

Changes in Assumption Day Herbal Bouquets in Poland: A Nineteenth Century Study Revisited¹

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Changes in Assumption Day Herbal Bouquets in Poland: A Nineteenth Century Study Revisited. The aim of this study is to compare a list of plants blessed in herbal bouquets on Assumption Day (August 15th) in Poland over a century ago with the bouquets blessed in the same locations in 2009. Assumption Day has been the main occasion when plants are blessed in Polish Roman Catholic churches for centuries. Such bouquets, composed of medicinal herbs and crop plants, are long believed to possess apotropaic properties. In 1894–1899, Seweryn Udziela made an herbarium documenting the composition of these bouquets (over 100 species) in 13 locations in the Kraków area. In 2009, 482 bouquets were photographed on Assumption Day and the plant species were identified. Results indicate that only half the species from Udziela's list are still blessed. A total of 233 taxa were found in the bouquets in 2009, an average of nine species per bouquet. The proportion of cultivated ornamentals has increased over time, whereas the proportion of wild species and dry grassland plants has decreased. The proportion of crop plants, as well as species from grassland and forest habitats, remained the same. The most commonly blessed species were *Solidago* spp., *Tanacetum vulgare*, *Dahlia* sp., *Sanguisorba officinalis*, *Anethum graveolens*, *Achillea millefolium*, *Mentha* spp., *Zinnia elegans*, *Triticum* sp., *Avena sativa*, and *Sorbus aucuparia*. The tradition of blessing bouquets continues, although the composition of the plant species has changed. These changes are due to alterations in the surrounding vegetation and the species of plants in cultivation, the transformation of species' value from medicinal and apotropaic, the maintenance of floral traditions, and artistic competition.

Jeden wiek zmian w bukietach zielnych święconych w dniu Matki Boskiej Zielnej w Polsce. Możliwość przeprowadzenia diachronicznych badań porównawczych XIX–wiecznego studium etnobotanicznego udokumentowanego arkuszami zielnikowymi ze stanem obecnym jest rzadką okazją dla etnobotanika. Celem tych badań było porównanie listy roślin święconych w okolicach Krakowa w dniu Matki Boskiej Zielnej (15 sierpnia) na przełomie XIX i XX wieku oraz obecnie. Zielna jest najważniejszym momentem w roku, kiedy święci się zioła w kościołach rzymsko-katolickich. Bukietom tym, złożonym z ziół i plonów przypisywano też własności apotropaiczne. Prawdopodobnie w latach 1894–99 Seweryn Udziela zebrał zielnik złożony z ponad stu gat. roślin święconych w okolicach Krakowa w 13 miejscowościach. W roku 2009 w dniu MB Zielnej zrobiono zdjęcia cyfrowe 482 bukietom święconym w miejscowościach, które badał wcześniej Udziela. Jedyne około połowa święconych dawniej gatunków roślin leczniczych jest w bukietach obecnie. W r. 2009 zanotowano 233 taksony roślin, średnio dziewięć na bukiet. Wzrósł udział gatunków kwiatów ozdobnych, a zmalał udział gatunków suchych muraw i pastwisk. Udział przedstawicieli pozostałych grup (rośliny łąk wilgotnych i ogólnoląkowe, runo leśne, drzewa i krzewy, rośliny uprawne) pozostał na podobnym poziomie.

Key Words: Ritual plants, plant blessing, historical ethnobotany, weihbuschn, kräuterweihe.

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Introduction

Ethnobotany suffers from a lack of well-documented diachronic studies. Older ethnographic data usually contain only anecdotal information on plant use, and well-documented historical comparative studies are rare (Heinrich et al. 2006; Kufer et al. 2005; Łuczaj 2010). In this study, the results of a uniquely detailed ethnobotanical study from the late 19th/early 20th century on the tradition of blessing herbs in Polish churches on Assumption Day were compared with the present state of the tradition in the same 13 villages and towns.

