

## Research Article

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# Ritual Sweat Bath in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2022-0235>

received May 31, 2023; accepted October 05, 2023

**Abstract:** This article traces differences and similarities in the ritual sweat bath usage through a comparative perspective that includes contemporary practice in Poland and the central and the north American traditions that inform it. I argue that there exist continuity and consistency of representations related to sweat bathing across time and space, which can be identified by the metaphors designating certain elements of the ritual. The bathhouse from a cross-cultural perspective can be considered a sacred and liminal space, a gateway that enables the transcending of ordinary space–time dimension and interaction with primordial creation–destruction forces. Fertility appears as only one aspect of these ambivalent forces. It manifests itself in the main metaphors of the Mother Earth’s womb and death–rebirth process in ritual’s contemporary descriptions in Poland. The similarities in the way the sweat bath experience is conceptualised reveal the influence of particular elements of the ritual that induce specific bodily sensations, intrinsically related to the human organism conditions.

**Keywords:** *temazcal*, *inipi*, sweatlodge, steam bath, paganism, ritual, delocalisation, transculturation, embodied cognition

## 1 Introduction

The practice of the sweat bath, consisting of direct exposure of the body to heat produced by incandescent stones, or to steam achieved by sprinkling them with water, in an enclosed space, was considered by Kirchhoff as a cultural element characteristic of the hunter-gatherer tribes of the North and of the cultivators of the Mesoamerican area.<sup>1</sup> The earliest securely dated sweat bath, located at Dzibilchaltun in the northern Yucatan Peninsula, dates to the Formative period, between 600 and 400 BC,<sup>2</sup> which spans the period of the timeline of its use up to 2500 years to the past.<sup>3</sup>

1 Kirchhoff, “Mesoamérica,” 10–1. The main exceptions in the distribution of historical usage among the native peoples in North America are limited to the communities in the central and north-east Canada, along with some peoples south of the Great Basin in the United States, such as the Yumas (California and Arizona) and in the northern regions of Mexico, including communities in Baja California and the Pimas (bordering Sonora and Chihuahua). Alcina Franch et al., “El ‘temazcal,’” 100. Driver and Massels, in accordance with their thesis about the environmental determiners of religion observe that the lack of sweat baths is related to hot and dry climate. “Comparative Studies,” 314. Groark is right to point out that it is not a universal rule, as the steam baths in the classic period were also in use in Yucatan, where the climate is hot and dry. Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 4.

2 Andrews Wyllys, “Dzibilchaltun,” 317–8.

3 There are three main hypotheses about the origin of the sweat bath on the American continent. Lapatin, who locates its origins in the territory of what is now Finland, suggests that it may either be 1) a parallel independent invention in the American territory, or 2) a cultural diffusion from north-western Europe via Iceland or directly. The second hypothesis is based on the similarities of the

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In regards to such a vast spatial and temporal distribution, the construction of sweat baths encompassed a great diversity of forms: fixed constructions made of stone or adobe, rectangular or circular in plan, semi-subterranean or above ground, with a furnace inside or outside, as well as temporary constructions made of sticks in the form of a dome or tunnel, covered with blankets or *metates*.<sup>4</sup>

The researchers of the sweat bath in the North American continent distinguished its four main and interrelated functions: 1) hygienic and social, 2) therapeutic/healing, 3) perinatal care, and 4) religious.<sup>5</sup> The twentieth-century scholars observed that the hygienic and social function appeared to prevail in communities of Mesoamerican traditions in the 1980s, while at the same time, the religious dimension of the practice was on the decline and it was successively abandoned in some villages.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, from the 1980s, the ritual sweat bath was revived on Native American reservations and has been used as a therapeutic tool for substance abuse and stress disorder treatment.<sup>7</sup> Especially from the 1990s onwards, it began to be practised within movements and by individuals who considered themselves to be the cultivators of the native religions, although they were not necessarily members of indigenous ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> The sweat bath ritual informed mainly by the Lakota tradition was reproduced beyond its traditional context and included among psycho-physical techniques offered by movements that promote an alternative spirituality, which, according to Mexican anthropologists Renée de la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez, are inspired by the holistic matrix of the New Age.<sup>9</sup> This process was in part a result of the encounters, exchanges, and alliances established between the Native American leaders and the leaders of the *Mexicanidad* movement:<sup>10</sup> after the first sun dance ceremony took place in Mexico in 1982, supposedly with the approval of the Lakota spiritual leader Leonard Crow Dog, “Lakota spirituality transplanted into Mexicanity” nourished movements, identified with panindianism, the *neomexicanidad*, and neo-shamanism or urban shamanism. Some of these organisations or individuals mention adhering to the Red Path (Camino Rojo in Spanish),<sup>11</sup> a native way of living – an example of this is the Native Church of the Sacred Fire of Iztachilatlan (SFI) founded by Aurelio Díaz Tekpankalli

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technique of producing vaporisation of the body by exposure to heat from fire-heated stones (without or with the use of water). Lapatin rejects the hypothesis of Driver and Massey who postulate its origin in northern Asia and its subsequent spread to western Europe and eastern North America. According to Lapatin, the steam bath technique of pouring water over hot stones did not exist in Asia (except for the Scythians who adopted it from the region of its origin) and that its existence can only be proved in north-western Europe and America (Lopatin, “Origin,” 989–90). Alcina Franch et al. (“El ‘temazcal’”) consider the hypothesis of double invention more likely, given the difficulties of such diffusion and similar climatic conditions in northern America and Europe. In the light of the recent find of a Scythian tomb in the central Asian republic of Tuva, it does not seem improbable that this type of the bath had been known in this part of the world, which would lead to the Driver and Massey’s hypothesis being considered. About the discovery of the Scythian tomb, look at: <https://siberia-scythica.pl/tuva.html>.

4 Alcina Franch et al., “El ‘temazcal,’” 100–18; González Aké, *El uso de los baños*, 47–58. Following the distinction adopted by Redfield, while the stone structures of the baths belong to the architecture of the Great Tradition, represented by an elite in power and leading an intellectual life, the baths made of clay, wood, and other less durable materials belong to the Small Tradition of the villagers. “The Social,” 13–4.

5 Alcina Franch et al., “El ‘temazcal,’” 120.

6 Katz indicates that in the 1990s in the Mixteca Alta, it was mainly pregnant or post-partum women who used it, while the men stopped doing it because *it is an indigenous thing*. Katz, “El Temazcal,” Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 7, 37, 43.

7 Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual*, 59–60; Tlanusta et al. “Crying.”

8 Hobson, “The Rise,” Aldred, “Plastic Shamans.”

9 de la Torre and Gutiérrez, “El Temazcal.”

