuna was only filled in 2009 with a translation of his most important work, entitled in Polish *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych* (Assmann 2009).⁵ As to Aleida Assmann's proposals, it has only recently become possible to read portions of

³ The traditions of Polish research into memory are discussed in this volume by Elżbieta Tarkowska.

⁴ The works of Hubert Orłowski could be referred to here, as well as scholars connected with the Western Institute and the *Borussia* journal.

⁵ This same year the translation of a portion of Jan Assmann's book *Kultura pamięci* [Cultural Memory] appeared (Assmann 2009c).

her most important work, *Erinnerungsräume, Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Assmann 1999), translated into Polish as *Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej* (Assmann 2009a), and also certain articles that have appeared in various publications (Assmann 2010).

The fact that the Assmanns' work was unknown until the end of the nineties in the United States (J. K. Olick 2008), which has recently been so important a source of inspiration for contemporary Central European scholars, did not favour the reception of their work in Poland. It was only the growing interest in Aleida and Jan Assmanns' publications concerning changes in German memory after the Second World War, particularly in relation to the Holocaust and its cultural consequences, that attracted the attention of a wider range of Polish scholars to the theoretical ideas contained in their works.

It would seem that the reception of Jan and Aleida Assmanns' work was also considerably influenced by problems of translation, particularly the question of translating into Polish the most important terms in their founding works (Assmann 1999, Assmann 1992). While there are no reservations about the most important of these—*kulturelles Gedächtnis* as *pamięć kulturowa* (cultural memory)—others have evoked considerable controversy. The concept of *kommunikatives Gedächtnis*—*communicative memory*—was translated as both *pamięć komunikatywna* (Traba 2009: 200; Assmann 2003; Assmann 2009c) and *pamięć komunikacyjna* (Kaźmierska 2008; Saryusz-Wolska 2009). Some scholars use both translations interchangeably (Wóycicki 2011). The concept of *Funktionsgedächtnis* (function memory) is translated as *pamięć funkcyjna* (Żytniec 2007), but also as *pamięć funkcjonalna* (Traba 2006: 44; Saryusz-Wolska 2011: 85) while *Speichergedächtnis* (store memory) appears in works published in Polish as both *pamięć archiwizująca* (archiving memory) (Traba 2007: 52 et seq.; Korzeniewski 2007) and as *pamięć magazynująca* (storing memory) (Saryusz-Wolska 2011: 85). In many cases these difficulties in establishing one Polish translation derive from earlier Polish translations of other German authors and from different ways of interpreting individual terms (Saryusz-Wolska 2009: 28 et seq.).

The result of these disputes (which are often known solely to a small group of Germanists) and of the various translations appearing in various publications is that sometimes not only small errors but also erroneous understandings of the Assmanns' theoretical proposals occur. The misunderstandings involve the use of terms known from portions of the Assmanns' work translated in recent years or categories known only from descriptions presented by Polish authors. For instance, the various translations of the term *Speichergedächtnis* might lead one to believe the Assmanns distinguish two separate types of memory—storing memory (*pamięć magazynująca*) and archiving memory (*pamięć archiwizująca*)—which is clearly the result of a mistaken understanding of the nature of the dispute over one of the basic terms, and not the introduction of new divisions by the creators of the concept of cultural memory.

Regardless of the substantive arguments involved in the choice of the best translation, the reception of the Assmanns' work in Poland would be facilitated by adopting

uniform translations of basic terms such as communicative memory, function memory, and store memory, and using them in succeeding works.⁶

All the above-mentioned factors mean that the Assmanns' concepts have rarely been used in Polish research into collective memory. One of the first researchers to use their theoretical proposals was Robert Traba, who saw that they contained 'not only a theoretical model, but also a practical guide to their application in research' (Traba 2006: 63). This does not mean, of course, that the Assmanns created a closed theory,⁷ or that they produced methodological premises that can be adopted without reservation by representatives of humanist disciplines considering the concept of memory, broadly understood.

Other researchers have readily used certain of the Assmanns' concepts: usually those concerning communicative and cultural memory. Differentiating these two analytical categories has turned out to be particularly useful in studying ways of constructing recent state and national history, including research into the memory and commemoration of Second World War experiences (Kwiatkowski et al. 2010), and the post-war history of the state and nation (Wóycicka 2009): in other words, subjects that are still tangible and are communicable by living witnesses. However, the Assmanns' concepts appear decidedly less often in research into earlier periods. Works such as Robert Traba's *Wschodniopruskość* (Traba 2005), in which the essential element is seen to be not only the moment of 'passage' between communicative and cultural memory but also the results of this process, are still exceptions, as are works that concern cultural memory viewed in the European dimension, such as Hans Georg Pott's books based on Jan Assmann's concepts (Pott 2007), which in Poland did not receive much comment.

