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Between order and chaos: Right-left symbolism in the Polish folk religious worldview

Abstract. This study explores the symbolic significance of the right and left sides in the folk societies of Poland, Kashubia, and Masuria, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It examines how these societies relied on keen observation of nature and cultural traditions to predict outcomes and navigate daily life. The right side, associated with divine favor, prosperity, and positive outcomes, was viewed as auspicious, while the left side often signified misfortune or negativity. This symbolic dichotomy was reflected in various cultural practices, including omens, rituals, and beliefs about personal fate. The analysis highlights the quasi-religious explanations underlying these perceptions, emphasizing the importance of the right side as a reflection of God's choosing and spiritual alignment. The study demonstrates how these beliefs shaped the social and cultural dynamics of the time, offering insight into the role of symbolism and superstition in folk society.

Keywords: right-left, symbolism, magical, misogynic, religious, folk perspective.

Why was the right side considered good and the left side bad in the Polish folk imagination? This question leads us to a complex symbolism of sides that shaped practices, rituals, and perceptions of everyday phenomena. In Polish folk culture (and more broadly, Slavic) the symbolism of right and left played a crucial role in organizing the world and social relations. The right side was associated with goodness, order, and divine protection, while the left side was linked to chaos, sin, and impurity. The question of why this deeply

ingrained opposition exists goes far beyond a simple explanation based on the majority of right-handed individuals in society. This article seeks to provide a synthetic analysis of the phenomenon, considering various contexts: religious (especially Christian symbolism), socio-cultural (including the patriarchal perception of femininity), mythical (such as the movement of the sun, natural cycles of nature related to magical explanations), and linguistic (embedded in idioms and everyday expressions). By exploring these perspectives, the author aims to show that the duality of right and left forms a foundational cultural order, vividly expressed in the magical and religious practices of the Polish countryside.

The scope of this study encompasses the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.¹ The analysis is based on a wide array of ethnographic and historical sources. Geographically, it considers Kashubia and the Masurian region, which, during the period in question, were part of pre-war Prussia and are today within the borders of Poland. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, although these regions were separated by political and religious boundaries, they also shared numerous cultural and social connections. This is particularly evident in the similarities found in the magical thinking of local populations, as documented in the works of Polish and Kashubian anthropologists and in the accounts of Max Toeppen. The Polish translation of Toeppen's book is titled *Wierzenia mazurskie* (Masurian Beliefs), whereas the original German edition, *Aberglauben aus Masuren* (Masurian Superstitions), underscores not only the beliefs themselves but also the practices and rituals of magical thinking.

Given the chronological and thematic coherence of the sources from these regions, their comparative analysis is fully justified. Accordingly, the following discussion proceeds in a thematic manner.

The Slavic origins of 19th-century magical thinking

My analysis focuses on the fundamental domains in which magical thinking, linked to the opposition of right and left, is most prevalent. In Polish, Kashubian, and Masurian contexts, the right side has consistently been regarded as auspicious in interpreting omens for individuals and their circumstances, whereas the left side has been seen as inauspicious. The right-left opposition

¹ Already in Mesopotamian civilization, which placed great emphasis on the opposition of right and left within highly developed art of divination, the right side, known as the *pars familiaris* (familiar side), was associated with good omens, while the left side, called the *pars hostilis* (hostile side), was linked to negative ones (see Guinan, 1996, p. 5–10; De Vos, 2013, p. 44; Leitchy, 1970, p. 7; Starr, 1983, p. 16; Ulanowski, 2021, p. 81–84).

appears with remarkable frequency in folk belief systems. As Biegeleisen has noted, in Slavic popular culture, events occurring on the right side are attributed to the influence of benevolent spirits, whereas occurrences on the left are believed to stem from demonic forces (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 157). In the 19th century, it was still widely held that a Guardian Angel stood to the right behind an individual, while the devil was positioned to the left (Gulgowski, 1911, p. 200; Więckowski, 2005, p. 13).

