

Maciej BARANIAK*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9200-3182>

“Kumoterki”, tradition, sport and cultural heritage

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Kumoterki, tradycja – sport – dziedzictwo kulturowe

Streszczenie

W gwarze podhalańskiej słowo „kumoterki” oznacza małe, dwuosobowe sanki tradycyjnie zaprzężone w jednego konia. Pochodzi ono od słowa „kumotrzy”, czyli rodzice chrzestni, którzy takimi właśnie saniami zawozili nowo narodzone dziecko do chrztu. Kumoterki, używane przez górali już w XIX w., były arcydziełem sztuki snycerskiej. Wiele uwagi poświęcono precyzji wykonania, wyborowi materiału oraz ornamentyce. Początkowo stanowiły podstawowy środek transportu w okresie zimowym. W okresie międzywojennym, ze względu na stopniowy rozwój motoryzacji, kumoterki utraciły swój użytkowy charakter i stały się pojazdem wyścigowym.

Pierwsze wyścigi kumoterek miały miejsce w Zakopanem w 1929 r. Były one corocznym wydarzeniem aż do 1939 r. Po II wojnie światowej wyścigi kumoterek zostały reaktywowane w 1962 r. w Zakopanem, a po kilku latach przerwy w 1972 r. w Bukowinie Tatrzańskiej. W latach 70. XX w. wyścigi kumoterek traktowano bardziej jako wydarzenia towarzyskie i zabawę ludową niż zawody sportowe. Konie, które w tamtym czasie brały udział w wyścigach, wykorzystywano do codziennej pracy na roli i nie były specjalnie przygotowywane do zawodów. Sytuacja zmieniła się diametralnie z początkiem lat dziewięćdziesiątych, po sprowadzeniu na Podhale koni sportowych. Od tamtej pory wyścigi kumoterek przybrały formę typowych zawodów sportowych, starsi górale zaczęli rezygnować z konkurencji szybkościowych, pozostawiając miejsce młodym zawodnikom. Rywalizacja sportowa oraz chęć osiągnięcia najlepszego czasu przejazdu wyparła element zabawowo-towarzystki tej imprezy.

Słowa kluczowe: kumoterki, wyścigi sań, sport, tradycja, Podhale.

* dr, Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, Oddział w Nowym Targu [Polish Historic Association, Nowy Targ Department]; e-mail: maciek.galop@op.pl

Abstract

In the dialect of Polish Tatra highlanders the word “kumoterki” indicates a small two-person sleigh traditionally harnessed to one horse. It is derived from the word “kumotrzy” which is godparents who used the horse team to get with a newborn baby to church to have the child baptised.

Since the mid-19th-century horse-drawn sleighs used by Tatra highlanders have been the masterpieces of woodcarving art. A lot of attention has been paid to the precision of workmanship, the choice of material and ornamentation. Initially, they were used as the means of transport during snowy winters in the Polish Tatra region. During the Interwar period, due to the development of mass motorization, horse-drawn sleighs lost their utilitarian character and people started to use them in racing events. The first horse-drawn sleigh race took place in Zakopane in 1929. It was an annual event until 1939. After World War 2, horse-drawn sleigh races were reactivated in 1962 in Zakopane and after that, after a few-year break, in 1972 in Bukowina Tatrzańska.

In the 1970s horse-drawn sleigh races were treated mostly as social events and folk festivities rather than sports competitions. Horses that took part in the races at that time were used to work mainly on the farmland and were not specially prepared for the races. This situation changed completely at the beginning of the 1990s after sport horses had been brought to Podhale. Since then horse-drawn sleigh races have become typical sports competitions; older highlanders started to resign from speed racing leaving the place for young contestants. Sports rivalry and willingness to achieve the best time of a ride displaced the fun and entertainment factor of this event.

Keywords: kumoterki, horse-drawn sleigh races, sport, tradition, Podhale.

This dissertation aims to present the genesis and development of kumoterki races in Podhale from 1929 until the present day. The history of the competitions, despite great interest in them, has rarely been discussed in scientific studies. M. Baraniak¹ and partly R. Urban² discussed this phenomenon in their studies. Therefore, press releases, protocols on competitions and interviews with organizers of these events were the source basis for this work.

The study uses the method of analysis of historical sources, synthesis, comparison, induction and deduction. The thesis puts forwards the following research problems:

1. What was the genesis of the kumoterka?
2. How did the transformation of the kumoterki proceed?

Podhale is a region where costume, dialect, customs, singing and music are elements cultivated for generations and constantly present in the everyday life of Podhale highlanders. One of such elements maintained until the present day are the “kumoterki” races, a phenomenon not encountered in other regions of Poland.