10 Arias Yerena, “La Danza,” 36–41, 81–82. The *Mexicanidad* movement developed from the 1950s with the aim of reclaiming, renewing, and rescuing native traditions, especially those related to the Toltecs and Aztecs, and evolved towards the so-called *neo-Mexicanidad*, which was more eclectic and esoteric, receiving influences from different traditions, such as the shamanism of Carlos Castaneda’s sign, Buddhism, yoga, and others. de la Peña, “Milenarismo.”

11 According to de la Torre, the Red Path “spreads the traditional rituals of the Native American Church to promote a neopaganism and pan-Indianism practiced through ceremonies of the sun dance (Wi Wayang Wachipi), the *inipi* (temazcal, or sweat lodge), the search for a vision of the Great Spirit (known as *vision quest*), the half moon (consecration of the peyote), and the sacred pipe or *chanupa* (prayers of the tobacco ceremony). ... The Red Path is a spiritual movement that, in the first instance, is deterritorialized from the institutional bounds of the Lakota tradition but is then relocated in various circuits: among New Age seekers, hippies, environmentalists, alternative therapies, indigenous people or neo-Indians, spiritists.” “Red Path.”

in Toluca in 2006.<sup>12</sup> Actually, we can observe a radical change in the distribution of the use of the ritual sweat bath: it can be found in seven South American countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, in England and in European countries such as Spain, Italy, Germany, and Poland.

In a transnational process that involves the circulation of products, information, and people, the increased interest in the indigenous religious practices and beliefs is associated with the construction of a positive imaginary about “the indigenous,” in which spirituality plays a fundamental role. The political context of this process concerns the ideology of pluralism and multiculturalism and the consequent recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples beginning with the 1980s, which led to the valorisation of minority ethnic cultures and indigenisation or the increase of the sense of ethnic belonging. The preservation of a cultural niche allows for economic and political advantages. This is how new relationships emerge, in which the “ethno-spiritual entrepreneurs,” as Sarazin calls them, respond to the concerns of spiritual seekers who need symbolic elements to give meaning to their lives and in order to build a personal identity.<sup>13</sup> Native activists and scholars strongly criticised the usage of cultural elements considered as native heritage, sweat bath rituals included, in the context of the broader criticism of the so-called New Age spirituality. Their criticisms are founded on a vision of the phenomenon as a prolongation of colonisation and violation of indigenous self-determination, intimately linked to the concept of the other and its two extremes: otherphilia and otherphobia.<sup>14</sup> To distinguish between shamanism and neo-shamanism or urban shamanism,<sup>15</sup> Indians and Neo-Indians,<sup>16</sup> scholars questioned expropriation, tergiversation, and commercialisation of native cultures. Members of the Native American communities have manifested their objection in numerous declarations<sup>17</sup> and insisted on the qualification of the phenomenon as a cultural genocide.<sup>18</sup>

The main objective of this article is to trace differences and similarities in the ritual sweat bath usage across space and time through comparative perspective that includes the central and the north American traditions and the contemporary practice in Poland. The focus on these specific examples is prompted by the trajectory of the transfer of the ritual sweat bath to Poland, as I demonstrate in the following text. I argue that there exist continuity and consistency of representations related to sweat bathing across time and space, which can be identified by the metaphors designating certain elements of the ritual. The similarities in the mode of conceptualisation of sweat bath experience reveal the impact of particular elements of the ritual that induce specific bodily sensations, intrinsically related to the human organism conditions.

In the contemporary scientific literature, apart from the quoted instances of strong criticism, the issue of the recent sweat bath popularisation is addressed in only a few mentions or in the margins.<sup>19</sup> The most elaborated findings in the matter are due to the already mentioned scholars Renée de la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez,<sup>20</sup> who based their research on participant observation in three different contemporary sweat baths. According to these authors, the delocalisation of sweat baths beyond the traditional contexts of ethnic communities involves the spiritualisation of the practice (a non-mediated connection with the sacred) and their transculturation, understood as a process of giving new meanings and symbols to certain elements of the ritual. In this study, I will confront these findings with the results of a comparison of the sweat bath usage across space and time, including the contemporary usage in Poland.

I apply the term “sweat bath” to the practice described in the beginning and consider it ritual according to the definition based on the prototype theory, proposed by Mateusz Dąsal, who identifies the following possible

<sup>12</sup> Arias Yerena, *La Danza*, 81; Cruz Balderas, “El Camino Rojo.”

<sup>13</sup> Sarrazin, “Transnacionalización.”

<sup>14</sup> Hobson, “The Rise;” Aldred, “Plastic Shamans.”

<sup>15</sup> Atkinson, “Shamanism Today;” Dubois, *An Introduction*.

<sup>16</sup> Galinier and Molinié, *Los neo-indios*.

<sup>17</sup> V Lakota Summit, “War Against;” Arvol Looking Horse, “Protecting Traditions;” Arvol Looking Horse, “The Selling;” Arvol Looking Horse, “Further Thoughts;” Arvol Looking Horse, “Message.”

<sup>18</sup> Bunce, *New Agers*.

<sup>19</sup> Peretti, “El Resurgimiento;” Owen, *The Appropriation*. Berho Castillo and García Navarrete, “Salud”.

<sup>20</sup> de la Torre and Gutiérrez, “El Temazcal.”

properties of the ritual: 1) structure (structuring that corresponds to the pattern of separation – liminality – aggregation); 2) *communitas* (the anti-hierarchical state of fraternal undifferentiated community); 3) flow and attunement (the immersion of the individual in action and its social dimension manifested in the peculiar unification of the participants in such immersion); 4) carnivalisation (inversion of the rules of the daily life); 5) operational and doctrinal effectiveness (the implicit effects of the ritual, such as social integration, and the effects expected according to the participants' professed doctrine); 6) special time (building the uniqueness of the ritual moment); 7) special space (building the uniqueness of the ritual place); 8) worldview (expression and confirmation of the general conception of reality); and 9) performativity (concrete act, performance being the opposition of an abstract system of rules).<sup>21</sup>

In order to determine the conceptualisations of the sweat bath ritual in the contexts of its use among the native American communities, archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic primary and secondary sources have been studied. Secondly, a netnographic research of Polish websites and social networks was carried out and seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who participated in or guided the sweat bath ritual in Poland. In the course of the second part of the research, it was possible to collect data concerning the number and frequency of the sweat baths realised, the groups or individuals performing them, as well as to identify the main actors responsible for its introduction and popularisation (Table 1). I used the same netnographic and ethnographic sources to reconstruct conceptualisations of the ritual and its elements, as well as functions of its use, in regard to the contemporary practice in Poland (Table 2).<sup>22</sup>

In the first part of the article, I reconstruct the main currents involved in the introduction of sweat baths in Poland and the temporal scope of the practice. In the following sections, I reconstruct conceptualisations and contexts of the use of sweat baths in a comparative perspective. Afterwards, while examining changes and continuities, the results obtained are discussed and their interpretation is proposed.