Let me turn to the available historical sources concerning the Slavs. The earliest accounts regarding the Western Slavs can be found in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* by William of Malmesbury, dating from the 12th century CE, though the author attributes the information to around 1041. In this account, he describes a form of divination:

The Vindelici² worship fortune, and putting her idol in the most eminent situation, they place a horn in her right hand, filled with that beverage, made of honey and water. (William of Malmesbury, 1847, book II, chap. XII, p. 208)

This Slavic goddess, referred to by the Latin equivalent in line with the custom of medieval Western chroniclers, most likely holds a *cornucopia* in her right hand. A remarkably similar testimony can be found approximately fifty years later in the writings of Saxo Grammaticus (1130/50–1225). Saxo not only discusses divination involving a horse as an intermediary between the divine and human realms but also clearly highlights the significance of the right side as an auspicious omen:

If the horse stepped over the rows of spears with its right leg first, rather than the left, it was considered a favorable sign for conducting a war. However, if it raised its left leg even once before the right, the intention to invade that land was abandoned. (Saxo Grammaticus, 14.39.10)

Significantly, this pattern persisted in a simplified form for centuries. In the 19th century, the same belief structure can be observed in folk wisdom:

If a purchased horse crosses the threshold of the stable with its left leg, it should be immediately sold, even at a loss, as otherwise, it will bring many losses to the farm. (Bieroński, 1885, p. 41)

Returning once more to the 12th-century world of the Slavic Rugians and their chief deity, Sventevit (Świętowit; referred to by Saxo as Suantovitus), we find that this most important deity of the Rugians in Arkona held in his right hand a horn of abundance used for divination and predicting future harvests:

² With high probability this is the name for the Wends – the general terms for the Polabian (Polabian) Slaves.

In the right hand of the statue was holding a horn made of various metals; this was filled once a year with wine by an experienced priest, who would predict the next year's harvest based on the drink's behavior. (Saxo Grammaticus 14.39.3-5)

Medieval chroniclers such as Peter of Dusburg (he lived at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries) and Simon Grunau (1455/1470–1529/1530) also touch on these magical associations. They recount the story of a man who performed apotropaic rituals meticulously,³ yet these ultimately failed to protect him from an evil spirit's attack.⁴ Grunau's detailed account underscores the critical importance of spatial symbolism: the man began his rituals by moving in directions considered positive—upward and forward, toward the divine sphere, the sun, and all that is bright, benevolent, and known. Only then did he proceed in the negative direction—downward, backward, westward—toward the infernal sphere, darkness, and the unknown. These movements embody synonymous chains of thought: back – down – west – left – death versus forward – up – east – right – life (see Kowalski, 1998, p. 214–216).

The natural order of the world from the folk perspective

The rural community was closely connected to nature. In everyday life, people observed the fundamental cycles of the natural world, including the movement of the sun, which in our latitude “moves” to the right. Movement to the right (in accordance with the sun's course) signified progress, growth, and thus life itself. In contrast, movement to the left was associated with decline and death. This natural order complemented and reinforced religious imaginings: life and light moved toward the right, while death and darkness were linked to the left.

The positive significance attributed to the right side in divination practices is often linked to its association with the movement of the sun, a key celestial and cultural reference point (Moszyński, 1934, p. 447, 719). In Pomerania, even as late as the 19th century, people would kneel before the rising sun to say prayers, especially on Christmas Eve – an act symbolizing the sun's life-giving power and its protective role in the cosmic order (Moszyński, 1934, p. 450). However, this solar alignment alone does not fully explain the broader phenomenon under examination. Deeper cultural and symbolic connections

³ Grunau, vol. 1, XI, V, 6, p. 494 “so macht er ein creutz uber sich, eines vor sich und eins under sich und danne sich so legte”.

⁴ Grunau, vol. 1, XI, V, 6, p. 495 “wan forne, obene und undene hates tu ein creutz, sonder hindene war keins, und da mocht ich zu dir”.

between the right side and the celestial or spiritual world offer more insight into the enduring significance of this spatial opposition.

For example, to ensure a blessing, houses were traditionally constructed by beginning in the east and proceeding in harmony with the sun's path across the sky (Ceklarz & Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 61). In the Lublin region, until recently, "when the foundations were being laid, the host and hostess would walk around the outline of the house in the direction of the sun, carrying holy images and sprinkling holy water" (Wawrzeniuk, 2016, p. 52).

