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## The role of national legends in the process of shaping the identity of children and teenagers

### Introduction

Traditional national legends shape the social and local identity of children and teenagers. Thanks to stories, first passed down in oral form, then in written one, past can be witnessed in the present. It comprises cultural achievements of countries, societies, regions and cities. Legends link generations, present the person's roots, give the feeling of continuity of history, maintain the connection with time, which had already passed, but which had exerted its influence on the process of mankind evolution and his surroundings. These stories, in spite of their fairy-like illusion, provide children with answers related to the history of their country, its rulers, national heroes, and strengthen the sense of security, as well as comprise the cultural heritage of a nation. Encouraging children to understand history and tradition of their region through legends, awakens their love for their "local homeland" and is an interesting and smart lesson of patriotism, not only the local one, but also in a much broader sense, in relation to their homeland and nation. Carefully chosen legends in accordance with a child's age not only hold educational values, but also educate by promoting noble values. Equipping children with knowledge about their own region in relation with a broader, national, state and even international reality, will help to shape the so-called "pluralistic identity". A young man by learning about oneself and about one's roots in one's "private homeland", simultaneously learns to respect the otherness of other cultures and societies. Reaching such a position might become a fundament for creating open, liberal, and tolerant societies, set to mutual understanding and international respect.

### The legend – definition, typology and the history of its evolution

The term "legend" is derived from Latin (*legere* – to read) and currently means a story in prose or a sung epic poem incorporating parts of historical truth with elements of fantastic events. At the very beginning, legends were passed down orally from generation to generation, and later were written down and included as part of

literature. The creation of the term “legend” is closely linked with medieval religious celebrations, when during liturgy, stories about the lives of saints and the miracles they had performed were read (Latin. *legendae erant*)<sup>1</sup>. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in French sources, the word “legend” stood for hagiographic work, while in late medieval period it was used while referring to historical heroes<sup>2</sup>. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature did researchers use the term “legend” to describe a literary genre. Saints, martyrs, sages, rulers and royal dynasties, gallant knights, and other historical and fictional heroes related to a specific country, region, city and place, can all be the main heroes of legends. In modern literature, legend is often mistaken with a myth, sometimes also with a fable or a fairy-tale, because some authors use those terms interchangeably. The main difference is that legends have historical base, they are related to real topography and tell stories of people, not gods, as in the cases of myths. The starting point of a legend was a specific historical fact, which became a pretext for the rest of the story. However, messages transmitted orally varied from one another, so often some details of the events were not the same. This allowed for a wide subjective addition to the story, by linking different known facts, places, and people. It also happened frequently, that depending on the author’s views and intentions, some parts of the events were purposely avoided, while much more emphasis was put on others. That is why modern versions of popular legends differ greatly from their previous versions. The most common types of legends are biographical compositions, which tell about the hero’s whole life or focus on the main events. Depending on who the main hero of the story is, we can differentiate hagiographic legends, telling about the lives of saints who were known for their love for God and other people, deep faith, humility, care for the weakest and the poor, as well as heroic legends portraying warriors and rulers. Apart from that, researchers also distinguish legends of place and classical legends (etiological legends) about the beginnings of heritage sites, landmarks, and events associated with the region and explaining the meanings of names of mountains, rivers, lakes, cities etc. The third group of legends comprise histories related to habits, behaviours and rituals, which appear in a given geographical area. Some researchers differentiate folk legends from “taught” legends – altered and supplemented with a plot from different works by authors writing them down. The oldest legends mainly related to the sphere of sacrum, and were filled with elements of miracles and peculiarities<sup>3</sup>. After the baptism of Poland, when the Church science started to influence the politics of the nation, rulers were considered to be the Representatives of God. As time passed, and secular elements were introduced into writing, the sphere of profanum appeared. Apart from secular elements, also pagan elements returned, adding mystery and dread into the story. Heroines of traditional Polish legends included highborn women beloved by their people: Wanda, the daughter of Krak, saint Jadwiga, saint Kinga and many others.