The question of mutual relations between communicative and cultural memory also seems to be inspiring for scholars studying not only the memory of Polish society but also the memory of neighbouring countries. It is doubtless no coincidence that the questions of remembering, remembrance, or changing consciousness that appeared in the Assmanns' newest works have since been undertaken by scholars studying 'German memory', such as Kazimierz Wóycicki (2011), and researchers studying memory about the Soviet labour camps, such as Zuzanna Bogumił (2012). In both cases, the Assmanns' proposals proved so inspiring that they enabled not only discussion of changes in memory observed in Germany and Russia, but also indication of the specifics, similarities, and differences of collective memory in those countries and in Poland.

It is significant in this light that Polish scholars refer decidedly less often to the proposals of Aleida Assmann than to those of Jan Assmann. Although Aleida Assmann has devoted much space to issues of the relations between power and memory and various modes of commemoration over the space of centuries, discussing in depth the

⁶ The basis could be the first Polish publication of the Assmanns' work, in which mention is made of *pamięć komunikatywna* [communicative memory] (Assmann 2003, pp. 11–16; Assmann 2008), *pamięć funkcjonalna* [function memory] and *pamięć magazynująca* [story memory] (Assmann 2009a).

⁷ In using the idea of 'theory' I would like to call attention to its ambiguity and also to the multiplicity of diverse discussions and disputes it has engendered in all the humanities.

questions of the alliance between memory and the official authorities, and the weight of genealogy in these relations, her views are relatively rarely utilized in Polish works. With exceptions such as Robert Traba (Traba 2009) and Zbigniew Mazur (2009), few authors have accorded Aleida Assmann's proposals scholarly reception. Perhaps this is due to the earlier research work on these issues in Poland and the use of theoretical concepts worked out during the previous decade (Szacka 2006, Szpociński, Kwiatkowski 2006).

The Assmanns' concepts have also been willingly referred to by experts in literature and culture, and particularly by the still small group of scholars who study German literature, history, and culture, such as Hubert Orłowski, Jerzy Kałużny, and Bartosz Korzeniewski. They have also appeared in works where the cultural memory of towns is analyzed through the medium of literary texts or film (Saryusz-Wolska 2010).

The Assmanns' Concept in Research into the Memory of Local Communities

Currently, the Assmanns' concept is still gaining popularity not only as a departure point for discussing memory in its social dimension, but primarily as an important source of theoretical proposals that differ from previous views of memory issues. Could it also be useful and inspiring in Polish research into collective memory viewed at the level of local communities?⁸

Raising these questions requires an explanation of how the concept of local communities is understood here, what kind of community's memory will be discussed, and also (very briefly) how my subject has been presented previously in the works of Polish authors.

I will begin with this last question. As Paweł Starosta (1995) writes more fully, research concerning local communities has a rich tradition in Poland and is connected with the names of Stanisław Ossowski, Kazimierz Dobrowolski, Stefan Nowakowski, and Franciszek Bujak. Yet among the many issues these scholars consider, the memory of local communities has usually remained on the margins of their interests. Only in very recent years has the subject appeared in succeeding works that draw attention to, among other things, the role and specific nature of this type of memory, and particularly the relation of local memory to national and state memory (Kurczewska 2002, Kurczewska 2006, Kwiatkowski 2008).

With this perspective in mind, my analysis will be directed solely at one type of local community⁹—urban society. Such a society is formed by the inhabitants of Olasztyń (formerly German Allenstein), who mostly came to the town after the Second World War and previously had no connections there, or who are descendants of these

⁸ In writing 'local community' I am thinking here of a community with strong internal ties, distinct from its surroundings: a community at the medium level of social aggregation (that is, between that of the whole community—the nation, or the society and state—and the level of the individual and his closest social environment) (Kurczewska 2006: XV, 111).

⁹ Other types of local communities are rural communities, small towns, regional communities, large towns, provinces, etc.

newcomers. After a few decades Olsztyn managed to create a community based not only on ties to the town as a place of residence, but also ties to its past, its heritage: to create a sense of pride in being one of its inhabitants. What is important is also that after several decades, the sense of community, which was originally built from above by the central authorities on foundations of national and state unity, now rests also on ties with the multicultural, local tradition.