Peasant life in rural Poland in the past was strongly tied to the cycle of seasonal agricultural activities; certain rituals, which combined older pagan and Christian beliefs, were commonly used to ensure the well being of the farm. One of the most important of them was the blessing of plants in church (Klimaszewska 1981; Paluch 1984). These blessings took place on the following three occasions.

- 1) On Palm Sunday (*Niedziela Palmowa*) oblong structures were woven using plant material and were blessed as “palms.”
- 2) On Corpus Christi Octave (*Oktawa Bożego Ciała*), which is the eighth day after Corpus Christi in June, wreaths of predominantly medicinal plants were woven and brought to church. Later the wreaths were hung on the premises and used as incense to protect from damaging summer thunderstorms or to smudge ailing people and animals.
- 3) On Assumption Day (*Zielna*, or “*Mary of the Herbs*”), the 15th of August, specially arranged bouquets were brought to the church for blessing. These bouquets usually comprised the largest number of plants, including medicinal plants, apotropaic plants, and a variety of crops plants, such as cereals.

Assumption Day is still one of the major Christian holidays celebrated in the Catholic and Orthodox churches. According to oral tradition, the Virgin Mary, instead of dying, was taken to heaven along with her body. This legend was officially confirmed as dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950, in his Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. This belief is known to the Orthodox Church as the Dormition. There is no obvious link between the theological meaning of the holiday and the tradition of blessing plants on that day. The

holiday must simply have been a convenient day to perform this ritual. This tradition has been reported in Europe from as early as the 9th century if not before (Höfler 1912; Rostański 1922; Sillasoo 2009). The Roman Catholic liturgy for this well-rooted ritual contains special prayers for crop and herb blessings (Schroedel and Schroedel 2006). Rostański (1922) derives plant blessings on Assumption Day directly from the Jewish holiday *Yom ha-Bikkurim* (*Day of the First Fruits, Shavuot*), which was adopted by eastern Christians and, at the end of the 6th century, transferred to the 15th of August. In early Christianity, only crops, lilies, and roses were blessed; however, when the holiday was transferred to central Europe (with the omission of Rome and southern European countries), locally used medicinal and apotropaic plants were added (Rostański 1922).

In 2008, I initiated a research program devoted to the documentation of bouquets still blessed in churches. This paper is the third report from the project. The first and second reports were on data collected in 2008 and 2009, but from a different region (Łuczaj 2009, 2011). Further studies are being carried out in order to document the tradition across the country in all its regional variations.

From 1894 to 1899, Polish ethnographer Seweryn Udziela (1857–1937) gathered extensive information on the ethnobotany of the Kraków area (Udziela 1931). His work contains detailed records, which are meticulously documented with voucher specimens (Fig. 1), on the use of plants in ethnomedicine and rituals, including the blessing of plants on Assumption Day. His collection is stored in the herbarium of the Institute of Botany of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków (KRAM). A century later, when Piotr Köhler (1996a) re-examined the herbarium, he confirmed the identification of most specimens and corrected a few incorrect identifications. He then published a table containing information on where each of the species was blessed (Köhler 1996b).

The aim of this study is to provide a comparison of Udziela’s findings over 110 years ago with the present state of blessing herbs in churches in the same localities.

Materials and Methods

STUDY AREA

The study area, located on the edge of the Western Carpathians (foothill zone), stretches