Healing practices also followed this principle: during rituals of purification or treatment, the patient was circled with a candle in the direction of the sun's movement (Ceklarz & Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 70). In the Podtatrze region, fumigation was performed by circling the person or object three times in the sun's direction, reinforcing the alignment of healing with cosmic forces. In contrast, performing such rituals in the opposite direction was considered an act of harm – black magic intended to bring illness or misfortune (2024, p. 169). Similarly, to remove harmful influences, one might sprinkle blessed salt behind oneself or incense an animal three times, always in harmony with the sun's movement (2024, 104, p. 149).

The observation of omens was not limited to daily occurrences but extended to more enduring periods as well. For example: "Seeing the new moon on the left side was thought to mean that the entire month would be unlucky, while seeing it on the right side was considered a sign of good fortune" (Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 311).

Divinatory omens (The magical explanation)

The omens which derived from the natural world, particularly from animals and plants, were seen as active agents in the prophetic realm. Divination by observing the flight of birds, their songs, calls, or other behaviors occurs with striking frequency in historical sources.

One of the earliest mentions of this practice comes from *The Instruction of St. Cyril, Archbishop of Cyprus, about Evil Spirits*, the oldest extant copy of which dates to the 14th century. In this text, St. Cyril criticizes the Orthodox believers in Rus for their superstitious practices:

We believe in birds, in woodpeckers, in crows, and in tits. When we want to go somewhere, we stop and listen. If one of them calls out, we pay attention to which direction it comes from, whether from the right or the left. If it speaks in a favorable way, we say to ourselves, 'The bird is showing us good.' And when something bad happens on the way, we tell our companions: 'Why didn't we turn back? Surely the bird was warning us not to go, and we didn't listen to it.'

He further writes:

When we have to go somewhere, we go to the sorcerers, believing in sneezing and encountering omens, and when we have to travel a long distance... we listen to the birds. (see Stanislaus de Scarbimirus, *Super Gloria. Sermo XII. Domine deus*, p. 103, v. 34–35 in Olszewski, 2002, p. 158; Moszyński, 1934, p. 410).

The authors also note similar admonitions in 15th-century sermons addressed to Poles and Pomeranians, which emphasize the enduring power of these beliefs (Grimm, 1844, vol. 1, p. 1085; Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 253).

Divination by bird “speech” remained widespread even into the 19th and 20th centuries. The calls of the cuckoo, for instance, were commonly interpreted according to the direction from which they were heard. A cuckoo calling from the right side heralds good fortune; one from the left side brings misfortune; and a cuckoo heard from behind the listener may even portend death (Gloger, 1877, p. 1–4; Moszyński, 1934, p. 410; Lorenz, 1934, p. 90; Gulgowski, 1911, p. 180; see Bracha, 1999, p. 129). A note from the village of Kłóbki confirms this belief: a cuckoo’s call from the right side was seen as a positive omen, while one from the left was considered a sign of misfortune (Moszyński, 1934, p. 411). More generally, a bird flying from the left side when embarking on a journey was interpreted as a bad omen.⁵

The dichotomy of right and left also played a crucial role in weather prediction. For instance, at sunset, the presence of clouds on either side of the sky was seen as an indicator: “If more clouds appeared on the left side, rain was thought to be imminent; if they gathered on the right, fair weather was expected” (Zamościński, 2017, p. 313).

Moszyński also underscores the significance of dream divination in these communities. While dream interpretations were influenced by multiple factors – such as colors, symbols, days of the week, and numbers – the right side invariably carried positive connotations (Moszyński, 1934, p. 369).

This same principle was applied to sleeping positions. To ward off nightmares and bad dreams, individuals were advised to sleep on their right side (Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 310). Should someone fall asleep on their left side, they risked being attacked by a nightmare that could suffocate them during sleep. In such a case, it was believed that moving any part of the right side of the body – even the smallest movement of the right foot’s toe – could provide protection (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 283 [Masuria]). Moreover, lying on the

⁵ Moszyński, of course, notes this situation and presents it in a broader cultural context. The Kalmyks and the Tatars held the white snowy owl (*Nectea nivea* L. = *Stryx nyctea* according to Pallas) in particular reverence; its appearance flying to the right side foretold good fortune, while flying to the left – misfortune (Pallas, 1771, vol. 1, p. 352; see Moszyński, 1934, p. 409).

left side was thought to place undue pressure on the heart, thereby granting the devil power over it and preventing the guardian angel from offering aid (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 156 [Żołyńia]). Ethnographic materials from Masuria confirm these beliefs. One must always sleep on the right side, as this ensures the protection of angels throughout the night (Toeppman, 2014, p. 110 [Dąbrówno]).