This tradition is inseparably connected with the town's history. Olsztyn is a town on the river Łyna, situated in the north-eastern part of Poland, in the region called Warmia. After the Second World War, it was inhabited by not quite 44,000 persons; currently, after nearly 60 years, it has close to 180,000 inhabitants.¹⁰ Its history, reaching back to the middle of the 14th century, has been marked by successive changes in state affiliation: first the city lay within the confines of the state of the Teutonic Knights, then in the middle of the 15th century it found itself within the borders of the Kingdom of Poland, to become, three hundred years later, a part first of the Kingdom of Prussia, and then of the German Reich. Olsztyn found itself once again within Poland's borders after the Second World War. Then too a fundamental change in the ethnic and national composition of its inhabitants occurred: previously, the majority of its inhabitants, who had described themselves as Germans, Mazurians, or Warmians, were replaced by immigrants coming chiefly from the former territories of Poland attached to the USSR or from Warsaw and its environs. In the fifties, the immigrants constituted about 90% of all the inhabitants (Sakson 1998). Persons coming to the town from various parts of pre-war Poland as a result of the post-war changes in borders mostly described themselves as Poles. The town's present population is formed by the generation of immigrants from distant regions of the state and their descendants who were born in the town and have ties to it. In addition to persons describing themselves as Poles, there are also persons among the inhabitants who describe themselves as autochthons: Warmians and Mazurians, and also those who call themselves members of the German minority. What is important is that the town, which was in the past multicultural and multiethnic, was also connected with various faiths: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism.

What conclusions can be drawn from the use of Jan and Aleida Assmann's concepts to study the memory of such a local community? Which of the proposals of the researchers will prove useful and which will require supplementation and why? Above all, however, is the use of the Assmanns' concept for research into a local territorial community justified?

In answering these questions, I will first concentrate on those characteristics of the Assmanns' concept that turn out to be valuable and inspiring in studying the memory of a local community like Olsztyn, and then I will turn to those traits and premises that require modification, refinement, or the opposite, broadening, at the moment of their adoption for studying such societies.

¹⁰ http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_655_PLK_HTML.htm

The Possibilities of Using the Assmanns' Concept for Studying Local Communities

To begin with, the specifics of the Assmanns' concept and the distinguishing features of their proposals should be indicated.

First, Aleida and Jan Assmanns' theoretical and methodological inspirations indicate their premises are based on findings in research fields that are sometimes quite distant from one another. Referring to the theses of anthropologists, ethnologists, philosophers, linguists, literary critics, and students of antiquity, the Assmanns show that these disciplines are linked by the topic of memory and that it could become the basis for new directions of study within various fields. The inter- or trans-disciplinary nature of their work, combining the achievements of several fields within one theoretical and methodological perspective, undoubtedly promotes understanding between representatives of various disciplines, who often have very varying theoretical and methodological approaches. This is important particularly in countries such as Poland, where strict boundaries between academic disciplines still hamper understanding between scholars.

The Assmanns inter- or trans-disciplinary work could, however, cause a number of difficulties. An example is the manner in which the Assmanns define the collective creating a cultural memory. Although the most often perceived and emphasized characteristic of their concepts is, as Jan Assmann has repeatedly mentioned, its unification of three elements—memories, cultures, and groups—both Aleida and Jan Assmann use ideas such as 'group', 'collectivity', 'society', or 'community' rather loosely. Jan and Aleida Assmann have unwillingly given definitions, often using categories such as 'group', 'society', or 'community' interchangeably. Portions of lectures, such as the one in which the Assmanns state that they 'concentrate on the interior perspective of a given collectivity', are frequently the only indication of what distinguishes their proposals from those presented by other authors (Assmann 2008: 65).

Their comments on the subject of collective identity, or self-identification, are an indication of the kind of collectivity they want to distinguish. In Jan Assmann's opinion, one of the most important—though not always essential—elements of collective identity (Assmann 2008: 30) is participation in a common interpretation of the past. In this manner, the group's imagining of itself is created. A similar question is discussed by Aleida Assmann, who refers to Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' and applies it not only in studying contemporary nations, but to presenting the idea of a common European memory (Assmann 2010).