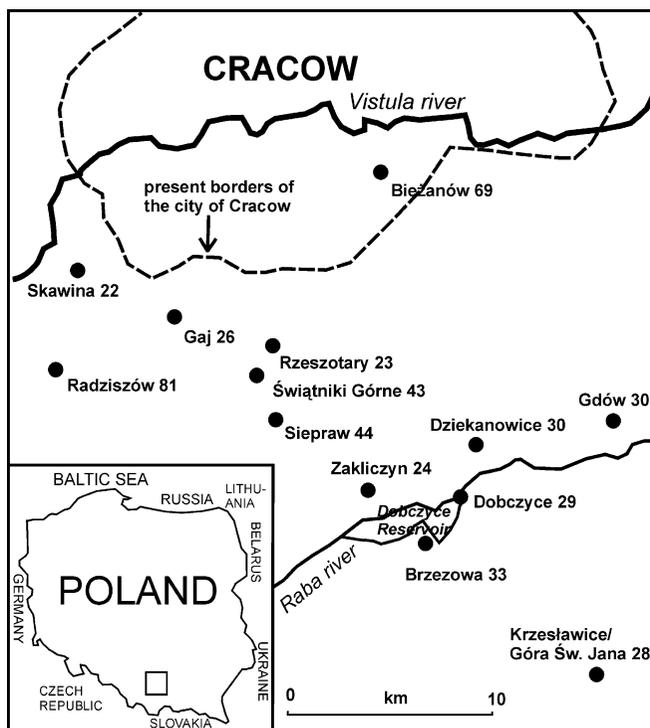


Fig. 2. Study localities. The number of bouquets studied is indicated after the name of village/town.

use of photographs is particularly suitable for studying Assumption Day bouquets, because a rapid documentation technique is needed to record such a large number of objects, which are assembled together in the church for several minutes only.

On August 15, 2009, three volunteers equipped with cameras assisted the author in documenting the bouquets in order to record church services held simultaneously in different localities. In 10 of the 13 localities studied, there is one parish church that is attended by people from the given parish and sometimes from one or two neighboring villages. One of the villages studied by Udziela, Biezanów, is now a part of the city of Kraków. Our study was done in the church where Biezanów used to exist. In Skawina, a small town with three churches, we chose the main and oldest church for this study. Krzesławice does not have a church, so we studied the bouquets in the church in Góra Świętego Jana (in the adjacent village), which is attended by people from Krzesławice.

Altogether 571 photos of 482 bouquets blessed in 19 Roman Catholic masses were taken (from 22 to 81 in each locality, Fig. 2). Photos were

taken before, during, and after the service, capturing most of the bouquets at each mass. Usually a single photograph was taken of each bouquet, although in some cases (when we had enough time and the bouquets were large) one or two more photos were taken. Late morning masses were mainly chosen for documentation, as they attract the largest congregations.

We were unable to ascertain precisely to what extent the number of taxa recorded in the photos corresponded to the real number of taxa in a bouquet. From a few comparisons between the real bouquets and their photos we estimate the average "data loss" is no more than one taxon per bouquet.

The significance of the differences between the proportions of various categories of species in Udziela's herbarium and in the bouquets of 2009 was calculated using the two proportion two-tailed Z-test (Freund 1953). Within the whole set of data, the following three categories were distinguished: Wild plants, cultivated ornamentals, and cultivated crop plants. Within the wild plants category, the proportion of species in various habitat categories in Udziela's study and in 2009 was also compared.

Additional information was supplied by 25 short unstructured interviews with the people who brought bouquets to the churches. Direct examination of their bouquets allowed identification of some taxa that could not be identified by photos only. All the interviewees were middle-aged or elderly women (age was not specified). The interviews were usually performed with the first people coming to church around 30 min before mass. They were asked the following questions: “What plants are blessed on Assumption Day?” “Are there any plants that used to be blessed and are not blessed now?” “Until when were they blessed and why did the custom stop?” “How were the bouquets used after blessing?” Due to limited time to answer, the responses were short and probably not exhaustive.

Results

PHOTOGRAPHS

Most families (at least three-quarters) that came to church on Assumption Day in 2009 brought bouquets for blessing. These bouquets were almost exclusively carried by women or children. As many as 233 taxa were blessed (171 were identified to the species level, 60 to the generic level, and 2 to the family level). Only 102 were wild, i.e., native or feral plants (Fig. 3). On average there were 9.0 species per bouquet (SD=2.8, maximum number of taxa=22). There was little difference in the species numbers among localities (maximum in Siepraw—10.4 species; minimum in Biezanów—7.8). The mean number of wild species per bouquet was 2.9 (lowest in Gdów—2.0; highest in Góra Św. Jana—3.3; SD=1.9; maximum number=15). There was a low and insignificant association between the number of species per bouquet and the distance from the center of Kraków (Pearson correlation coefficient, $r=0.25$, $P=0.20$). The most commonly appearing species were goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.), tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare* L.), dahlia (*Dahlia* sp.), great burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis* L.), dill (*Anethum graveolens* L.), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium* L.), zinnia (*Zinnia elegans* Jacq.), wheat (*Triticum* sp.), oats (*Avena sativa* L.), mint (*Mentha* spp.), and rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia* L.). Udziela did not mention goldenrods, dahlia, dill, zinnia, and rowan (Table 1).