¹ M. Baraniak, *Sport w Zakopanem w okresie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Novae Res, Gdynia 2015; idem, *Sporty hipiczne w Zakopanem w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym XX wieku*, [in:] J. Dżereń (ed.), *Z dziejów Kultury Fizycznej Polski oraz wybranych regionów i mniejszości narodowych*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Szkoły Wyższej im. Pawła Włodkowica w Płocku, Płock 2011; idem, *Wy moje koniusie... Studium z zakresu hodowli i użytkowania koni na Podhalu*, Nowy Targ 2018.

² R. Urban, *Geneza i rozwój skjøringu i ski-skjøringu w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym*, [in:] L. Rak (ed.), *Sporty zimowe w tradycji polskiej kultury fizycznej*, Wydawnictwo Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie, Częstochowa 2011.

"Kumoterki" are ancient two-person sleighs used by the highlanders of Podhale region as early as the beginning of the 19th century. The name of the kumoterki sleighs is derived from the word "kumotrzy" meaning godparents in the Highlander dialect who used such sleighs to take their newborn children to be baptized, while the parents and the rest of the guests waited at home for their return from church. It was an old custom resulting from the specific religiousness of the Podhale highlanders which was a synthesis of Christian and pagan notions, and even magical practices used in pastoral cultures. One such practice stipulated that a woman in confinement was unclean for six weeks and could not attend services, receive the sacraments, enter the church, or touch relics or consecrated objects³.

"Kumoterki" sleighs were masterpieces of woodcarving art, carefulness of workmanship, choice of material and traditional ornamentation were issues of great significance for highlanders. Most often, local wood species: ash, beech or elm were used for the manufacture of the kumoterki sleighs. There were also copies woven with ash slats. According to Jan Bieniek, a foreman from Bukowina Tatrzańska: "[...] the best material to manufacture kumoterki is wood from ash trees of the female kind growing on southern slopes, seasoned after cutting in a block for two years"⁴.

The sleighs have a specific design with a low centre of gravity, the sleigh man sits with his legs stretched out and leans against the back of the sleigh. The inside of the sleigh was not fitted with a soft seat, but it was padded with straw or hay and a woollen blanket that covered the seat thus prepared. During frosts, people in sledges were covered with sheepskins called "baranica".

The oldest description of this type of sleighs was found in a work entitled *Zdobienie i sprzęt ludu polskiego na Podhalu. Zarys życia ludowego* [*Decorations and equipment of Polish people in the Podhale region. An Outline of Folk Life*] by Władysław Matlakowski, quote:

The *sleigh*, is almost the most beautiful, most carefully and firmly finished thing in Podhale, some are so slim that they look like a feather. Transferred to the city, and suitably altered for convenience, they would have made an impression on sportsmen who would have adopted them for harnessing and for sliding⁵.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, they were the primary means of transportation during the winter. Sleighs were usually drawn by a single horse, and pairs of horses were rare. Until the end of the 19th century, most of the horses used in Podhale were individuals with features of primitive breeds, of small height and poor conformation, the so-called "mierzyzna". Following an avalanche

³ B. Ogrodowska, *Polskie tradycje i obyczaje rodzinne*, Sport i Turystyka Muza SA, Warszawa 2012, p. 45.

⁴ Jan Bieniek report of 20.10.2020. All transl. – author.

⁵ W. Matlakowski, *Zdobienie i sprzęt ludu polskiego na Podhalu. Zarys życia ludowego*, Warszawa 1901, p. 172.

of tourist traffic that could be observed at the turn of the 19th and 20th, horse transport developed and the number of horses in Podhale increased. The quality of horses used also improved considerably. Individuals with primitive traits were replaced by noble horses of the Małopolska type.

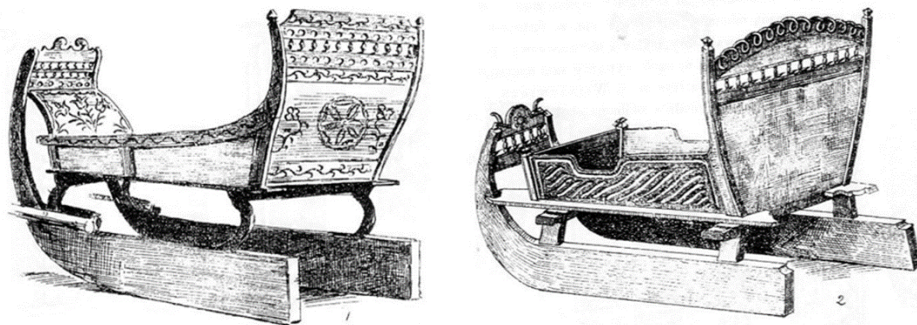


Fig. 1. Kumoterki drawing by P. Paszkiewicz

Source: W. Matlakowski, *Zdobienie i sprzęt ludu polskiego na Podhalu*, Warszawa 1901.