The important thing is that the Assmanns, in writing about cultural memory, refer to the examples of very different types of societies. On the basis of the solutions they have developed, they show the diversity of goals, possibilities, and even the very cultures of remembrance. In this manner they show that their premises can be applied equally to research into cultures of remembrance such as the Israeli-Jewish, Greek (Assmann 2008), or contemporary German ones (Assmann 2009b).

The adoption of such a perspective and such a manner of applying theoretical categories turns out to have an important result for the question of local community memory. In balancing between various terms and referring to very different examples

of ethnic groups, nationalities, supra-national or supra-state communities, and societies formed by the idea of the state, the Assmanns justify the concept's use to analyse the memory of social systems at various levels of social aggregation. Among these are local communities, in so far as they fulfil the conditions concerning a 'remembrance community'.

The inhabitants of Olsztyn, like many other local communities of the urban type in the former territories of Eastern Prussia, indubitably meet the conditions. They are linked not only by their place of residence, but also by their manner of viewing the past, which fulfils the requisites for cultural memory. This community is based primarily on a connection with a town, with its history, with an increasing 'rootedness' related to the succession of generations and the development of an individual vision of the past based on its existing heritage (Sakson 2011). The anniversary celebrations of the city's founding, during which its most famous inhabitants are remembered, are an example. Today's Olsztynians appear to find the ties of former heroes to the city and their services to it more important than matters of ethnic origin or nationality, in contrast to how they felt in the decades after the Second World War (Karkowska 2010).

Secondly, the specificity of Aleida and Jan Assmanns' proposals is that it allows attention to be concentrated on particular theoretical solutions or processes understood within a theoretical framework, often without the necessity of referring to a whole elaborate analytical system. Proof is the above-mentioned tendency of Polish scholars to apply selected theoretical proposals of the Assmanns, particularly cultural and communicative memory.

Why, however, does the category of communicative and cultural memory turn out to be so important for recent research and what does it contribute to research into local communities? What matters perhaps is the attention the Assmanns give to changes related to the cultural dimension of memory, the role of generational change,¹¹ and the transformation of memory connected with the passage of time. Polish scholars have naturally discussed these questions in their works, yet their attention has decidedly more often centred on points such as the very definition of collective memory, the relation and difference between individual and collective memory or between memory and history, the role of collective memory in shaping the vision of the state and nation, or the relations and changeability of official and unofficial memory (Szacka 2006, Kwiatkowski 2008). The question of collective memory viewed primarily in the cultural dimension has been raised much less frequently.

In the newest research into collective memory, particularly of local communities trying to work out their own vision of the past and functioning in democratic states, it is very significant that the subordination of a community's own, local vision of the past to the vision propagated by the state is decidedly less necessary than before the systemic transformations. Namely, it portrays those memory changes that, although

¹¹ As Jan Assmann observes:

After forty years a certain era of collective memory is coming to an end: living memory is threatened with extinction, and the forms of cultural memory are becoming problematic. Even if the debates about historical memory, about mnemotechnique memory, assume highly abstract and learned forms, this specific problem appears to be the existential core of the discourse... (Assmann 2008: 27).

they are still controlled by, for instance, the state authorities, are heading in the direction of creating a sufficiently cohesive vision of the past to be shared by the society as a whole—to take into account its needs and heritage.

Thirdly, what distinguishes the Assmanns' concept is a departure from marking definite boundaries between categories. By differentiating communicative memory and cultural memory, the Assmanns recognize them as mutually complementary rather than mutually opposing. The adoption of such a premise in research into local communities of post-communist countries is significant not only in so far as it allows such important earlier phenomena as variability and the frequent contradictions of official, state-propagated communications concerning the past and communications functioning in families or in given environments to be perceived, but also in making it possible, by referring to theoretical premises tested on other examples, to study the mutual influences of various types of memory, their supplementation, and disappearance.

How essential these questions are, and how deceptive the use of reductive, dichotomist, and homogenizing categories in studying local communities can be, has been shown by Joanna Kurczewska (Kurczewska 2004: 99). In studying the memories of local communities that have experienced the change from communist to democratic system, the departure from a dichotomist understanding of phenomena is the more important as it enables perception of the specifics and mechanisms of changes in memory during systemic transformations.