Special reverence in legend has been given up to this day to saint Kinga, the wife of Polish monarch Bolesław the Chaste, who (according to the legend) asked her father – the king of Hungary, to give her salt as her dowry, which she wanted

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<sup>1</sup> K. Tymieniecki, *Polska legenda średniowieczna*, „Przeszłość” 1935, no. 7 (4), p. 9–57; cf. E.R. Curtius, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze*, Kraków 1997.

<sup>2</sup> H. Kapełus, *Legenda*, [in:] *Literatura Polska. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1984, p. 551–552.

<sup>3</sup> E. Wipszycka, *Kościół w świecie późnego antyku*, Warszawa 1994.



Fig. 1. Copperplate nr 4 in the series of 51 photographs *Fotografie królów i książąt polskich*, ryt. Benedictus Fariat, [in:] H. Mortkowiczówna, *Podanie o Wandzie. Dzieje wątku literackiego*, Warszawa 1927, p. 33



Fig. 2. Woodcut depicting the bust of Wanda, from the work of S. Sarnicki, *Descriptio veteris et novae Poloniae* (Kraków 1585), [in:] H. Mortkowiczówna, *Podanie o Wandzie. Dzieje wątku literackiego*, Warszawa 1927, p. 5



Fig. 3. W.L. Anczyc, *Wiano Świętej Kingi*, [in:] *Legendy i baśnie polskie*, retold by A. Sójka, il. by A. Fonfara, Poznań 2006, p. 18

to give to her future homeland. In honour of this event special chapels in biggest salt mines in Wieliczka and Bochnia in Małopolska voivodship were devoted to saint Kinga<sup>4</sup>.

Traditional Polish legends were the subject of numerous changes over the course of years, and on their basis neolegends were created, including urban legends. Independent creation of neolegends by young people in forms of narrative and artistic expressions, impels them to carefully observe their region, supports the development of imagination and activates creative processes.

### The essence of a legend in social life – themes of creation and tradition

Passing down legends through centuries serves to maintain national heritage and has a significant impact also on contemporary generations<sup>5</sup>. These stories relate to crucial events, key characters and places for the whole community, giving it the sense of stability. An important reason why legends were created was the eagerness to possess the knowledge about the beginning of the society. What was characteristic of these works was the faith in guarding and protective forces which reward people for their good and honest lives, and this faith gave people a sense of security.

<sup>4</sup> E. Stadtmüller, *Wiano Świętej Kingi*, [in:] *Królowie i święci*, Kraków 2001, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*, Kraków 2012.



**Fig. 4.** Wawel from the north. View of Cracow in *Liber cronicarm*, H. Schedel, 1493. Woodcut made in the workshop of Michael Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff as described by Konrad Celtis, [in:] E. M. Firlet, *Smocza Jama na Wawelu. Historia, legenda, smoki*, Kraków 1996, p. 37.



**Fig. 5.** M. Orłóń, *Książę Popiel i myszy*, [in:] *Legends i baśnie polskie*, retold by A. Sójka, il. by A. Fonfara, Poznań 2006, p. 10.



Positive heroes of legends possessed the most valued and desired traits in a given culture, such as: courage, justice, wisdom, godliness, modesty, purity and beauty. As early as in the medieval times, legends were created to include elements of adventure and fantasy, and that is why their main purpose shifted to entertainment. Writing down legends resulted in the creation of European literature. Contemporary research has shown that Homer's works had been based on oral tradition, which comprised of a combination of stories, which included Greek legends and myths. Two main collections of legends about the actions of Achilles and Odysseus, were written down by Homer in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*<sup>6</sup>. The oldest written European legend is considered to be the story about Achilles. Especially legends connected with Gniezno, Kruszwica and Cracow became a part of Polish tradition.

In Gniezno on top of Lech Hill there is a primeval cathedral, which belonged to an older ruler of the city and the progenitor of the Poles. The symbol of Kruszwica is the Mouse Tower, where voracious rodents ate the evil Popiel.