## 2 The Ritual Sweat Bath in Contemporary Poland

The data collected in the course of preliminary research on the Polish case revealed the crucial currents and actors responsible for the introduction and popularisation of the sweat bath in Poland, processes that have occurred in the two main stages.

The first stage had its key moment in July 1995, when, in the vicinity of Lublin, the sweat bath ceremony was guided by David Thompson and his wife, Mattie Davis-Wolfe, who received it from teachers of the Blackfeet (Blackfoot) Nation, in the province of Alberta, Canada, and learned it from the Seminoles of Oklahoma. The couple created the Sacred Circles Institute (SCI), a spiritual development organisation based in the Washington state, with the purpose “to address the world need for simple yet powerful techniques for spiritual opening, transformation, self-exploration and healing, based on the ancient wisdom of earth-honouring people combined with insights from modern consciousness research, depth psychology and perennial spiritual practices.”<sup>23</sup> Part of the SCI activities consisted of therapeutic work, the sweat bath practice included, with native American prisoners.

The sweat bath run by the SCI founders was fundamental in the consolidation of the Hard Path (in Polish *Twarda Ścieżka*) created by Wojciech Józwiak,<sup>24</sup> who defines it as a practice of personal development based on a series of consciousness-expanding exercises that operate through the body and its senses, and not through words, symbols, and meanings, as opposed to soft activities such as tarot readings or invocations in ceremonial magic. One of the reasons for creating this name was to avoid abusing the word “shamanism,” although its

<sup>21</sup> Dąsal, “Rytuały,” 11–172. Although it is not the main objective of this article to prove the ritual character of the sweat bath practice across space and time, I consider that most of the indicated features (especially 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7) can be observed in the usage of the sweat bath in examined regions and periods.

<sup>22</sup> Personal data and the names of the centres organising the sweat baths have been omitted as they are considered sensitive data.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.sacredcircles.org>.

<sup>24</sup> A Polish biophysicist, astrologer, researcher, and writer, pioneer of steam baths in Poland and founder of the portal Taraka.pl.

Table 1: Sweat baths organised in Poland<sup>a</sup>

| No | Organiser/scope of activities  | Frequency   | Sweat bath guide   |
|----|--|---|--|
| 1  | Polish leader initiated by Camino Rojo leaders; glamping centre on the private plot, drum workshops, eco-farming, concerts   | Every 2–3 months; ca. 50; up to 2023  | Camino Rojo leaders (SFI); organiser   |
| 2  | Eco-village (Slavic/local tradition); farming and natural therapy workshops, initiatives (political, educational), concerts  | Three registered since 2019<br>a) July 2019<br>b) September 2019<br>c) May 2021 | a) Mayan priestess living in France<br>b) Mexican from Puebla<br>c) Polish practitioners   |
| 3  | Workshop and therapy centre on the private plot, shamanic festival (entheogen plants, dance, breath, voice, women/men circles)   | Since 2015, at least 2–3 a year during shamanic festival in summer              | a) Polish practitioners (different spiritual traditions/archaic practices)<br>b) Camino Rojo collective, men and women<br>c) Mayan elders (Tzutujil), men<br>d) Panindianist leader, man<br>Organiser      |
| 4  | Polish practitioner in a family eco-farm and travel agency; body and spirit workshops  | Two registered since 2021   | Organiser  |
| 5  | Polish shaman woman, artist, women circles, eclectic/own path; based on Polish (Hard Path) and Mexican teachers; Inipi; on the rented plot in the countryside                          | Since 2018, every month   | Organiser  |
| 6  | Polish leader, man, Hard Path practitioner, Hard Path ceremonies, walking on fire, drum/shamanic journeys, on the private plot in the countryside                                      | Since 2012, every month   | Organiser  |
| 7  | Creative co-operation centre on the rented private plot on the outskirts of the small town; workshops, ceremonies, concerts  | Since October 2020, every 1–3 months  | a) Polish naturetherapists and artists, women<br>b) Polish practitioners, man and woman<br>c) Camino Rojo practitioner, man  |
| 8  | Centre of the body and spirit workshops and therapies, ceremonies (tantra, women and men circles, Osho meditation, shamanism), tantra festival; on the private plot in the countryside | Four registered: a) 2015, b) 2021, and c) 2020 and 2022                         | a) Peruvian musician and teacher living in Poland, man<br>b) Eclectic workshop, therapist from Chile, woman, sweat bath for women<br>c) Mexican tantra teacher living in Europe, man, eclecticism (tantra) |
| 9  | Centre of the personal development workshops – conscious movement, meditation, well-being; medicinal plants; <i>fusion of business energy with inner energy</i> , in the countryside   | Five registered from 2017 to 2019   | a) Polish therapist, man, related to Camino Rojo<br>b) Panindianist leader from Mexico/shaman  |
| 10 | “Calibration camps” for men; Polish leaders, men, eclectic tradition (Quero, Wixarica, Toltec path, Polynesian techniques); on the (rented?) private plot in the forest                | Five since 2020   | Organisers   |
| 11 | Private plot in the mountains with a gathering space (yoga, concerts, others)  | 1 (December 2021)   | Polish practitioners   |
| 12 | Ecstatic dance and other workshops centre in the city; sweat baths organised on the (rented?) private plot out of the city   | 2 (June and July 2022)  | Two Mexican leaders, Panindianist and Camino Rojo  |
| 13 | Polish shaman, man on his agrotourism farm   | 2 (March and June 2022)   | Organiser  |
| 14 | Body and spirit workshops centre, on the (rented?) private plot out of the city  | Three times since 2021  | Polish coach, psychologist, therapist, ( <i>soul healer</i> ) woman  |
| 15 | Polish drummer, man, phytotherapist, lithotherapist, aromatherapist, REIKI massager; on different (rented?) private plots out of the city  | Mostly three times (and at least once) a month, since 2016                      | Organiser  |

<sup>a</sup>This table only includes commercial sweat baths, open to the public and announced on the websites or social media. Consequently, sweat baths carried out since the second half of the 1990s within the Hard Path are not considered here as they were not advertised, nor did they have a commercial character.