Here we come to the next, fourth, trait of Aleida and Jan Assmanns' concept. The Assmanns' system not only points to the various factors and dependences to which the phenomena of memory are subject, but also encompasses, in the theoretical framework, a complex and multi-aspect mechanism of change in the memory of a given collectivity. In referring to Maurice Halbwachs' premise that 'collective memory is dependent on the framework organizing memory',¹² the Assmanns understand a remembrance framework to include not only the historical conditions studied by historians, but also worldviews, societal situations, and cultural heritage. All these form a context that is not only the background for analyses, but integral to them. It thus becomes possible to view the processes accompanying memory variability in reference to variability in the conditions of remembrance.

In analyses of mid-range communities, the adoption of such premises becomes important because at this level the remembrance framework could be different than at the state or national level, or could be differently formed. However, it is worth emphasizing here that the 'framework organizing memory' has a 'non-metaphorical' nature (Assmann 2008: 52), and can be shaped entirely differently at the level of a local community; it may be maintained by other institutions, which introduce their 'memory policy' by other means.

¹² This framework (called the memory framework, the reference framework in connection with...) is very broadly understood, as it is formed by very different components of social reality. Their presence or absence has a fundamental impact on the interpretation and selection of content and on reading the meanings of cultural memory.

The fifth trait of the Assmann's concept is that the categories they propose are useful in analysing phenomena observed at various times in various historical, political, or social contexts. *Figures of memory*, that is, imaginings about the past functioning in a given group at a given time, and not *historical facts* understood as the events, processes, or phenomena presented by historians based on a critical analysis of historical sources, are an example of such a category. Adoption of the premise whereby figures of memory are compared rather than historical facts makes it possible to show how far the manner of presenting events, processes, historical figures, or interpretations of their actions can change.

An example is how Mikołaj Kopernik (Nicolaus Copernicus) is remembered in Olsztyn. In the 1950s this historical figure was chiefly shown as a world-famous scholar, a Pole, a Polish patriot (Wakar, Wolski 1956), a symbol of resistance to the Teutonic Order, and a politician hostile to the Warmia Chapter and favouring the unification of Warmia with Poland (Wakar, Wolski 1956: 28). Half a century later, during the course of the jubilee celebrations for Olsztyn's 650th year, the presentation was different. In press articles,¹³ Copernicus was presented above all as one of the town's most famous inhabitants (Achremczyk, Ogrodziński 2003). His national affiliation (viewed earlier in 19th-century categories) appeared in many cases to be a secondary matter, while much more importance was attached to his ties to the town and contemporary pride in the fact that a world-famous figure was one of the inhabitants of the town on the Łyna River.

Analysis of how Copernicus has been described reveals that in the last decades, at the local level, there has been a departure from the state perspective or the national vision of history in favour of underlining the local dimension of events or the activities of a person such as Copernicus. This example shows how differently the same person, who is a major figure in local history, could be presented at various times and how much impact contemporaneity has on the way the past is read. Thus the form is retained, but is reread in new conditions (Assmann 2008: 41 et seq.)

Limitations of the Assmanns' Concepts

Independently of the possibilities presented above, the Assmanns' concepts impose certain limitations in studying communities at the medium level of social aggregation.

First, in light of Aleida and Jan Assmanns' proposals, the cohesiveness—but in no case the monolithicity—of the content of cultural memory has enormous significance. Their proposed theoretical construction, which has been described by some scholars as homogeneous (Żytyniec 2007), gives a relatively uniform picture of cultural memory. There is no question here about basic variability or multiple simultaneous interpretations of important topics within the same political or social system, although cultural memory could be transformed under the influence of factors such as a change in the framework conditions, a change of generations, time, or the internal dynamic of a given culture.

¹³ For instance, in the *Głos Olsztyński* [Olsztyn Voice].

How thus to enter the phenomenon of the contemporary ‘multiplicity’ or ‘polyphony’ of memory within the framework of the Assmanns’ concept? How different from the prevailing and propagated cultural memory—for instance, that propagated by the state—could memory be at the local level, which has its own priorities and polyphony, varying between regions? Finally, how can the activities of the central authorities and local community authorities be captured in the theoretical framework if they have different aims, diverse strategies of proceeding, or varying interpretations of the past?

The answer to these questions must doubtless touch on issues related to control of cultural memory’s transmission. In analyzing local community memory in the light of Aleida and Jan Assmanns’ concept, it is thus worthwhile to take the variety of different systems and the influence of state authorities on ‘civic memory’ into account.¹⁴ The differences between local community memory in democratic countries, where citizens enjoy the right to speak out and present their opinions unhampered in the public forum, and the memory of local communities living in totalitarian countries, which are often and frequently controlled and subordinated to the decisions and priorities of the highest authorities, could prove considerable.