Thus, consistently, waking up on the left side was believed to foretell a bad mood throughout the day (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 156). Folk magic, however, provided remedies for nearly every bad omen. For instance: "Evil power and fainting will pass if you prick a finger on the left hand and make a protective sign three times" (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 78).

Additional guidelines, though surprising to modern sensibilities, further illustrate this worldview: "Dirt from under the fingernail of the left hand, thrown into vodka, causes headaches and blindness in the person who drinks it; dirt from under the fingernail of the right hand, on the contrary, cures these ailments" (Stomma, 2000, p. 106, no. 3; Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 10). The next is originating from the typical magical sphere: "Whoever consumes the little finger of the left hand of a stillborn child, and does so at midnight, at a crossroads, facing north, will be able to harming people without consequences" (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 73; Stomma, 2000, 106, no. 4).

In the Western Beskids, it was believed that stepping over the shadow of a yew tree with the left foot would bring illness (Cieklarz, Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 43). In cases of fever, the afflicted person was instructed to turn the left sleeve of their shirt inside out while reciting: "Turn, shirt, and you, fever, turn away from [name of the afflicted person]. I say this to you in the name of God the Father and the Holy Spirit" (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 323).

To further reverse the course of the illness, the sick person was to lie on the floor on a sack turned inside out. The healer would then scatter ash around the room, turning the sieve to the left (Libera, 1995, p. 185). A curse is the opposite of a prayer; thus, one can curse someone by making the sign of the cross with the left hand, offering cloth to the home church rolled inside out, and so on (Zowczak, 2013, p. 505). To remove a curse, one had to spit on a shirt turned inside out (or on their hands, preferably the left hand) and then wipe their face three times from the forehead downward or in a counterclockwise circular motion. This was believed to reverse the effect of the illness and restore the natural order – namely, health (Cieklarz & Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 244). To protect oneself from misfortunes outside the home, it was customary to break a branch and hold it in the right hand, drawing a circle around oneself (Więckowski, 2005, p. 65).

A cast spell could also be reversed by fumigating the bewitched individual with hair that each participant in the ritual had cut from above their right eye. This underscores the protective role of the right side (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 250). The significance of the left side extended even to the perceived effectiveness of treatment. Among Polish Jews, even in the first half of the 20th century, there persisted a belief that medicine or food given to a sick person with the left hand would be ineffective (Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 311).

The symbolism of sides in folk imagination (The religious explanation)

In the 19th and 20th centuries, magical and religious practices in Polish rural communities were deeply rooted in the Catholic worldview. Although biblical knowledge among the rural population was limited, almost everyone knew the prayer "I believe in God" with the line: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." This simple yet powerful phrase reinforced in the folk mentality the belief in the "divinity" of the right side.

Biblical examples also unanimously present the right side as divinely chosen and favored:

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2),

You make your saving help my shield, and your right hand sustains me; your help has made me great. (Psalm 18:35)

It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1 Peter 3:21–22)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left (Matthew 25:34),

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." (Matthew 25:31–34)

The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:40–41)

Artistic depictions of the Last Judgment frequently show Christ pointing to the bright heavens with his right hand, while his left hand directs toward the darkness of hell. Additionally, the devil was believed to mark his victim's body on the left side, further reinforcing the symbolic opposition between the right and left (Rożek, 1993, p. 240).

Among the most important events in 19th-century rural communities was the baptism of a child. To ensure the child's future success, a specific ritual was performed: before leaving for the ceremony, a prayer book was placed on the threshold, and the person carrying the child would cross it while holding the child in their arms, necessarily stepping first with the right foot (Karwot, 1955, p. 124). In general, it was believed that crossing any threshold with the right foot would bring good fortune (Ceklarz & Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 61).

When it comes to miracle of grain, in folk interpretation the child Jesus, as the sower, casts the grain with his right hand – and the grain would ripen immediately after being sown (Zowczak, 2013, p. 288).