**Table 2:** Sweat bath conceptualisations in contemporary Poland<sup>a</sup>

|                                     | 1               | 2a | 2b <sup>b</sup> | 3a | 3b | 3c | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7a | 7b | 8a | 8b | 8c             | 9a             | 10             | 13             | 14 | 15 |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----|-----------------|----|----|----|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----|----|
| Prayer                              |                 |    |                 |    | +  |    |   |   |   | +  | +  | +  |    |                | +              |                | +              |    |    |
| Cleansing, purification             | +               | +  |                 |    | +  | +  | + | + | + | +  |    | +  |    |                | +              | +              | +              | +  | +  |
| Healing, medicine                   | +               | +  |                 | +  | +  | +  |   |   | + |    |    | +  |    |                | +              |                | +              | +  |    |
| Transformation                      |                 |    |                 | +  | +  | +  | + |   | + | +  | +  | +  |    | +              |                |                | +              | +  | +  |
| Self-knowledge                      |                 |    |                 | +  |    | +  |   | + | + |    |    |    |    |                |                |                | +              | +  | +  |
| Mother Earth or Mother's Earth Womb | +               | +  |                 | +  |    | +  | + | + | + | +  |    | +  |    | + <sup>c</sup> | +              | +              | +              |    |    |
| Rebirth/(little)death and rebirth   | +               | +  |                 | /+ |    | +  | + | + | + | +  | +  |    |    |                | /+             |                | /+             | /+ |    |
| Elements                            |                 | +  |                 | +  |    | +  | + | + | + | +  | +  | +  | +  | +              | + <sup>d</sup> | + <sup>e</sup> | + <sup>f</sup> |    | +  |
| Ancestors/community                 | +/ <sup>g</sup> |    |                 | +  |    |    |   | + |   |    |    |    |    |                | +              |                | +              |    | +  |

<sup>a</sup>In cases 11 and 12, no description of the practice was given.

<sup>b</sup>In this case, the description only refers to dualism of forces (hot–cold).

<sup>c</sup>There is an explicit evocation of Tlazolteotl and the Father of Universe Tehuatl (?). As far as I know, there is no mention of Tehuatl in Mesoamerican sources; “tehuatl” in Nahuatl means “you,” the second person singular.

<sup>d</sup>Father of Universe Tehuatl.

<sup>e</sup>Explicit evocation of the Sacred Fire.

<sup>f</sup>Explicit evocation of the Fire/Great Father Sun.

<sup>g</sup>Reference to connection with Brothers and Sisters.

founder recognises the Hard Path shares some techniques with the Michael Harner's core-shamanism, “a «shamanism» for «urban Whites».” The sweat bath became an indispensable component of the Hard Path workshops, which also incorporated practices of other traditions, such as the burying into the ground, transient movement,<sup>25</sup> drum meditations, ecstatic positions, fire-walking, colon cleansing, and some hatha-yoga elements.<sup>26</sup>

The people linked to the Hard Path movement have conducted numerous sweat baths in various locations in Poland. In the years 2011–2019, the sweat baths in a small circle of people were usually held every month on a full moon. What distinguishes this stage is the limitation of ritual participants to a circle of personal contacts. In addition, the sweat baths performed within Hard Path did not have a commercial character and were subjected to experiments that lead to depuration of the ritual from its symbolic elements proceeding from the native American tradition.

As Józwiak points out, according to Thompson's transmission, in the sweat bath ritual, the sweathouse represents *the universe at the moment of its creation, when it was fullest in its primordial power*; the healing role of this ritual depends on “*shifting*” to the phase of the Beginning: *connecting with the primordial, “embryonic” power of the universe, that enables one to go back to other beginnings and turning points in life, which in turn allows one to make good decisions, correct the wrong ones and keep the good ones in action.*<sup>27</sup> Between Plains Indians, as Józwiak states, the sense of the ritual consists on building and recreating wholeness, unity, and connectedness among people themselves and with the elements of the universe, the fact expressed in Lakota invocation *mitakuye oyasin* (“all my relatives”). In European and Polish conditions, where the whole context of the ritual is different, as different is the grounding either in tradition or in the consciousness of the participants, there is no point in trying to adhere strictly to Indian custom. For Józwiak, it is respect and ignorance that make him abstain from singing Indian ceremonial songs. During some Hard Path sweat baths, Polish and Ukrainian text were melo-recited accordingly with the purpose of grounding the ritual in the Slavic tradition.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Warrior's burial” and the “transient movement” were reworked on the basis of the books by the Mexican author Víctor Sánchez (more information about this author: <https://toltecas.com/victor-sanchez/>).

<sup>26</sup> Józwiak, “Twarda ścieżka” ([https://www.taraka.pl/twarda\\_sciezka\\_jej\\_warsztaty](https://www.taraka.pl/twarda_sciezka_jej_warsztaty)).

<sup>27</sup> Józwiak, “Szałas potu” ([https://www.taraka.pl/szalas\\_potu](https://www.taraka.pl/szalas_potu)).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



Referring to the written, archaeological, and linguistic evidence of the use of sweat baths in Slavic territories,<sup>29</sup> Józwiak considers it as a forgotten “power installation” that, thanks to the Lakota and Blackfoot peoples, has been recalled and restored.<sup>30</sup> Hard Path sweat baths are “modernised” because blankets and tarpaulin, not animal skins, are used in the ritual. Nevertheless, these human products should be reduced to minimum, since, as Józwiak emphasised, in “slavisation and modernisation” processes, one of the most important aspects is the environment in which the practice takes place which should be *anekumena* – a space without human intervention or wilderness, which has its parallel in the human unconsciousness, the domain of dreams, visions, and inspirations.<sup>31</sup> Other important features are the attention to the signals emitted by nature and the elimination or reduction of usage of language.<sup>32</sup> As we can observe, these features make the sweat bath ritual perfect for its purpose of the “shifting to the beginning.” It is also essential to remark that the author of the Hard Path considers the inspiration by pre-Christian native traditions – and in particular, conception of *anekumena* as an extra-human domain – a common feature of the Hard Path and the paganism. Finally, the Hard Path sweat bath is “a ritual and spiritual experience,” not a “party” or “hygienic activity.”

Some people who participated in Hard Path sweat baths continue practicing and organising sweat baths that are open to the public and commercial (see Table 1: 5 and 6). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, the second stage of sweat bath popularisation in Poland starts, which is marked by the establishment of trans-Atlantic relationships between individuals and members of organisations focused on the transmission of the traditional native American ceremonial practices such as sweat lodge, sun dance, vision quest, and providing the access to potent entheogen substances endemic to both American continents. These agents are associated with commercial sweat baths (advertised on Internet sites or on social media and accessible to the public for a fee).<sup>33</sup>

As we can appreciate in Table 1, the popularisation of sweat baths in Poland is mainly due to the Hard Path members and representatives of movements related to the Red Path/Camino Rojo,<sup>34</sup> as well as individuals from Latin America. One of the most important characteristics of the Polish people involved in the ritual popularisation is to be living in the countryside on the private plot (Table 1: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13), where the sweat baths are organised. In most cases, the ritual has been guided by a man, although women are also quite common guides. They often describe themselves as shamans (4, 5, 13), spiritual artists (15), or soul healers (14). The participants and/or guides of the ritual sweat bath that were interviewed are people in their 40s,<sup>35</sup> with higher education and a freelance profession, belonging to the middle class. The rituals have been organised regularly or even with high frequency (1, 5, 6). Less frequently, sweat baths are organised in personal development centres, where they constitute one among many workshops and therapies offered. These centres vary in the profile of their activities: they may focus on tantra (8) or ecstatic dance (12). Some of them have a strong commercial character: the amount of money for the participation is fixed and gives the impression of being the main source of income for the centre. Others, on the contrary, only bring together a narrower circle of friends and allow bartering. The research also revealed a growing trend in the number of places where sweat bath has been organised since the second decade of the twenty-first century.