This is shown, for instance, by comparing how regionalism was viewed by state authorities in the 1950s and after 1989. In Olsztyn, in the middle of the 20th century, as local researchers into the past have noted,

local topics were referred to unwillingly and with suspicion, as they were considered a way of propagating content aimed at decentralizing the state or even supporting separatism’ (Sukertowa 1965: 317).

The result of the authorities’ attitude was a lack of publications describing and interpreting the past from the local perspective and the dissemination of works completely subordinate to the state’s or nation’s then vision of history, where the priority was to prove the Polishness of the former Warmia and Mazuria (Wakar 1971; Wakar, Wolski 1956).

Historical works concerning Olsztyn from the beginning of the 21st century are already quite different. Succeeding publications aim above all to present the heritage of the lands where Olsztyn is located and show the town’s multicultural history (Achremczyk, Ogrodziński 2003; Achremczyk 2004). Like the activities of associations such as the Borussia Cultural Community, these publications, co-financed by the town administration, show what a different role various levels of authority play in different systems and how different their impact on the content and meaning entailed by cultural memory can be.

In this light, it is worth noting one more issue. Jan Assmann (Assmann 2008a) and Aleida Assmann (1999) argue that state authorities both monitor the choice of content forming the basis of cultural memory and also aim to impose an interpretation that suits their needs.

¹⁴ Barbara Szacka addressed this question in considering democratic and non-democratic systems and distinguishing between social and official memory (Szacka 2000: 16), as did Marcin Kula in writing about historical memory (Kula 2002).

Activities of this nature, which are effective at the state level, meet with a range of obstacles when they begin to be applied at the regional level, for instance, in towns. These obstacles are the greater if the interpretations presented by the state undergo rapid change, as happened just after the Second World War, when in a short time various interpretations appeared as to, for example, who were the Warmians or Mazurians in the Northern Territories (Berlińska, Madajczyk 2008).

In this regard, a lack of cohesiveness, or even contradictions, could appear in communications emerging on these two levels. The phenomenon could appear particularly visible at the local level, as in the case of Olsztyn. An example here could be the attempts undertaken in the mid-fifties to prove that the period of the town's rapid development in the 19th century (as proven by the development of railways and the construction of more buildings) was a time of 'crisis in the municipal economy' (Wakar, Wolski 1956: 48).

The specificity of memory viewed at the local or regional level, even of that constructed on the foundations of national or state memory, is shown by other examples as well. One such is the manner of describing the history of this same town, or more precisely, the periodization of its history presented by Polish historians publishing monographs on the town in the middle of the twentieth century, in the seventies, and currently. Whereas until the eighties the periodization of events in the town on the Łyna was closely connected with the area's key political events (Wakar 1971; Wakar, Wolski 1956), and particularly with changes in national belonging, the works published in the new millennium have departed from this schema, concentrating rather on economic or social development and dividing the town's history into periods on that basis (Achremczyk, Ogrodziński 2003; Achremczyk 2004).

This basic change, from the viewpoint of the priorities of cultural memory, primarily indicates the role and meaning of the political system in shaping cultural memory in a given area. The above-mentioned example shows that the political transformations not only had a fundamental impact on the pluralization and democratization of memory on the national scale (Korzeniewski 2010), as expressed in free speech and the multiplicity of voices in discussions on the past, it was also visible in another process, called regionalization: in this case appearing as something more than just a growth of interest in the region's past. In a society undergoing transformations—such as Poland's—ethnic, local, and regional dimensions gain decidedly in political, social, and cultural significance. A vision of the past that encompasses local priorities and needs begins to be formed, independently of the central authorities. In this light the cultural memory promoted by the state begins to differ from the cultural memory promoted at the local level.

Another problem that appears at the moment of attempting to apply the Assmanns' concepts in studying local community memory is the often complicated ethnic and political history of such communities. The Assmanns' concepts are easier to apply in relation to communities where there is a continuity of memory and tradition, even if the group of persons being its inheritors is small. The works in the series *Historia i pamięć polsko-niemieckiego pogranicza. Warmińska Purda* (Sakson, Traba 2008; Kar-

dach et al. 2011), which uses the Assmanns' concepts to analyse, among other things, the memories of borderland communities, are examples.