In Cracow, at the foot of Wawel Hill, there is a cave where a dragon lived according to the legend. Literature is not consistent, however, as to who killed the dragon. According to some, it was king Krak, whose daughter, Wanda, threw herself into the Vistula river, because she did not want to marry a German – Rydygier<sup>7</sup>. Details of these legends merged with the topography of the oldest Polish cities and a lot of study books and film adaptations were made about them. The oldest written down Polish legend is considered to be a story included in the first book of Gallus Anonymus – *Deeds*, created probably between 1113–1116<sup>8</sup>. The plot of the legend was related to the theme of hospitality. A great feast was organized by prince Popiel for his friends and nobles, in celebration of his son's first haircut. In the same time, a poor ploughman, Piast, also organized a humble treat for his friends. When two unexpected wanderers turned up in the garden, they were driven by Popiel, but welcomed by poor Piast. Gracious strangers, looking upon a humble amount of food on the table, performed the miracle of multiplying food and drink.

Attempts to develop a critical and scientific verification of the legends' credibility cause disputes among researchers and are often perceived as an action against religious and social values. According to anthropologists, the defence of the credibility of the legends is associated with the role that they played in the life of societies<sup>9</sup>. Together with myths, legends, in an attractive and accessible way, formulated the rules of social conduct. Contemporary urban legends usually relate to recent events, the present, making their readers almost direct participants of the events. Literary fiction appears in these works, having little connection with historical events. For young people, legends are still attractive, because they share a certain mystery, which one can unfold by visiting places related to them, by listening to the elder's stories or by reading books.

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<sup>6</sup> I. Holmberg, *The Creation of the Ancient Greek Epic Cycle*, „Oral Tradition” 1998, no. 8(2), p. 456–478.

<sup>7</sup> B. Heyduk, *Legendy i opowieści o Krakowie*, Kraków 1994; cf. A. Majorczyk, *Legendy Krakowskie*, Kraków 2012.

<sup>8</sup> E. Skibiński, *Przemiany władzy. Narracyjna koncepcja Anonima tzw. Galla i jej podstawy*, Poznań 2009.

<sup>9</sup> W. Goodenough, *Cultural anthropology and linguistics*, [in:] *Language in culture and society*. Dell Hymes, New York: Evanston, London, 1964.

## The role of a “traditional” legend in education, upbringing and therapy for children

American psychotherapist and researcher of American Latin legends, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, in the Introduction to *Women Who Run With the Wolves* wrote the following: “Stories are medicine. I have been taken with stories since I heard my first. They have such power [...], engender the excitement, sadness, questions, longings, and understandings”<sup>10</sup>. Understanding the power of these words caused literature to be called “the guide of life”, which points the way of rules and values, supports the process of personality development, improves imagination, enhances world knowledge, and perfects one’s character. When we want to talk with a child, we need a narrative base. It is not easy for young learners to understand abstract concepts such as tolerance, freedom, justice or patriotism. It would be easier to do if they reached for stories in forms of fables, fairy-tales, myths and legends. Traditional legends especially create the opportunities for intergenerational dialogue. On the basis of told, read or watched stories, communication between adults and children is formed, which is significant for the success of upbringing, educational, and even therapeutic actions. Reading might lead to significant changes in mental and social puberty of every young person. It improves imagination, shapes attitudes, expands vocabulary and knowledge. It can become the inspiration for various forms of activities, such as discussion, drama, recitation, storytelling, and artistic activity. Shaping the need and the habit of reading is a prerequisite for the development of a child’s critical thinking, it develops the child’s sensitivity and empathy. In addition, carefully selected texts might reduce negative feelings, equip the child in tools for coping with an emotionally-challenging situation, motivate for hard work, and also strengthen positive feelings. According to Maria Molicka, “stories allow the transmission and accumulation of culture, including the beliefs and values, and are a great source of knowledge, while being responsible for cultural identification and social identity”<sup>11</sup>. By combining historical facts, which teach, and elements of fantasy, which entertain, legends are considered ideal for children. Stories about the homeland are important for the youngest and definitely stimulate child’s patriotic attitudes. Children, however, due to their development conditions – child’s egocentrism, limited cognitive abilities, little mobility – are closest to “here and now” perspective. Local environment, “local homeland”, is of greatest importance to them. For this reason, urban legends, that is traditional stories about the creation of cities and places in them, are particularly important.