<sup>29</sup> One of the written sources containing description of the Slavic baths was given by al-Bakri (eleventh century) based on a tenth century account by Ibrahim ibn Jakub, a Sephardic Jew and traveller from Tortosa in the Cordoba Caliphate: *in the wooden, square-shaped structures dug into the ground, water was poured onto incandescent stones, and by sweating unnecessary substances were excreted through the skin, leaving it without a single scab trace.* (“Relacja Ibrahima,” 54). Written references of sweat bath usage in Eastern Europe are corroborated by archaeological findings, such as 3.5 m × 3.5 m semi-subterranean structure found in the early mediaeval settlement in Brzezie (Małopolska) (<https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/w-brzeziu-odkryto-laznie-sprzed-tysiaca-lat>). Polish words *łazienka* (bathroom) and *łaźnia* (bathhouse) come from the word *włazić*, which means to move in a hunched or bent position, directly alluding to this type of construction.

<sup>30</sup> Józwiak, “Szałas potu”, [https://www.taraka.pl/szalas\\_potu](https://www.taraka.pl/szalas_potu).

<sup>31</sup> Józwiak, “Anekumena” (<https://www.taraka.pl/anekumena>).

<sup>32</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>33</sup> The preliminary research finished in April 2023.

<sup>34</sup> See note 11.

<sup>35</sup> With exception of one person with age of 70 years in 2021.

According to the descriptions on Polish websites and on social media, a sweat bath is a ritual or ceremony, an ancient or ancestral practice of the Native American or Mesoamerican tradition.<sup>36</sup> In most cases, no gender traits appear in these descriptions, but the cases of sweat bath reserved for women (Table 1: 8b), run by the Chilean woman therapist in 2021, as well as sweat baths run during “calibration camps” for men since 2020 (10) may indicate an incipient trend of sex/gender segregation of participants, with the purpose of connection with the “sacred feminine” or “sacred masculine,” as another consequence of the practise delocalisation process, indicated by Gutiérrez and de la Torre.<sup>37</sup> It is suggested that participants prepare an intention, relating to the part of their life they wish to heal or transform. The ritual is usually performed at solstices, equinoxes, and full moons. It takes place in an existing or newly constructed temporary structure of hazel poles, covered with blankets, quilts, and sometimes a tarpaulin. In the centre, there is a hole dug out in the ground, in which stones are placed after being heated in the fire that is burning in front of the sweathouse. The participants sit inside in almost total darkness.

The temperature rises as, during the four successive rounds corresponding to the four elements or the four stages of life, the heated stones are placed inside and then poured over with water. The ceremony is usually led by one person, chants are sung and instruments are played. Although depending on the guide, the ritual may be more or less structured, the following components are recurrent: division into four rounds, altar in front of the bath structure (in some cases it has a form of the turtle), incensing before entering, inhaling smoke from plants, invocations in Lakota *aho mitakuye oyasin*. The ritual introduced in Poland is broadly based on the Lakota tradition.

In the following sections, I will focus on the representations associated with the sweat bath ritual and contexts of its use in a comparative perspective.

### 3 Conceptualisations of the Ritual Sweat Bath in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

A brief compilation of ethnohistorical data allows us to observe the correspondence of meanings and symbols present in the ritual between peoples as far apart as the Dakota and Lakota from the Great Plains on the one hand and the Tzotzil and Tzeltal from Chiapas Highlands on the other. However, we can also observe marked differences. I recognise that such an approach to the subject is risky as it flattens the emic perspective and allows only a limited insight into how the sweat bath was situated in the symbolic code of specific communities. Still, I would argue that even this insight makes it possible to draw conclusions that are relevant to the subject of this study.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the sweat bath among the people from the Great Plains, and to reconstruct the variety of contexts of its use. For the Lakota, it constitutes one of the seven major ceremonies established in the mythical times as *inipiti* – life-giving lodge, which cleanses the body of any evil that torments it.<sup>38</sup> Lakota people would attend it before (and after) important ceremonies, such as vision quest, sun dance, or sing of isolation (women puberty rite), and they used it before undertaking anything of importance.<sup>39</sup> It was used to cure sickness, purify and recreate the spirit, communicate with spirits through the leader, clean oneself from taboo after killing somebody, for martial purposes, and even for malicious uses such as inflicting

<sup>36</sup> In most cases, they generally refer to its American or both Mesoamerican and Native American roots (3a, 3b, 4, 5, 6, 8a, 8b, 14, 15). In the case of 2a and 2c, there is an explicit mention of the Mayan tradition (sweat bath called *zumpul-che* and *tuj* in Yucatec Mayan) and in 8c – the Nahua tradition. The reference to the Mesoamerican tradition appears in the descriptions of ceremonies organised by centres or individuals identified in Table 1 with numbers: 2b and 10. In 9a and 3c it is associated with North American Indians (although in 3c it is designated with a Nahua word *temazcal*). Cases 11–13 do not contain any references and in 7 the only reference is the name in Nahua.

<sup>37</sup> de la Torre and Gutiérrez, “El Temazcal.”

<sup>38</sup> Dooling, *The Sons*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> St. Pierre and Long Soldier, *Walking*; Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual*, 36.



diseases. As Bucko states, a shift can be observed in the sources that tend to stress physical and moral healing in the first middle of the twentieth century and subsequently spiritual purification. From 1980, as previously mentioned, the sweat bath has been adapted to contemporary needs of substance abuse treatment, stress disorders and as a social event that solidifies groups and offers mental, spiritual, and physical refreshment.<sup>40</sup>

According to accounts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dakotas might consider the stones used in the sweat bath the seat of Takan, the most ancient divinity or the original energy in all things, as they were the first things created on the Earth. They addressed the stones with supplications and made them offerings of tobacco.<sup>41</sup> In the account of Black Elk edited by Joseph Brown, which is the first detailed record of a symbolic interpretation of the *inipi* and which was used in the later interpretations and reconstructions of the Lakota ritual,<sup>42</sup> the principal beings invoked in the sweat bath are Grandfather Wakan Tanka (the Great Spirit, heaven, fire or sun ray, eternal fire) and Grandmother or Mother Earth (rocks, earth). In the steam bath, all the forces of the universe operate: the earth, and the things that grow from the earth, water, fire, and the air. Thunder-beings or birds are associated with cardinal directions.<sup>43</sup>