The thieves on the crosses beside Jesus hung on his arms (in folk versions of the Bible, on the Tree of the Cross): the good one on the right, and the bad one on the left. As for the Orthodox cross, in the Lemko region and in the Białystok area, the right end of the slanted footrest, raised upwards, points to the good thief, while the left end points to the bad one, symbolizing heaven and hell respectively (Zowczak, 2013, p. 399, 506). After the death of the Lord Jesus, Lucifer tried to take his soul, but failed – so instead, he took the soul of Judas and the thief on the left, and returned with them to hell (Zowczak, 2013, p. 440).

The folk interpretation of the divine world and the conflict between the good God and the evil devil looked as follows. The God of light reigned in heaven, and there was also the prince of darkness, lower down to his left. The angels who stood on the right side took the side of the God of light – those on the left belonged to the prince of darkness, Lucifer, who ruled over the shadows of the night, and they later became devils (Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 3). The peasants believed that before the Day of Judgment, the son of Lucifer will be born to a 70-year-old Jewish woman. He will be called Jautychryst and will come into the world with teeth. The Lord Jesus will summon everyone to the final judgment and will say to the good: "stand on the right side," and to the evil: "stand on the left side" (Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 27).

When the soul traveled after a person's death along a thorny path, paradise was found on the right side, while hell and the vast lands before it were on the left side (Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 23). In the song for rural pilgrims, we can read: "Before the sinner Adam stood on the left, while (the Holy Mary) stood on the right" (Zowczak, 2013, p. 89).

All of these examples point to a consistent connection between the right side and divine favor, illustrating its association with blessings, success, and God's choosing. This symbolic dualism – right as sacred and left as profane – deeply informed not only Christian religious practice but also broader cultural interpretations of spatial symbolism, reinforcing the enduring positive connotations of the right side.

Situations related to good fortune (The sociological explanation)

Matters of prosperity and success occupied a central role in rural communities. Consequently, all signs that might foreshadow future prosperity were carefully observed, while those believed to predict negative outcomes were diligently avoided. Thus, particular attention was paid to identifying positive signs of fortune: "Ringing in the right ear signifies impending happiness, while ringing in the left ear signifies impending misfortune" (Gołębiowski, 1830, p. 160; Stomma, 2000, p. 107, no. 5; see Olszewski, 2002, p. 158). Similarly, itching of the right eyebrow (or eye) was seen as an omen of joy, while itching of the left one was interpreted as a sign of upcoming sorrow (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 156; Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 316). In the same vein, itching of the right hand signified forthcoming earnings, while itching of the left hand signaled loss.⁶

This theme of interpreting bodily signs was also prominent in Masurian traditions. The chronicler Grunau noted: "If someone hears ringing in their right ear, they say: 'They are speaking well of me'; if it rings in the left ear, they say that they are being deceived or that someone wishes them harm." He continued:

If a person enters a city, village, or house for the first time and steps with their left foot, they interpret it as a sign that something bad will happen there; however, if they step with their right foot, everything will go well for them. (Grunau, 1876–1896, see Toeppen, 2014, p. 98, ref. 154, see also Olszewski, 2002, p. 75)

⁶ This is not a clearly interpreted prophecy. According to Gołębiowski, if your right hand itches, you will spend money, and if your left hand itches, you will collect it (Gołębiowski, 1830, p. 161).

Further magical practices relating to happiness and prosperity included the following:

for a bride to ensure a fortunate marriage and life, she was given a silver coin and a strand of hair (symbols of abundance, also associated with the Slavic god Veles, protector of herds and wealth), which she would place in her right shoe. (see Merski, 2021, p. 73)

Gender and the symbolic connotations of the left side (The misogynic explanation)

According to the folk view of male-female relations, “a woman must follow a man because of her lesser intellect” (Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 32). In the world of folk values, woman must not be given more rights than a man – this is illustrated by a story in which the Lord Jesus walked the earth together with Saint Peter (Zowczak, 2013, p. 349–350).

In the folk imagination, the negative connotations of the left side were inseparably linked to the perception of women. This was a deeply patriarchal vision: women were seen as “different,” “impure,” and associated with forces of chaos – just as the left side was considered “bad” (Stomma, 2000, p. 117–118; see Ciszewski, 1927, p. 4, 10–11). Frequently, women were equated with illness and death (Szlągowska, 2002, p. 44, 49–50). The plague was regularly portrayed as a woman (Kolberg, 1982, vol. 15, p. 12). Even a pregnant woman was considered unclean and defiles others with her very presence (Figiel, 2018, p. 99).