The case of Olsztyn is significant in that it shows how difficult it is for people to construct a common imagining about the past and ties to a place when they are mostly immigrants from various distant territories, forced to confront the cultural heritage of their predecessors and register it in their own vision of the past. The Assmanns' rarely made this sort of situation the object of their analyses, although for Polish researchers studying Polish collective memory it could be important. At the moment of being applied to the study of local communities, the Assmanns' elaborate theoretical concepts entail other difficulties as well, particularly in connection with some of their definitions.

An example is the category of *canon*, defined as a group's selection of the resources (including text, symbols, and meanings) that it has at its disposal and that 'cannot be increased, which fundamentally differentiates that canon from the flow of tradition' (Assmann 2008: 109). Thanks to the canon, various societies, according to the Assmanns, acquire an image of themselves and transmit that identification to the following generations, creating a remembrance culture. Jan Assmann, in writing about the canon, most often refers to texts: frequently religious ones such as the Torah or the Bible.

Finding the correspondent of such a text at the local level could be very difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, in choosing a community at this level as an object of study it should be expected that some of the basic ideas presented within the conceptual framework must be modified or adapted in a decidedly less orthodox manner than premised by the German scholars.

In considering the possibilities and limitations of using Jan and Aleida Assmann's proposals, reference should also be made to the category of *counter-memory* (*kontr pamięć* as the term *Gegen-Erinnerungen* is given in Polish translation), or of counter-present remembrance. In studying local memory it can appear, as defined by Jan Assmann, as 'artifactual... devoid of a reference framework, unanchored in contemporaneity and without confirmation in present reality' but maintained by a group or part of a group. An example of such a remembrance is Jewish mnemonic culture (Assmann 2008: 294). Aleida Assmann also wrote about counter-memory and described one of the tasks of function memory—delegitimization. She called attention to the phenomenon wherein a community may form a memory based on unofficial remembrances that are critical of the official memory supported by the authorities and are thus sentenced to both censorship and 'artificial animation' (Assmann 1999: 138). In her opinion, they are as political as official memory.

The concept of counter-memory is fairly briefly discussed in the Assmanns' work and is referred to sporadically, but for scholars studying collective memory in Central and Eastern Europe it could have major significance. It clarifies, at the least, the importance of the divisions used by Polish scholars to indicate the differences between official and unofficial (common) memory (Szacka 2002), counter-history, or counter-memory (Domańska 2006). If only for this reason, it would be worthwhile to devote decidedly more attention to this precise phenomenon.

Doubts may also arise over those theoretical premises that involve the recognition of too unambiguous divisions, or the acceptance—surprising given earlier declarations about the fluidity of collective memory and the permeability of its various types—of a dichotomy between official memory and counter-memory.

In applying this category, there may also be a problem with how much in competition with official memory remembrance must be to be described as counter-memory. Which of the various, frequently alternative, visions functioning in a multicultural community, for instance, should be considered to be the effect of the existence of counter-memory, and which can be ascribed to the sphere of official memory? In short, where is the boundary between official memory functioning as part of cultural memory and counter-memory, as an alternative to the official vision of the past?

These questions become important particularly if the subject of analysis is the collective memory of a community, like Olsztyn's, which cannot or does not want to throw off the entirety of the existing vision of the past. The Assmanns, in writing about counter-memory, assume its basic separateness in relation to the main trend of official memory. They do not take into account the possibility of a kind of integration of official memory and counter-memory through negotiation or mediation. Nor do they devote much attention to the possibility of working out a compromise on elements in the vision of the past between previously competing and mutually negating versions of past events, their appraisal, or manner of being presented.

In this place it is worth reflecting on one other question: namely, forgetting at the local level, i.e., the process of a frame of reference's disappearance (Assmann 2008: 51–53). The question that appears here concerns the alliance—as Jan Assmann puts it—of the authorities and forgetting. This subject has also been raised by Aleida Assmann, who states that 'official memory lasts as long as the powers that support it last' (Assmann 1999: 138).

The Assmanns' concept does not take into account, however, a situation where remembrance or a certain idea remains in spite of fundamental changes at the highest levels of various types of authorities. An example is the durability of the idea of 'Recovered Territories' and the discussions about it (Sakson 2006, Mazur 1997). This idea, which was strongly propagated in the forties and which says that the land attached to Poland after the Second World War, including Warmia, had always been Polish and was just 'recovered', is still one of the most enduring schemas describing the past. Although this manner of thinking is less visible at the state level, it often appears to be very important at the local level. In spite of changes in the priorities of remembrance it remains in the public debate, neither fading nor becoming taboo.