As in the case of the Lakota, in Mesoamerican traditions, the sweat bath accompanied other rites of passage and possibly important ceremonies. This function, however, faded under the aggressive religious policies of the Spanish invaders. During the Classic and Late Classic periods, in the Mayan area, sweat baths, located alongside temples, dance platforms, and pelota playing fields, were a part of the ceremonial complexes at Piedras Negras, Palenque, Yaxchilán, Toniná, Copán, and others. Child points out that the inscriptions placed on the temples (symbolic baths) of the Group of the Cross in Palenque report that the ruler Chan Bahlum II took ritual baths for purification, strengthening, and transformation when he reached puberty and assumed power.<sup>44</sup> Similar to the Great Plains traditions, in the Mesoamerican ones, the sweat bath has a therapeutic/healing function. Its use, however, might be related to the heat-cold dichotomy considered constituent for the Mesoamerican folk medicine.<sup>45</sup> The singular feature of the sweat bath use in Mesoamerican traditions is the treatment of obstetric and gynaecological disorders, and the restoration and maintenance of fertility following childbirth.<sup>46</sup>

In southern Mexico and Guatemala, versions of the myth where steam bath is an instrument of the mother's death and it becomes the source of the creation have been recorded. One version of this myth is the Mixtec narrative about two brothers who murdered their father in the guise of a deer, filled its skin with bees and other insects, and brought its meat to their mother, saying that it was the meat of wild animals. The mother becomes aware of their lie and rebukes them for their shameful act. The brothers then trap the mother in a sweat bath prepared for them, where she dies and is transformed into the spirit of the bath, while they themselves are transformed into the sun and the moon.<sup>47</sup> Another version, edited by Shaw, comes from Tzutujil people from the lake Atitlán region: eight brothers get rid of the ninth, the youngest one, and the two eldest turn into the sun and the moon, after which they lock their mother in the bathhouse where she dies.<sup>48</sup> According to Groark, different versions of this myth would explain the ambivalent nature and paradoxical significance of the bathhouse as a place of death and birth at the same time.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual*, 46, 50, 59–60; Tlanusta et al., “Crying.”

<sup>41</sup> Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual*, 28–9, 33, 38–9, 71; St. Pierre and Long Soldier, *Walking*, 47–8.

<sup>42</sup> Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual*, 51–3, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Elk and Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 31–46.

<sup>44</sup> Child, “The Symbolic Space,” 164.

<sup>45</sup> López Austin, *Cuerpo Humano*, 303–18. Aparicio Mena, “El temazcal.”

<sup>46</sup> In the Mixtec area, it appears in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall (folio 16), on the occasion of the birth of the Lady 3 Flint. This use is demonstrated in the Florentine Codex (Book 6, Chapter XXVII) and in *The Ritual of the Bacabs* (Knowlton and Dzidz Yam, “Perinatal Rites”). The use of the sweat bath as a perinatal therapeutic/healing tool and as a space for birth-related rites is attested to this day among different native peoples from central Mexico to Guatemala (Galinier, “Pueblos,” 423–30; Groark, “To Warm;” Ichon, *La religion*, 329; Katz, “El Temazcal;” Peretti, “El Resurgimiento;” Villa Rojas, *Etnografía*, 291–310) but also in birth houses run by midwives not of indigenous ethnicity.

<sup>47</sup> Dyk, *Mixteco Texts*, 10–4.

<sup>48</sup> Shaw, *According*, 239. In Tarn and Pretchel (“Comiéndose”), only fragmentary reference to this myth can be found: *a steam bath originated through the death of the grandmother, an ancestor womb from which all mankind was born.*

<sup>49</sup> Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 20–6.

The association of the sweat bath ritual with the power of creation, which also includes the binaries of female and male aspects, is present in the Mayan sweat bath constructions of the Classic period in the representation of God N and Goddess O, the anthropomorphic forms of the old telluric deities, patrons of midwifery. As Houston demonstrates, the already referred to sanctuaries in the form of sweat bath in the Cross Group in Palenque as well as some Post-classic shrines in the east coast of Yucatán refer to the supernatural birth. In the Mayan region, sweat baths have also been associated with caves which represent the entrances into the underworld domain of earth deities responsible for agricultural growth and fertility.<sup>50</sup>

Among Aztecs, as we read in the Florentine Codex, in the front of the sweathouses there was the representation of the Mother of the Gods (Teteo innan) – also named Our Grandmother (Toci) and Heart of the Earth (Tlalli yiollo) or the Grandmother of baths (Temazcaltoci) – who was a major aspect of the terrestrial-maternal-fertility deity complex.<sup>51</sup> Her devotees were midwives, curers, and owners of the *temazcalli*.<sup>52</sup> In the description of the sweat bath ritual of a pregnant woman, the main entity referred to is the Eternal Mother (Tonan, Tocenean) and the Night Healer (Youalticiti). The beings invoked are also the progenitors, the ancestors who inhabit the world of the dead turned into gods and who have become the primordial progenitor couple (Oxomoco and Cipactonal). The entities invoked by the midwife are supposed to intervene, causing the strengthening of a child and feeding, adorning, and strengthening of the pregnant woman.<sup>53</sup>

As Sullivan points out,<sup>54</sup> the Aztec Teteoinnan was iconographically and conceptually related to Tlazolteotl in her aspect of the Filth Eater – who appears in the front of the sweathouse in folio 77 from Magliabecchiano Codex – with the power of cleansing evil, perverseness and debauched living.<sup>55</sup>

According to recent ethnohistorical accounts, the deity related to the sweat bath among the Totonacs in the 1960s is Natsi'itni or the Mothers of all creatures. The sweathouse represents the interior of the Earth and constitutes the domain of the owner of fire – Taqsoyut, the old divinity residing in the bath furnace, called the navel (*xicle*).<sup>56</sup> In the Tzotzil-Tzeltal region in the 1990s, the sweathouse belongs to the Earth Lord and the Holy Earth, the ambivalent deities associated with agricultural productivity, the control of rain, fertility, and the products of the land, and the healing is done through the Father in Heaven (Christ-Sun) who manifests in form of the fire.<sup>57</sup> In the same period, in Mixtec area, it is related to the kitchen fire owner as well as owners of the land, the forest, and the rain. In Mixtec communities, it is considered potentially both benevolent and harmful, able to frighten due to the “great heat.” In the interior, it is forbidden to get angry, as the wrath of the bathhouse owner can be provoked.<sup>58</sup>

We can also find representations that suggest that the sweat bath ritual in Mesoamerican traditions – differently from the northern peoples – was associated with sexual pleasure. According to some authors, it is demonstrated in the scene of the feast of gods from Late Classic Maya vessel, possibly occurring in the sweathouse where young women massage and fan old deities, which combines licentiousness with drunkenness and enema use.<sup>59</sup> During the colonial times, the friars tried to restrict the use of sweat baths considering it a place of “nefarious pleasures.”<sup>60</sup> Although we should treat this information with some distance, given the particular perspective of Catholic missionaries inclined to see transgressions in the religious practices of

<sup>50</sup> Houston, “Symbolic Sweatbaths,” 145–6; Moyes, “The Sweatbath.”