In this aspect, religious and patriarchal beliefs came together to create a single symbolic order: woman, left side, darkness, death. The following questions arise, is left-sidedness and femininity in the patriarchal order of the world linked because both elements threaten the established order? Is the demonization of women not only a religious but also a cosmological process – embedding them in the symbolism of chaos and death?

Particularly valuable in this respect are the studies of the Polish anthropologist Ludwik Stomma, who conducted a thorough analysis of these issues within a broader cultural and gendered context. His work reveals that the spatial symbolism of right and left reflects not only the movement of the sun but also a fundamental ordering of the world that permeates ritual practices, moral beliefs, and social life.

According to Stomma, the right side is often associated with masculine aspects because it is linked to symbolic themes of (son) – happiness – light (healing). In contrast, the left side tends to be connected with feminine aspects:

(daughter) – misfortune – darkness (blindness) – and the northern direction (Stomma, 2000, p. 107; Szlagowska, 2002, p. 50). According to the folk spatial vision, the future is associated with the front, top and right side, and the past is the opposite. Stomma's fieldwork revealed that meeting a man coming from the southern direction was considered an omen of success in the near future and he formulated a thesis that further clarifies these associations: masculine – happiness – south. For example, in folk healing practices, bathing in a river flowing from the south was believed to remove enchantments, demonstrating the connection between southern orientation and positive outcomes. Since the south is linked to happiness – and happiness, in turn, to the right side – it follows that the left side and the north became associated with misfortune, reinforcing the symbolic polarity of right/south/masculine/life and left/north/feminine/death (Biegeleisen, 1929A, p. 124; Stomma, 2000, p. 107). In opinion of Stomma, there is no doubt regarding the answer to why the left side, associated with the feminine, was perceived negatively in Polish folk culture. In this concrete cultural context, a symbolic opposition emerged: the masculine was linked to order, rationality, and light, while the feminine was associated with chaos, emotion, misfortune, and darkness (Stomma, 2000, p. 117–118).

This raises the question of why women, in particular, were perceived as chaotic, irrational, and impure beings? Folk traditions appear to reinforce this perspective; for example, in 19th-century Polish villages, menstruating women were not allowed to touch food supplies to avoid contaminating them, and they were also prohibited from coming close to fire (Stomma, 2000, p. 118–119; Ciszewski, 1903, p. 40–41). Additional examples illustrate similar beliefs: “If an old woman offers them something to drink, they do not drink the glass to the bottom, as the last drops may often contain the devil, who could then slip unnoticed into the drinker's body” (Jahn, 1886, no. 124). After giving birth, a woman in Kashubia would be isolated from the community for six weeks. To be reintegrated, she had to go through a ritual of purification in the church. This included walking with the priest to the altar, being sprinkled with holy water, circling the altar with a burning candle, and making a monetary offering – after which she was once again considered pure and welcome within the community (Gulgowski, 1911, p. 122).

In Kashubia near the Baltic Sea but also in the Polish mountains, encountering a woman first during a journey was believed to bring bad luck (Zamościński, 2017, p. 348). Similarly, if a man was the first to arrive on Christmas Eve, it was considered a good omen, while a woman's arrival signaled bad luck (Kulikowska, 2017, p. 141; Ossadnik, 2023, p. 306, 310, 312).⁷ Seeing

⁷ While conducting anthropological and sociological-religious research, I also observe various groups focused on issues of magic, divination, and folklore. One of them, *Szeptuchy*,

a woman with empty watering cans was seen as an omen of misfortune; here, the empty vessel symbolized barrenness and poverty (Bieroński, 1885, 41; Ossadnik, 2023, p. 192, 313).

The folklore of Masuria echoes similar beliefs. If the first person to enter a house on a Monday was female, it was seen as a sign of misfortune. Encounters with a woman while leaving the house – especially an old woman – were seen as unlucky omens. In contrast, encountering a male figure was believed to bring luck (Toeppen, 2014, p. 95; see Bracha, 1999, 137). Kolberg also described the common belief that if a man, upon leaving his house, encounters a woman, it means that the day will be wasted for him (Kolberg, 1982, vol. 15, p. 289, see Krzywicki, 1889, p. 865–866). A particularly vivid example involves a farmer who encountered a girl on the road while transporting a wooden beam to town. He became agitated and demanded that she turn back, only calming down when she reassured him that she was born on a Sunday and thus being “a child of luck.” The farmer lamented that he had never experienced such misfortune before – earlier that day, he and his brother had encountered an old woman, and shortly thereafter, their wagon chain broke, nearly causing a fatal accident (Toeppen, 2014, p. 96 [Olsztynek]).⁸ Shepherds in mountain pastures similarly upheld these beliefs, not allowing women or outsiders into the sheepfold, fearing that they might bring curses or enchantments (Ceklarz & Janicka-Krzywda, 2024, p. 104).

