

Lace and licentiousness

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Is a hand-made, lace g-string an appropriate symbol of local cultural heritage? This has been one of the questions villagers in Koniakow, southwestern Poland, have been asking themselves since some local lace makers began to turn out crocheted lingerie in the face of falling demand for their traditional products. The production of tablecloths and ecclesiastical items in crochet lace has been a cottage industry in Koniakow since 1864, when the wife of a local schoolteacher taught the younger girls in the village the technique. The craft was passed on from one generation of women to the next, eventually developing into a distinct local style with its own vocabulary of floral motifs. Acknowledged as a craft unique to the village, it became recognized as a form of 'folk art' in the 20th century. Koniakow lace found its way to national and international exhibitions, as well as into the households of several European royal families and the Vatican with the appointment of John Paul II. Since 2003, bra and panty sets are churned out by members of the collective KONI-Art, along with the by now infamous 'stringi' – Polish for thongs. Their products are sold locally, through the village website (www.koniakow.com) and through websites located in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany.

The commercial success of this crocheted lingerie demonstrates the ability of the small-scale manufacture of specialized goods to flourish alongside the global flow of mass-produced commodities. Yet, the innovative application of traditional motifs and techniques for the creation of this new line of products has not been without its challenges. The 'stringi' and their producers have been met with some resistance from within the community itself, as well as from the Catholic Church. Religious authorities have labeled the new line of products 'indecent' and the media reported that some craftswomen were reluctant to admit they make lingerie for fear they would be named and shamed in church. The Association of Folk Artists (Stowarzyszenie Tworcow

Ludowych) has refused to grant the lingerie the official status of 'folk art', seeking to assert its right to determine and control 'Koniakow lace' as a brand (Grygar et al. 2004). Indeed, media interest in the story has done nothing to allay the social tensions that have appeared in Koniakow since the activities of the KONI-Art group in 2003. Rather, feasting on the story, the media has been eager to present the conflicts as a result of a liberal, young minority challenging an elderly, conservatively Catholic population within the village community. The Polish press has been keen to represent the 'stringi' as a symbol of burgeoning modernity, a thread that has been eagerly taken up by the international media.

Yet, while the image of grannies crocheting racy lingerie undoubtedly makes for eye-catching journalism, for the anthropologist it provides a case study for a much wider range of issues, particularly the relation between the transmission of craft knowledge and commercial innovation. Quite clearly, the emergence of the 'stringi' has challenged established norms and brought out latent conflicts surrounding issues of (sexual) morality, gender and entrepreneurship. The craft, however, is cultural knowledge shared by the majority of the women in this village and thus also a shared resource of income. The discussions and conflicts surrounding the application of a traditional technique for making 'stringi' can then be seen as an articulation of an ongoing negotiation of boundaries between the legitimate use and the misuse of craft knowledge. The relationship between tradition and innovation is a question of the political economy of knowledge, rather than simply the emergence of new material forms. The boundary between 'tradition' and 'innovation' is drawn through the constant renegotiation of who should know and how they should use their knowledge.

In July, I shall be going to Koniakow in order to conduct my first extended period of fieldwork in the village and these are some of the issues that will be informing my approach. Initially, I seek to understand why such issues as sexual morality, religious piety and adherence to craft tradition become the chosen vehicles for the articulation of this negotiation. Secondly, I seek to understand how the political economy of knowledge influences, and is influenced by, commercial practice. With the perhaps somewhat naïve enthusiasm of an amateur lace maker myself, I regard the emergence of Koniakow lace lingerie as a sign that the common prediction of the hand-made as a dying form of production is misconceived. I wonder what this case tell us about the emergence of new markets for craft objects in the globalised world.

Grygar J., Hodrová L. and Kořarková E. (2004) Koniakowska Krajka™. Vyjednávání tradice a lidovosti umění ve Slezských Beskydách. In L. Hodrová and E. Kořarková III. *Antropologické symposium*. Plzeň: Aleš Šeněk.

Selected press:

Hařba z trzydziestu kwiatków *Wysokie Obcasy* (20/10/2003)

Koronkowie stringi budzą kontowersje *Gazeta Wyborcza* (24/8/2003)

Polish lace makers at odds over recent switch to G-strings *The Wall Street Journal* (4/6/2004)

Pope's altar cloth makers turn to a more profitable line – thongs *The Independent* (8/8/2004)

Verushka's Secret *The New York Times* (15/5/2005)

Heilige Höschen *Stern* (13/4/2006)