<sup>51</sup> Sullivan in de Sahagún, *Primeros*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 1, Part II, Chapter VIII and XII, 15, 23.

<sup>53</sup> de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 6, Part VII, Chapter XXVII, 151–8.

<sup>54</sup> In de Sahagún, *Primeros*, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Codex Magliabecchiano, folio 77. On the other hand, Tlazolteotl was the one who might inspire the same qualities, according to Sahagún (“Florentine Codex”, Book 1, Part II, Chapter XII, 23). In Santiago Atitlán, the owner and inhabitant of the bathhouse is Mam, an ambivalent entity who cleanses the impurities of the dead there. Tarn and Pretchel, “Comiéndose,” 78–9.

<sup>56</sup> Ichon, *La religión*, 151, 328–33.

<sup>57</sup> Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 35–43, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Katz, “El Temazcal.”

<sup>59</sup> Houston, “Symbolic Sweatbaths,” 142; Taube and Stuart, *The Memory of Bones*, 192, 194.

<sup>60</sup> Códice Tudela, folio 62. According to Romero Contreras, it is also shown by the confessionals that include questions related to the steam bath (“Visiones Sobre Temazcal,” 134).

indigenous peoples, it cannot be overlooked that a sweathouse can be a metaphor for a sexual act in some regions of Mexico at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup>

As is shown in Table 2, the sweat bath ritual performed in contemporary Poland, in almost all cases examined, is described as a symbolic return to the womb of the Mother Earth (associated with the sweathouse) and re-birth (or even death and re-birth). In general, the ritual involves physical and spiritual cleansing or purification, transformation of the body/mind/heart, and, in some cases, self-knowledge. In singular cases, among the results of the practice, the healing of relationships and mystic states or altered states of consciousness are mentioned.<sup>62</sup> The results of the practice seem to be due to the power inherent to the elements (earth or stones, water, air or wind, and, especially, fire) present in the ritual. These elements are sometimes associated with ancestors as in the central metaphor of Mother Earth and expressions Grandfather Fire or grandmothers-stones. The dualism of forces or binarism involving the co-occurrence of the personification of fire as the male ancestor (father/grandfather) and of earth as the female ancestor (mother, grandmothers) has been directly expressed in the description in a limited number of cases (2b, 8c, 9a, 13). The practice might also enable the connection to ancestors that provide the participants with their supporting power.

In the case of the Polish contemporary practitioners, it was possible to get a deeper insight into the object of the study by addressing it from the phenomenological perspective. The content of the sweat bath experience revealed in the accounts of the participants and/or guides of the ritual in Poland is useful to confront conceptualisations present in descriptions of the commercial sweat baths. According to these accounts, this experience consisted or resulted in *liberation from the peripheral, from the contingent and getting to know myself, my true self*;<sup>63</sup> *connecting with nature and its cycles, facing death and gaining certainty about life after death*.<sup>64</sup> In other cases, this experience consisted of *getting out of your comfort zone to gain inner peace, connection with nature and the true self*,<sup>65</sup> *the state when the soul is watching you and you know the meaning of life and death*.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, we can consider it a purifying and strengthening experience which involves knowledge about reality. Of particular note, however, was the vision lived by one of the participants who experienced *the presence of dozens of ancestors* whose message was: *we have lived and fought, you have our backing, we are with you and you are a part of us, we pass on our power to you*, which resulted in a transforming experience of being *a part of the flow of life*.<sup>67</sup>

In the next section, I will discuss the most important changes and continuities in the ritual sweat bath usage and its conceptualisations across time and space.

## 4 Discussion

In the historical sweat bath practice spanning 2500 years in such a vast area, considerable variations of its representations and contexts of use can be observed, as well as important continuities and consistencies.<sup>68</sup>

Anchored in diverse historical contexts, different conceptualisations link the sweat bath ritual or basically identify it with earth and fire entities. It is a recognition of their agency that implies actually both the establishment of contact with or disposition to the action of agents that are invoked, entreated, and appeased.

<sup>61</sup> Among the Otomi at carnival time the songs of *hōrasu* (the woman who makes love) evoke lascivious embraces in a *temazcal*. Galinier, *La Mitad del Mundo*, 143–54. In Oxchuc, people report that the sweathouse is used by couples (as well as unmarried youths) as a private location for sexual activity and that husbands and wives take the advantage of the warmth of the sweat bath when trying to conceive. Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 51.

<sup>62</sup> In the cases 3a; 4; 6; 14.

<sup>63</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>64</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>65</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>66</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>67</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>68</sup> Authors such as Child (“The Symbolic,” 158); and Groark (“To Warm the Blood,” 27) observe this continuity and consistency in regard to the Mesoamerican traditions.

Examples and accounts of these acts abound in the literature already referred to: among the Tzotzil-Tzeltal, Mixteca, and Otomi peoples in the second half of the twentieth-century offerings are made and prayers recited to the entities especially associated with earth and fire. In particular, among the people from the Great Plains, as it was mentioned earlier, the stones were treated as beings holding special powers. The conceptualisations of the ritual sweat bath we have traced seem to defy the contention that the sacralisation of nature occurs with the location of the ritual outside the native Central and North American communities. Gutiérrez and de la Torre thesis about the resignification of the steam bath practice that consists on the sacralisation of nature – seen in the importance of the so-called natural elements: earth, stones, plants, water, air, and fire, which are believed to possess “healing,” therapeutic and pedagogical qualities, and which are metaphorically given “agency,” – as a result of the delocalisation of the steam bath from the traditional contexts of its use by indigenous communities,<sup>69</sup> cannot therefore be unequivocally agreed upon, and hence, it is not supported by the results achieved through a comparative perspective.

Another important change, according to the Mexican scholars, would consist of the “spiritualisation of the practice” or non-mediated connection with the sacred, within the framework of a personal spiritual healing process. However, this feature does not appear to be a particularity of the contemporary practices: in the indigenous communities, we find a variety of forms of practice that have been conducted with the guidance of professionals (midwives or medicine men or women) for one person or a collective, the individual bathing of a woman in labour,<sup>70</sup> and bathing in domestic family baths without the participation of a professional in Chiapas Highlands.<sup>71</sup> The cases from contemporary Poland analysed in this article included in Table 2 have the character of collective baths. Nevertheless, some adepts of the Hard Path used to perform sweat baths individually.<sup>72</sup>

In sum, in a comparative perspective and on the basis of the analysis carried out, neither the lack of mediation in contact with the sacrum in the process of individual healing nor the attribution of the agency to the elements of the sweat baths could be considered a distinctive feature of contemporary ritual baths in Poland.