Even seemingly minor details reflect this worldview. For instance, in plant-based divinations, thyme growing on the left side was associated with girls, while that from the right side was linked to bachelors. This reinforces the symbolic division between right and left, masculine and feminine, throughout folk practices (Ziółkowska, 1989, p. 102).

Such beliefs were not limited to women alone but extended to certain animals. Encountering a hare or an old woman was seen as an omen of misfortune (Toeppen, 2014, p. 96 [Działdowo, Wielbark, Dąbrówno]). In some cases, the woman was replaced symbolically by a dog in folk sayings, such as: “The woman was supposed to be made from Adam’s rib, but a dog snatched it away. God then tried to catch the dog but only managed to tear off its tail – and from that, the woman was created” (Zowczak, 2013, p. 71),

Wiedźmy i Szamanki (Whisperers, Witches, and Shamans, 22,400 members), organized an internal competition at the end of 2024 regarding the most popular beliefs and superstitions associated with the arrival of the New Year. In relation to my research, it turned out that there is still a belief that if a man enters the house on New Year’s Day, it will be a good year, but if a woman enters, it will bring bad luck. Additionally, a banknote (which must be) placed in the right shoe on New Year’s Eve is believed to bring prosperity for the entire following year.

⁸ An interesting fact remains that such superstitions already existed in the Middle Ages (see Bracha, 1999, p. 137, ref. 107).

and “When a hare crosses the path, it means misfortune, specifically a fire. A dog crossing the path also signifies misfortune” (Toeppen, 2014, p. 96). This substitution of a woman with a dog in the context of bad omens reveals a deeper cultural association between gender roles, impurity, and misfortune within rural folklore.⁹

In addition to the preceding examples it is worth to examine further instances documented in 19th-century anthropological studies that illustrate these specific misogynic behaviour and its significance within situations related to procreation.

Wives wishing to conceive a son should grasp their husband’s right testicle during intercourse, whereas those desiring a daughter should hold the left (Stomma, 2000, p. 106, no. 1; Talko-Hryniewicz, 1893, p. 67 [Zwinogródka, Kijów]). In order for childbirth to proceed properly, a thunderstone had to be held under the knee during labor; under the right knee if a boy was to be born, and under the left knee if a girl was to be conceived (Kolberg, 1962, vol. 7, p. 146). Similarly, it was believed that: “A woman who wants to give birth to a son must rise from bed in the morning with her right foot” (Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 310; Stomma, 2000, p. 106, no. 2). In general, stepping out of bed with the left foot was considered to bring misfortune, while doing so with the right foot was believed to ensure a successful day (Baumann, 1989, vol. 1, p. 339–340; Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 311; Bracha, 1999, p. 136 [Nicolaus Magni, *De superstitionibus*, f. 281r1]; Więckowski, 2005, p. 13, 31).

Further examples pertain to childbirth and infant care: “After birth, if the father places the newborn on its right side, it will be free from misfortune. If the mother offers the left breast for the first feeding, the baby will have the ‘evil eye’” (Biegeleisen, 1929B, p. 311).

Undoubtedly, this latter example demonstrates how negative attributes and misfortune were consistently linked to the left side. The “evil eye” was perceived as a particularly dire consequence, one that could endanger the well-being of the entire community. In this worldview, the left side of the body was believed to attract malevolent forces and to embody the impure aspects of the world.