Children intuitively feel the borders of reality of occurrences, they are happy, however, with the illusion visible while they are reading, and even more when a legend is skilfully presented by an adult. The most appropriate form of legend’s presentation seems to be the storytelling while visiting places related to it. A story presented in this form allows the child to experience the space and objects included in the plot of a legend. These stories solidify cause-and-effect relations, time orientation, enhance imagination. Stories with elements of fantasy allow their recipients to

<sup>10</sup> C. P. Estés, *Biegająca z wilkami. Archetyp dzikiej kobiety w mitach i legendach*, transl. by A. Cioch, Warszawa 2010, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> M. Molicka, *Biblioterapia i bajkoterapia*, Wrocław 2011, p. 52. Translated by the author of the article.

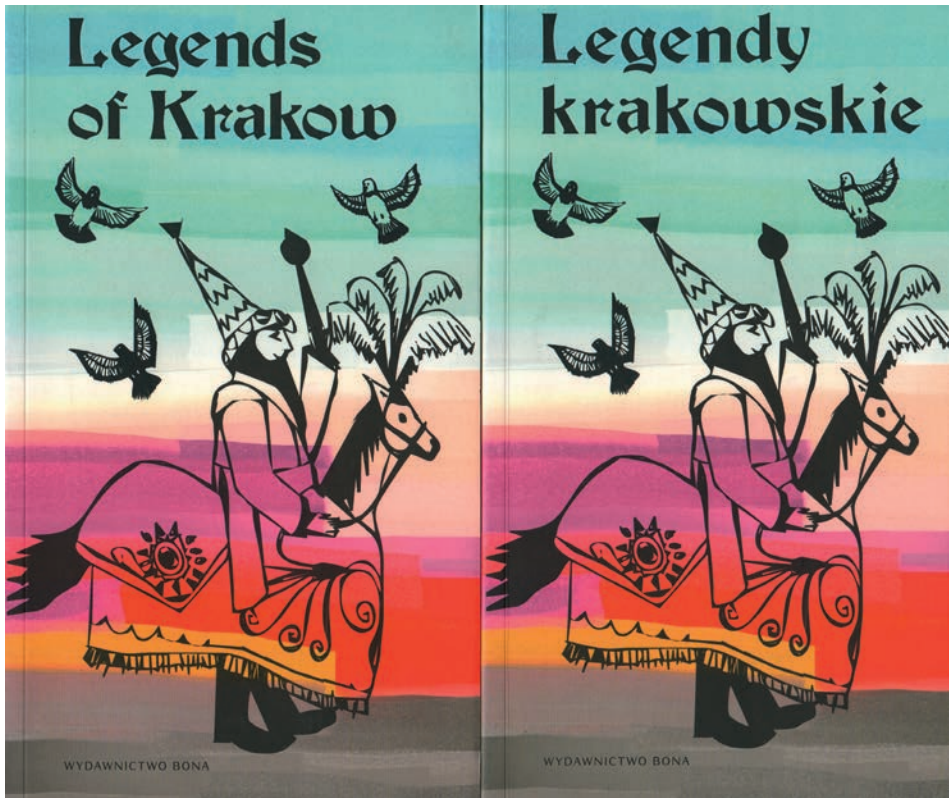


Fig. 6. Legendy krakowskie, retold by A. Majorczyk, transl. by R. Gill, il. by K. Borzęcka, Kraków 2012, cover

go beyond time and space, stimulate the development of hypothetical thinking and deduction, by defining the scenarios of other people's behaviour, which is extremely important for the individual and his functioning within a group. Legends, therefore, teach about social life, they socialize, encourage recipients to make their own conclusions and interpret events, they organize memory and help its development<sup>12</sup>. Apart from a field trip, interesting forms of using legends include: preparation of a drawing by children based on the story, presentation of theatrical productions and creation of children's own versions of the story. Including legends in various forms of a child's creative activity, makes the story closer, more understandable and better remembered.

### The need of neolegends – reinterpretation of the reality

The eagerness to answer the question about the creation of country, city, districts, important places, stimulates the imagination of residents, even if the origin of these places is known and documented. The members of a given society, most often

<sup>12</sup> J. F. Bruner, *Making stories. Law, Literature, Live*, Massachusetts 2003, p. 98–103.