All interviewees preserved their bouquets by drying and keeping them indoors. The bouquet is treated with respect; it cannot be thrown out,

only burned. Older people recall the times when dried herbs from the bouquet were used to heal animals and people, and to give cows strength after giving birth. The blessed grains were sown back into the fields to provide a good harvest, and apples from the bouquets were eaten to prevent sore throats. Nowadays these practices are carried out in order to preserve the tradition and, in a general sense, to “protect from evil.”

COMPARISON WITH UDZIELA’S STUDY

A major shift in bouquet composition occurred during the 20th century, mainly due to the inclusion of new ornamental plants. Only around half of the species reported in Udziela’s study (51%) appeared in the bouquets of 2009. Wild species dominated in Udziela’s data (Köhler 1996b), constituting about two-thirds of the blessed species (however he may have omitted purely ornamental plants), whereas wild species now constitute only half of the species blessed, and only slightly outnumber the ornamentals (Fig. 3). Looking exclusively at wild species, in 2009 there was a larger proportion of ruderal species (41% compared to 25% in the past) and a smaller proportion of xerothermic (i.e., dry grassland) species—a shift from 19% to 8% (Fig. 4), only the latter difference being significant (two proportions Z-test, $P<0.05$). The proportion of native woody species, woodland herbaceous species, and meadow species remained similar (Fig. 4).

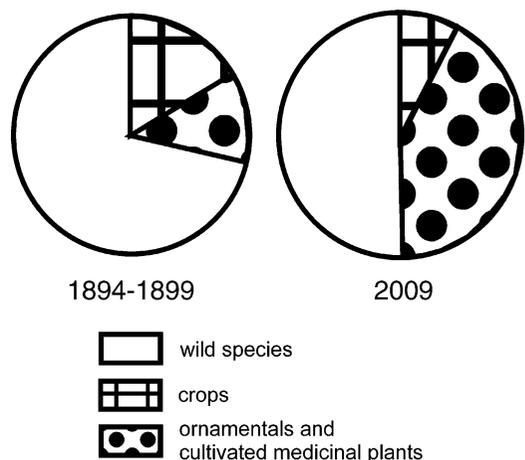


Fig. 3. The respective proportions of wild, ornamental, and crop plants in Udziela’s herbarium and in the photographs taken in 2009.

TABLE I. PLANTS COMMONLY RECORDED IN POLISH BLESSED BOUQUETS (26 MOST COMMON PLANTS RECORDED IN 2009 AND 26 SPECIES THAT WERE, ACCORDING TO UDZIELA, BLESSED UNIVERSALLY IN EACH VILLAGE IN THE LATE 19TH/EARLY 20TH CENTURY).