The interwar period was the period of the greatest development of many localities in the Podhale region and the transformation of Zakopane from a small mountain village to a well-known cultural and sports centre. A network of paved roads was developed, as well as railway connections, newly established transport companies were introducing bus transport. With civilisation progress, highlanders gradually gave up on horse-drawn transport, also kumoterki sleighs lost their utilitarian function to be used more and more often as a racing vehicle⁶.

For the first time, kumoterki appeared at the starting line on 29 December 1929⁷. The races were held for the opening of sports stadiums located in Równia Krupowa in Zakopane⁸. The construction of the stadiums was initiated by the Committee for Sports Events (hereafter: KIS) established in 1929 associating representatives of intellectual and sports circles. The main objective of KIS was to organize sports competitions in the city, to build sports infrastructure, and to attract sponsors to execute these tasks⁹. The establishment of the new facility meant a breakthrough in the history of sport in Zakopane which until then was perceived mainly through dynamically developing skiing. In addition to horse competitions,

⁶ M. Baraniak, *Sporty hipiczne...*, p. 615.

⁷ "Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny" 1929, no. 357, p. 9; „Światowid” 1930, no. 2, p. 6.

⁸ "Tygodnik Zakopiański" 1928, no. 6, p. 3; R. Urban, *Geneza i rozwój skjöringu i ski-skjöringu w Polsce...*, p. 170–171.

⁹ The most important achievement of KIS is considered to be the construction of two sports stadiums at Równia Krupowa park in Zakopane with funds raised from the resort's budget, Bank Podhalański, Baron Götz Okocimski and J.A. Baczewski.

the stadiums hosted hockey matches, skating and shooting competitions, automobile and motorcycle races, and athletic competitions in the summer. Since 1931, during the summer season, Mountain Opera staged *Halka* and *The Haunted Manor* by Stanisław Moniuszko, *Pomsta Jontkowa* [*Jontek's Vengeance*] by Bolesław Wallek-Walewski and *The Castle of Czorsztyn* by Karol Kurpiński¹⁰.

The first season of KIS winter events in 1929 was opened with horseback riding competitions organized with the significant participation of the Lesser Poland Riding Club based in Lviv presided at the time by Count Robert Lamezan Sallins¹¹. Apart from jumping contests, flat and hurdle races which civilian and military riders competed in, "Highlander Races" were also held which also included the following events: races of cougars, skjöring races (a luge behind a horse), ski skjöring races (a luge behind a rider), and horse-drawn carriage races¹².

Traditionally, one horse with Podhale harness was teamed by a man (gazda – farmer) accompanied by a woman (gażdzina) – both had to wear traditional highlander costumes. Races started jointly with three to five sleighs in a single race. Kumoterki sleigh competition became a popular entertainment among both highlanders and tourists visiting the stadium at Równia Krupowa park. For the highlanders, participation in the races provided an opportunity to test their teaming skills, their horses' training level, as well as to present festive costumes, vehicles and harnesses to the public. "Highlander Races" permanently entered the program of winter sports events in Zakopane, they were held several times during the winter season, from December 1929 to January 1939. The most successful contestants of that period included the following carriage drivers: Jan Ślimak, Józef Klimek, Stanisław Karpiel-Pietrusiak, Józef Stopka, Stanisław Pitoń. Władysław Chyc, Paweł Okręglak, and skiers: Józef Ustupski and Bronisława Staszek-Polankowa (multiple Polish ski champion)¹³.

World War 2 and the 1950s were a tough time for the country. War damage and poverty were not favourable to the organisation of horse-riding competitions. The Slovakian, German and later Soviet troops stationed in the area committed mass requisitions and ordinary thefts following which the number of horses in Podhale decreased significantly.

Only after a 23-year break, in 1962, the tradition returned. In that year, as in 1929 and 1939, Zakopane was selected as the organizer of the International Championships of FIS Ski Federation. During the championships, many accom-

¹⁰ Materials relating to the Sports Events Committee, (AMT), ref. AR/NO/308; L. Długołęcka, M. Pinkwart, *Zakopane – Przewodnik historyczny*, PTTK "Kraj", Warszawa 1989, p. 160.