Fig. 7. *Wolska bajka*, Warszawa 2012, cover



Fig. 8. *Baśnie i legendy o Płocku. Gwiazdy w Wiśle*, Płock 2008, cover

local one, constantly create versions of events related to their place of living and their constituent elements (which are a product of nature or human). In order to intensify this trend, to gather and write down stories, numerous literary competitions are held. Their aim is to create a legend, fairy-tale, myth, fable about a given city, sometimes narrowing down the topic to an object, street, district, and sometimes expanding upon the topic to voivodeship. Creating new legends, called neolegends, proves that people in different age, including children, are interested in the region. An example of such an initiative was a “new legend” competition organized by portal Gazeta.pl in 2011. The numerous applications included creatively modified known, traditional legends (Wanda, Wawel dragon), and also made frequent references to the history and appearance of buildings built in recent decades. A similar competition was held in the capital of Poland – Warsaw. Its task was to create a story concerning one of the districts of the city – located on the left side of the Vistula river – Wola. Participants based their applications on known Warsaw legends, changing their course and explaining the origins of Wola or created entirely new, fantastic stories. A post-competition edition had a special form, because published texts were accompanied by children’s drawings created during art competitions related to this part of Warsaw. A collection of neolegends called *Wolska bajka (Wola’s fairy-tale)* is a proof of a strong and positive impact of the local environment on children, which is reflected in their activities – careful observation and a lively creation.

The popularity of urban legends is reflected in a tendency, especially visible in tourism marketing and public marketing, to create stories about cities and places, set routes for tourists in the footsteps of old and new legends. New legends are used as a form of revitalization of historic sites and places, by creating new perspective of looking back at old times, and also addition of historical value to relatively young cities and sites. Neolegends create a certain image of regions and cities, contributing to their popularization and promotion, which influences the development of tourism, as well as national and international business.

## Summary

For centuries legends have strengthened national identity, deepened the sense of community between the members of a local society, strengthened individual accommodation, relationship, custom, and tradition bonds. The timelessness of these stories lies in providing them to the youngest generations as a cultural heritage, source of knowledge and value, necessary in the pedagogical process. These legends help children to learn about themselves, which means that they help children to settle in the tradition of regional and national culture. Legends used in regional education build and develop emotional relationships with the local homeland of children and teenagers. In order to select appropriate regional literature, it is essential to choose works of highest aesthetic and artistic potential. Only then do they meet their educational, cognitive, instructional and aesthetic functions. Educational aspect lies in the emotional layer, which triggers the love of local homeland, cognitive one, which raises knowledge about the region, and instructional one, located in the formal literature aspect that allows a discussion of some concepts of literary theory.

People tend to think, yearn for higher needs, wish to pass down their experiences to next generations, and are able to learn from the achievements of their predecessors. Literature created by people is a combination of memory and imagination, with a power to release the creative energy and encourage the recipient to constantly transform the world. Legends passed down from generation to generation are precisely for that – to connect people and create civilizations, because, as Patrice de la Tour du Pin wrote: “nations which have no more legends, fairy-tales and stories are doomed to die from freezing”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Piquemal, *Bajki filozoficzne*, Warszawa 2004, p. 4.

## **National legends in the process of shaping national identity of children and adolescents**

### **Abstract**

The article contains the results of research on the impact of traditional national legends on social and local identity development of children and teenagers. Thanks to legends, first passed down in oral form, then written, past can be witnessed in the present, and is the cultural heritage of the nation, region, and the city. Legends, in spite of their fairy-like illusion, provide children with answers related to the history of their country, its rulers, national heroes, and strengthen the sense of security, as well as comprise the cultural heritage of a nation. Traditional Polish legends were the subject of numerous changes over the course of years, and on their basis neolegends were created, including urban legends. Encouraging children to read legends and create their own neolegends in forms of narrative and artistic expressions, impels them to carefully observe their region, supports the development of imagination and activates creative processes. Carefully chosen legends, in accordance with a child's age, not only hold educational values, but also educate by promoting noble values.

**Key words:** national legends, books for children, neolegends, urban legends

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