Species	Rank in 2009	No. of bouquets in 2009 <i>N</i> =482	Rank in 1894–1899	No. of villages in 1894–1899 <i>N</i> =13	Habitat
<i>Solidago canadensis</i> L. & <i>S. gigantea</i> Aiton	1	285		0	ru
<i>Tanacetum vulgare</i> L.	2	228	1–26	13	ru
<i>Dahlia</i> sp.	3	126		0	or
<i>Sanguisorba officinalis</i> L.	4	105	1–26	13	gr
<i>Anethum graveolens</i> L.	5	103		0	cr
<i>Achillea millefolium</i> L.	6	102	?	nd	gr
<i>Mentha</i> spp.	7	99	1–26	13	or
<i>Zinnia elegans</i> Jacq.	8–9	97		0	or
<i>Triticum</i> sp.	8–9	97	1–26	13	cr
<i>Avena sativa</i> L.	10	95	27–28	7	cr
<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i> L.	11	94		0	fo–tr
<i>Rosa</i> spp.	12	88 (only garden varieties)	58–106	1	or/tr
<i>Phlox paniculata</i> L.	13	82		0	or
<i>Helianthus annuus</i> L.	14	81		0	cr/or
<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i> L.	15	80	?	nd	ru
<i>Gladiolus</i> sp.	16	78		0	or
<i>Rudbeckia laciniata</i> 'Golden Glow'	17	76		0	or
<i>Erigeron annuus</i> (L.) Pers. s.l.	18	66		0	ru
<i>Malus domestica</i> Borkh.	19	64	1–26	13	cr–tr
<i>Tagetes patula</i> L.	20	62		0	or
<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i> L. & <i>R. fulgida</i> Aiton	21	49		0	or
<i>Secale cereale</i> L. & <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L.	22–23	38	<i>Secale</i> 1–26 <i>Hordeum</i> 29–32	<i>Secale</i> 13 <i>Hordeum</i> 6	cr
<i>Lytbrum salicaria</i> L.	22–23	38		0	gr
<i>Artemisia abrotanum</i> (L.)	24–25	37	1–26	13	or
<i>Callistephus chinensis</i> (L.) Nees	24–25	37		0	or
<i>Hydrangea</i> sp.	26	36		0	or–tr
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i> L.	27	34	1–26	13	xe
<i>Amaranthus</i> spp. including <i>A. caudatus</i> L.	31	29	36–41	4	or
<i>Papaver somniferum</i> L.	38	20	1–26	13	cr
<i>Artemisia absinthium</i> L.	52–54	12	1–26	13	or/ru
chamomile-like plants: <i>Chamomilla recutita</i> (L.) Rauschert, <i>Matricaria perforata</i> Mérat & <i>Anthemis</i> <i>arvensis</i> L.	57–60	10 (mainly <i>M. perforata</i>)	1–26	13 (only <i>Chamom.</i>)	ru
<i>Salvia officinalis</i> L.	71–81	6	1–26	13	or
<i>Corylus avellana</i> L.	71–81	6	1–26	13	cr/fo–tr
<i>Thymus pulegioides</i> L.	82–96	5	1–26	13	xe
<i>Eupatorium cannabinum</i> L.	97–119	4	1–26	13	fo
<i>Levisticum officinale</i> Koch	97–119	4	1–26	13	cr
<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i> (L.) Schultz–Bip.	120–131	3	1–26	13	or
<i>Dipsacus fullonum</i> L.	120–131	3	1–26	13	ru

(Continued)

TABLE 1. (CONTINUED).

Species	Rank in 2009	No. of bouquets in 2009 <i>N</i> =482	Rank in 1894–1899	No. of villages in 1894–1899 <i>N</i> =13	Habitat
<i>Vinca minor</i> L.	163–233	1	1–26	13	or/fo
<i>Daucus carota</i> L.	163–233	1	1–26	13	cr
<i>Bryonia cretica</i> L. subsp. <i>dioica</i> (Jacq.) Tutin		0	1–26	13 (only for witchcraft)	ru/or/?
<i>Centaureum</i> cfr <i>erythraea</i> Rafn		0	1–26	13	xe
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> Miller		0	1–26	13	cr
<i>Hyssopus officinalis</i> L.		0	1–26	13	cr/or
<i>Pisum sativum</i> L.		0	1–26	13	cr
<i>Ruta graveolens</i> L.		0	1–26	13	or

Habitat: or—ornamental or/and cultivated medicinal plant, cr—food crop, tr—tree or shrub, ru—ruderal, gr—mesic or moist grasslands, or—a grassland plant with a broad habitat range, xe—xerothermic grasslands, fo—forest or forest clearings, wa—water edges and marshes, ?—sometimes cultivated, and nd—no data concerning localities.