The first and the most important difference resulting from comparative perspective is its probable association with sexual intercourse present in Mesoamerican traditions – a feature that at the first sight does not appear neither in the Lakota ceremonies nor in the contemporary Poland. Secondly, the use of the sweat bath in the context of perinatal care in Mesoamerican traditions – during pregnancy, labour, and postpartum period – is undoubtedly an exception among the cases analysed and requires to be addressed in a separate study. An important explication of this difference could rely on the specificities of the needs of the agriculture-based, hierarchically structured Mesoamerican societies, as were postclassic Aztec and classic Maya.

The emphasis on sexuality and fertility aspects – and correlated use of the sweat bath in the reproduction process – to some point becomes blurred, however, if we turn our attention to the effect of the sweat bath ritual, which – across time and space – consists of purification, healing, strengthening, and also transformation occurring on many levels of individual and even collective existence. In this regard, the bathhouse in a cross-cultural perspective can be considered as a sacred and liminal space, a gateway that enables the transcending of ordinary space-time dimension and interaction with primordial creation–destruction forces. Fertility appears as only one aspect of these ambivalent forces. It manifests itself in the main metaphors of the Mother Earth’s womb and death–rebirth process in ritual’s contemporary descriptions.

The research which has been undertaken does not yet allow a firm conclusion to be drawn and offers more questions than answers. The material components of the sweat bath ritual (earth, fire, stones) in many cases examined are personified as ancestors that are life-transmitting agents: the sweathouse is conceptualised as an interior of the female ancestor associated with the Earth. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, we could therefore consider conceptualisations of the sweat bath ritual as corresponding to the basic domain of experience or *natural kind of experiences* which are products of our bodies (the experience of warm, tight,

<sup>69</sup> de la Torre and Gutiérrez, “El Temazcal.”

<sup>70</sup> Interview 6.

<sup>71</sup> Groark, “To Warm the Blood,” 49.

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.taraka.pl/texts/aut/99>.

humid, and dark space; being almost asphyxiated); our interactions with our physical environment (experience of entering this space and getting out into the unlimited space through the small hole); and our interactions with other people within our culture (to be a part of a family as an offspring). Lakoff and Johnson indicate that these basic domains of definition are products of human nature and may be universal or vary from culture to culture.<sup>73</sup> In this interpretation, however, two major problems arise that cannot be ignored.

Firstly, how it can be explained that, in the Hard Path within which the popularisation of sweat baths in Poland took place, the representations that I have found consistent and continuous were eliminated and yet the ritual appears to have been carried out successfully. Secondly, in the phenomenological perspective emerging from the individual accounts from the Polish individuals presented in this article, we do not find cited conceptualisations or they are not explicit. Instead, the dominant conceptualisation seems to be a reference to the self-knowledge, which clearly situates it in the context of New Era spirituality in the terms of Paul Heelas, who recognises its initial task to make contact with the spirituality within the person, in an essential shift from our contaminated mode of being to that realm which constitutes our authentic nature.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the experience of knowledge about meaning of life and death and vision of ancestors and their message about being a part of the flow of life suggest that the sweat bath ritual should be considered as a technique inducing mystical experience within which one's conceptual scheme is loosened, making possible identical experiences across different traditions.<sup>75</sup>

These problems lead us to evaluate the hypothesis of the meaninglessness of ritual, put forward by Frits Staal, who on the basis of the analysis of the Vedic ritual of Agnicayana, says that the ritual performance *contains itself*. The participants in the ritual are completely absorbed by it, so that no symbolic meaning then appears in their minds. Staal defines a ritual as an activity that is governed by the explicit; and that is fulfilling in itself: the ritual has no purpose, it conveys no cultural values, though it does not exclude side effects, which may be the strengthening of bonds between participants, the raising of morale, and the establishment of a connection to ancestors. The *meaninglessness* of ritual is explained by the fact that multiple meanings can be attributed to it. Together with Wittgenstein, Staal points to the pre-linguistic character of ritual, which can induce a mystical pre-linguistic state.<sup>76</sup> The purposelessness, however, cannot be regarded as the characteristic of the sweat bath ritual across time and space. On the contrary, it was rather effect-oriented and, as I argued, conveyed a purpose of purification, strengthening, healing, and transformation. Relevant to the cases under study seems to be the total absorption of participants postulated by Staal, which we also find in Daşal's definition, as *flow and attunement*.

These observations bring us closer to the assumptions of the direct perception theory and the claim, in the words of Tim Ingold, that the structures and meanings we find in the world already reside in the information we extract in the act of perception, as their source is in the objects we perceive. Culture does not serve us to perceive, but to interpret the world, and we do not need to interpret things in order to perceive them; hence, perceiving is essentially knowing, and the knowledge we thereby acquire remains unspoken.<sup>77</sup>

The possible explanation for the fact that the sweat bath can be used with equal success for purification and strengthening by Chan Bahlum II, a Tzeltal woman in labour, and the contemporary Central Eastern Europe dwellers may be the fact of experiencing similar states resulting from the existence of the same patterns in interactions of an organism with the similar components of environment. Finally, in regard to the continuations of the conceptualisations of the sweat bath ritual studied in this article and observed in the case of its trans-Atlantic transfer, it is not without relevance to observe that the ritual has been subject to an uninterrupted direct transmission by humans in such a way that the one who runs the sweat bath has already

<sup>73</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *The Metaphors*, 117–8. The researchers' position on the impact of cultural conditioning on experience is not unambiguous, as in the same book they state that: *It would be more correct to say that all experience is cultural through and through, that we experience our 'world' in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself.* *The Metaphors*, 57.

<sup>74</sup> Heelas, *The New Age*, 2, 18–38.

<sup>75</sup> Deikman, *Understanding Mysticism*, 240–69.

<sup>76</sup> According to Staal, rituals are always jealously guarded and this is precisely because they have no meaning (as useless institutions they are closed; they cannot be understood, they can only be preserved or abandoned). Staal, "The Meaningless," 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ingold, "Kultura."



participated in it. Much like the problem of the exclusivity of the use of baths in perinatal care in Mesoamerican traditions, this is another issue worthy of separate research.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Dr Katarzyna Szoblik from the University of Warsaw for her comments regarding the representations of steam baths in Mesoamerican sources. My grateful appreciation also goes to those who agreed to share their experiences and knowledge concerning steam baths in Poland, especially Izabela Ewa Ołdak and Wojciech Józwiak.

**Funding information:** The publication of this article was funded by the University of Warsaw.

**Conflict of interest:** Author states no conflict of interest.

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