Thus it is worth considering what caused these remembrances to persist. Is it only the state authorities, who, in the Assmanns' conception, decide from above the choice of content in cultural memory, and their interpretation that has decisive influence on what cultural memory actually contains? Can other entities influencing the durability of given elements of a vision of the past—for instance, local authorities trying to satisfy their need for legitimization and seeking their own 'genealogy'—also be distinguished?

How, therefore, is local community memory constructed? How far is it an emanation of national or state memory? Although it is difficult not to agree with Piotr T. Kwiatkowski's and Andrzej Szpociński's thesis (Szpociński, Kwiatkowski 2006)—invoked by Robert Traba as well (Traba 2009; Traba 2008a: 44)—that local memory is most often constructed to suit the canon of national memory, the example of Olsztyn undermines that thesis. Although the national or state vision of the past might seem to be dominant, at the local level it may have traits that differentiate it from a vision promoted from above; it has its own specificity and character, is subject to other processes, and is perhaps shaped by other mechanisms. Joanna Kurczewska drew attention to this question in her work *Spoleczności lokalne i pamięć zbiorowa* (Kurczewska 2002) in writing about images of openness and closed-ness in local society and pointing out various strategies of remembrance that are sometimes very different from those functioning not only in other groups, but also at other levels of social aggregation. Accepting the premise of the domination of an official memory created from above at the state level requires succeeding questions to be considered: what, in fact, are the relations in various social and political systems, in various periods, between cultural memory at the state level and at the local or regional level? Does one always set out the priorities for the other, deciding on its 'contents and meanings'? The examples mentioned show that this is not necessarily the case.

What matters is that this problem is closely linked with the theses, discussed at length by Aleida Assmann, about the most important tasks of cultural memory: legitimation of the present powers-that-be in the broad sense and the delegitimization of the previous powers. Adopting these theses makes it possible to follow the process of validating the new state powers replacing the former ones. However, in the context of relations between local and state authorities, additional questions should be asked: In democratic conditions, which authorities—the state or local ones—are primarily supposed to be legitimized by cultural memory at the local level? In other words, in the new, democratic conditions wherein cultural memory is constructed by a community whose members have an almost unfettered ability to express themselves on the subject of the past, who is to be legitimized and to what extent?

Conclusions

The questions and research suggestions presented above, as well as the reservations about applying certain of the Assmanns' concepts to studying local communities such as the Olsztyn community, show how important it is to consider memory constructed not only at the national and state level but also at the local level.

First, factors such as a society's need to differentiate itself, its striving to build a local or regional identity, its own vision of events, its own community, must be taken into account. Such factors could influence the elaboration of a unique view of the past proper only to the given community, centred on events in the community and its social sphere, not a political or economic history of the entire state or nation. The specificity of this process means that in this type of local community a sense of identity can be

formed. Through reference to the past of the various groups composing the society, a common 'we' can be built that engenders pride in belonging to that place and group.

Second, the application of the Assmanns' ideas to research into local communities shows how useful it can be to distinguish various types of memory while simultaneously keeping the fluidity and permeability of borders between them, their interaction and plasticity. However, there are also indications that some of the premises need to be modified: e.g., the difficulty of applying ideas such as 'the canon' or the necessity of developing the concept of 'counter-memory'. An attempt to use the Assmanns' proposals also reveals the potential in using theoretical categories such as 'remembrance framework' or 'memory figures', which make it possible to investigate processes related with changes in memory occurring at a given time in a given collective.

Such an application also makes it possible to indicate the processes occurring in the memory of a society whose sense of community is based on its ties to a given territory. It points out the role of the area and its significance in shaping local memory, regardless of historical changes in borders or of systemic breakthroughs and transformations.

Finally, applying the Assmanns' concept not only tests it in new areas and fields of research, but also enables deeper analysis of memory mechanisms that were earlier passed over or underappreciated.

In ending, it is worth emphasizing that it would be good to test my proposed use of the Assmanns' concept to analyse the community memory of Olsztyn by using the concept to study other types of local communities. This would make it possible to point out the specificity of those communities' memories in comparison with national, state, or European memories created from above. In concentrating on a local community linked by various types of ties, the grassroots social mechanisms, including grassroots mechanisms for forming memory—cultural memory as well—acquire particular weight.

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