Although the proportion of crop plants has not changed much, different crops are blessed now, and fruit trees and shrubs are better represented. Cereals, once steady components of the bouquets, occur in 33% of these blessed in 2009.

Interviewees usually emphasized the disappearance of certain species and the decrease in time spent outdoors due to the decline in farming as the main sources of changes in the custom.

Discussion

The change in the ratio of ruderal and xerothermic grassland plants can be explained by habitat transformations. Pastures, hay meadows, and arable lands are largely replaced by habitats undergoing secondary succession; that is, they are either overgrown by large perennials or have become woodland. As plant communities undergo secondary succession, it is difficult or even impossible to find certain plants that used to be common in pastures and traditionally blessed (e.g., *Carlina vulgaris* L. and *Hypericum perforatum* L.). While numerous arable weeds, once common, are endangered by herbicide spraying, more and more exotic ornamentals are grown in gardens. As most of the population no longer earns their livelihood on farms, they do not have everyday contact with the surrounding countryside. Plants that are still common, or even more common than in the past (*Tanacetum vulgare*, *Solidago* spp., *Erigeron annuus* (L.) Pers., *Achillea millefolium*, and *Trifolium* spp.), are easy to find and have remained in the bouquets. Ornamental plants flowering in mid-August are added to enrich the bouquets (particularly *Dahlia* sp., *Zinnia elegans* Jacq., *Phlox paniculata* L., *Rud-*

beckia spp., *Gladiolus* sp., and *Tagetes patula* L.), and in some cases certain species traditionally blessed in the past are being replaced by counterparts; e.g., *Matricaria perforata* Mérat in the place of *Chamomilla recutita* (L.) Rauschert (similar flowers and habitat).

Habitat change is not the only factor responsible for the shift in the composition of bouquets. In the past, bouquets were treated as a reservoir of medicinal plants. Now, medicinal plants are no longer considered necessary, as pharmaceutical drugs have replaced them. And one change was caused by changes in the law in 1985 (legislation entitled *Ustawa o zapobieganiu narkomanii*, Dz. U. nr 4, poz. 15), making the cultivation of poppies (*Papaver somniferum* L.) and cannabis (*Cannabis* sp.) illegal in Poland, with the exception of licensed farms. Not surprisingly, this has caused the almost complete disappearance of these species from the bouquets.

One of the most important plants blessed in the bouquet now is dill (*Anethum graveolens* L.). It does not occur in Udziela's herbarium, which hosts a similar species—fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* Miller), which was not recorded in the photos of 2009. As the name *koper* (used by Udziela for fennel) is commonly applied for both of these taxa, he may have confused them or not distinguished between them. Both species have been grown in Poland, although the cultivation of fennel is now much rarer than the cultivation of dill. Dill is now omnipresent in gardens, as its leaves and seeds are an important condiment in Polish cuisine (leaves for soups and mashed potatoes, seeds for lacto-fermented cucumbers), which explains its commonness in the bouquets.

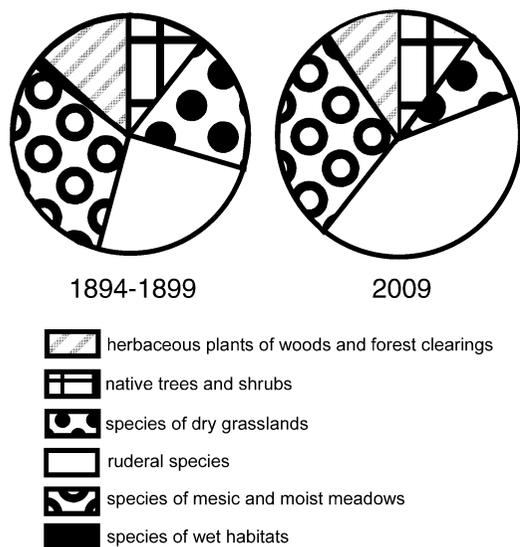


Fig. 4. The proportion of habitats in which the wild plants from both sets of data occurred.