Summary

According to internet sources only about 10% of the population is left-handed, compared to 90% who are right-handed. Indeed, 19th-century anthropological

⁹ Naturally, since women were encountered daily, this principle seems to be more nuanced in practice. For example, meeting a young girl was seen as an omen of a successful day, while encountering a pregnant woman was associated with failure or misfortune.

accounts mention the belief that if a child's shirt was mistakenly put on the wrong side (the left side) by the godparents, the child could grow into an evil ghost – and would definitely be left-handed. In Kashubia, this belief was so deeply ingrained that a special ritual was performed to prevent a child from becoming left-handed: when dressing a newborn in a shirt for the first time, it was essential to do this with the right hand, precisely to avoid any association with left-handedness (Kash. *saja*) (Gulgowski, 1911, p. 121; Łęgowski, 1892, p. 53). Among the common people, only signing with the right hand was considered binding (see Zowczak, 2013, p. 337). Such practices underscore the deeply rooted negative reputation of left-handedness associated with idleness and, consequently, poverty or social disapproval.

I recall also from my grandmother's stories that left-handed people were regarded with considerable distance, and the reason for this was often framed in quasi-religious explanations. The right side was seen as sacred or divinely favored, reinforcing its positive associations in daily life. Even in my school days, my neighbor was forcibly taught to write with her right hand, despite being naturally left-handed.

Yet, these explanations, while insightful, do not fully account for the complex phenomenon. Many intricate divinatory processes and their outcomes resemble equations with multiple unknowns, where even a "negative sign" on the left side might invert its meaning and become positive. This complexity also does not explain why the left side is associated with femininity – after all, in ancient Rome and China, the left side was seen in a distinctly positive light, and there was certainly not a predominance of left-handed individuals in those cultures. The symbolism of sides, i.e. right – left, is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon – it cannot be reduced solely to statistics regarding "handedness".

The magical manifestations of 19th- and 20th-century Polish reality are deeply grounded in a profound respect for the prevailing Roman Catholic faith. This naturally raises the valid question of how well the rural population actually knew the Bible. The immediate answer is that their knowledge was often basic. However, without a doubt, everyone was familiar with the text of the *Credo* prayer, particularly the passage: "He (Jesus) ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty".

The second element that shaped these beliefs is the deep-seated misogyny and the tendency to associate the negative, left side with femininity – even equating women with illness and misfortune. Yet, it was not solely religious beliefs or the patriarchal attitudes towards women that reinforced this symbolic dichotomy. Folk society, out of sheer necessity for survival, depended on careful observation of nature. This close relationship with the natural

world informed decisions, guided daily life, and provided a sense of control over the uncertain forces that shaped existence – weather, harvests, and fate itself. General observations – such as the sun’s path and the natural polarity of up-down, right-left – are universal and appear to have been recognized by many societies across temporal and geographic boundaries. Ordinary people noticed that the sun moved toward the right side of the sky. Moving to the right, following the sun’s course, was seen as progressive and life-affirming, while moving downward symbolically represented. In the same vein, the sequence of noise–life–spring–fertility–brightness is also deeply rooted in many cultures (Kowalski, 1998, p. 217; Olszewski, 2002, p. 159).

Finally, the philological perspective – the linguistic evidence across cultures – reinforces this traditional division. In modern languages, these associations remain: right – righteous (*prawy* – *prawość* in Polish), while left-handedness and the left side carry negative connotations “out in left field” (left field, *lewizna* in Polish, or the humorous saying “Never argue with left-handed people. They are not right”). In linguistic reflection, one can go even further: *prawy* (right) is related to *prawo* (law), *prawdziwy* (true), *sprawiedliwy* (just), *prawowierny* (orthodox). Thus, in Polish, the entire major religious denomination *Prawosławie* (Eastern Orthodoxy) etymologically derives from the word *prawy* – meaning “in accordance with the law” as given by God.

Only by considering all these intertwined elements can we understand why the right side held such significance in the daily lives of Polish, Kashubian, and Masurian communities. It was a deeply symbolic alignment with divine favor, natural order, and spiritual harmony – an orientation that shaped not only their worldview, but also the many customs, omens, and rituals of everyday life.

An analysis of Polish (as well as Kashubian and Masurian) beliefs shows that the symbolism of the right and left side is the result of complex processes: religious, magical, linguistic, patriarchal, and natural observations of the world. This “order of sides” not only influenced rituals but also shaped an entire worldview – organizing the cosmos, defining gender and social relations, and even the moral order. Only by considering all these elements can we understand why “rightness” was more than just a direction for these communities: it was the key to living in harmony with God, nature, and the community.

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