Unfortunately, no literature data were uncovered comparing the importance of the two species in 19th century Poland.

Special attention must be paid to *Sanguisorba officinalis* (Fig. 5). While most of the frequently blessed plants are common, this riparian meadow plant is relatively rare and is not blessed in other parts of Poland where the bouquets were studied

(Łuczaj 2009). However, in this region it is perceived as an important plant in bouquet composition, and people who use it each have “their own place” where they collect it.

The composition of bouquets has presumably changed more in the Kraków area over the last few decades than it has in more rural parts of the Carpathians. For example, there are some plants reported by Udziela as frequently blessed but are now rare in the bouquets studied in the Kraków area. But, plants that are still commonly found in the bouquets in the Beskid Niski mountains and foothills (120–180 km to the east), where the vegetation and soils are similar to the area surrounding Kraków, include *Eupatorium cannabinum* L., *Origanum vulgare* L., *Viburnum opulus* L., and *Hypericum perforatum*. Additionally, the frequency of cereals and vegetables found in bouquets of the Beskid Niski mountain area is higher (Łuczaj 2009, 2011). In Zarszyn, a village in the foothills of the Beskid Niski mountain range (Łuczaj 2011), people believe that *Eupatorium* is the king of herbs and *Origanum* is the queen. *Eupatorium* is perceived as the most important blessed herb in a few other villages in southeastern Poland, although it is no longer used in ethnomedicine (Łuczaj 2009). Exactly the same belief about *Eupatorium* and *Origanum* was reported from the Kraków area by Udziela (1931); nowadays, however, not only is the belief dead, but the



Fig. 5. An example of a large bouquet from one of the studied villages (Siepraw) containing the main traditional elements (cereals, fruits, and herbs). Note the presence of greater burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*)—a frequent component in this area, rarely found in other regions of Poland (photo by Piotr Sobota).

plants are hardly ever blessed in Kraków. In spite of the larger proportion of wild native plants blessed in the Beskid Niski mountains, rather than the Kraków area, the number of species per bouquet is nearly identical.

Conclusions

The tradition of bouquet blessing is alive and well in the Western Carpathians. However, the composition of bouquets and their roles have changed as the tradition has evolved from an activity that had concrete functions in an agricultural society to a generalist apotropaic activity. Respondents pointed out two factors that may have contributed to the preservation of the custom. One is the fact that in 1989 Assumption Day became an official holiday again, as it used to be before 1961 (which means participants have more time to prepare the bouquets in the morning). The second factor is an increasing interest in gardening; thus, the bouquet is transformed from being a magical object into a subject of aesthetic competition between neighbors. The composition of the bouquets has undergone substantial changes accordingly, and the bouquet has stopped being a ritual object carefully arranged according to a specific “key.”

Blessing herbs on Assumption Day is not restricted to Poland. For instance, it has been practiced in Austria (Aumüller 1974; Christanell et al. 2010; Höfler 1912), Belgium (Rostafiński 1922), Slovakia (Nadiya Varcholova, pers. comm.), and Germany (Marzell 1957; Schroedel and Schroedel 2006). Preserving this tradition could be an effective tool in saving local ethnomedical heritage and in maintaining local plant knowledge. In Podegrodzie (Nowy Sącz area, southern Poland), a local cultural center organizes courses of herbal bouquet-making for children (see *Święto Matki Boskiej Zielnej* website). In the village of Kartitsch in Eastern Tyrol (Austria), some women give out bouquets they have made to raise awareness of the disappearing tradition (Christanell et al. 2010). In Austria, a major reason for the tradition’s decline is the low number of people attending church. In Poland this is not yet the case. The majority of Polish people attend church regularly, with 45% of the population going there every Sunday (see *Połowa młodych* website). Unfortunately, the abandonment of traditional crops and grassland degradation, particularly the disappearance of many medicinal plants that used to grow in pastures, has made an indelible impression on the tradition.

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