¹¹ "Wokół Koni" – supplement to "Kościński" 2002, no. 3, p. 64.

¹² "Zakopane" 1930, no. 1, p. 4.

¹³ M. Baraniak, *Sport w Zakopanem...*, p. 171–180; "Raz, Dwa, Trzy" 1931, no. 27, p. 1; "Zakopane" 1931, no. 1, p. 3; "Echo Zakopiańskie" 1931, no. 1, p. 4; "Echo Zdrójów Podhala i Karpat" 1932, no. 1–2, p. 4; "Zakopane i Tatry" 1932, no. 1, p. 7; "Raz, Dwa, Trzy" 1933, no. 2, p. 1; "Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny" 1936, no. 20, p. 1; 1937 no. 36, p. 1; 1938, no. 17, p. 3.

panying events were held aimed at showing the heritage and cultural achievements of the Podhale region. Regional bands gave concerts, a highland wedding was staged, and a kumoterki and skjörung race was organized which was more like a show than a sports competition with 28 competitors taking part in it¹⁴.



Photo. 1. Kumoterki race start, Zakopane 1931 r.

Source: National Digital Archives, ref. 1-S-2903-23.

Zakopane again held kumoterki races in 1964–65 on the occasion of the “Carnival of Zakopane” and several times in the seventies as part of Smokowiec-Zakopane towns competition and after this period the event was moved to Bukowina Tatrzańska¹⁵.

The first kumoterki races in Bukowina Tatrzańska were held on 14 March 1965. 28 competitors from Bukowina, Gliczarów, Zakopane, Poronin and Zub-suche took part in the competition. The winner of the kumoterki race was Pietras Bronisław, ski-skjörung Budz Franciszek and Sztokfisz Kazimierz, all from Bukowina Tatrzańska. The initiator and organizer of the event were the President of the Folk House, Józef Pitorak and Community Cooperative in Bukowina¹⁶.

After 1965 there was a break in the organization of the Bukowina kumoterki races due to problems with raising funds and with owners of the lands on which the competitions were organized. The breakthrough date in the history of the Podhale kumoterki sleigh race was 1972 when Józef Koszarek, the initiator and creator of the “Highlander Carnival”, a local folklore event which over the years has

¹⁴ “Dziennik Polski” 1962, no. 27, p. 6.

¹⁵ “Dziennik Polski” 1964, no. 33, p. 4; 1965, no. 45, p. 6.

¹⁶ Minutes of the competition on 15.03.1965. Dom Ludowy w Bukowinie Tatrzańskiej [Folk House in Bukowina Tatrzańska].

grown to the rank of a several-day highlander winter festival, was appointed the Chairman of the Folk House in Bukowina. Since 1973, the kumoterki sleigh race has been a permanent attraction of the “Highlands Festival” in Bukowina Tatrzańska¹⁷. With the efforts of chairman J. Koszarek, the owners of the Pod Skocznią (Ski Jump) land have reached an agreement and many sponsors have been attracted, including Cooperative Bank in Bukowina, “Samopomoc Chłopska” Provincial Association of Agricultural Cooperatives, “Rolnik Polski” magazine, “Tatry” Provincial Tourist Economy Company in Zakopane, “Cepelia” Cooperatives in Nowy Targ and Zakopane.



Photo. 2. “Kumotrzy” in kumoterki sleigh, Bukowina Tatrzańska, interwar period.

Source: Dom Ludowy w Bukowinie Tatrzańskiej [Folk House in Bukowina Tatrzańska].

In this period, two competitions were held: the race of kumoterki and the ski-joring and the final result was determined not only by the journey time but also by the points awarded for the coachman and skier outfit, choice of harness and kumoterki sleigh. Over the years, the races were expanded to include other competitions, and in 1988 a race of hackney carriages –

[...] gazdas carrying ladies and gentlemen around our area (horse-drawn carriages in highland sleighs), skjöring and a kumoter parade (a one-horse carriage in traditional kumoterki) were introduced. In the parades, a committee made up of local “horse breeders” judged the outfits of the contestants, the selection and quality of the sleighs, kumoterki and harnesses, as well as the condition and general appearance of the horses. Since then, the event is known as the “Gazda Parade”. The “Kumoter Gońba” name also appeared in Podhale as a modern invention of linguists, but it has no historical or dialect justification¹⁸.

¹⁷ A report by by Józef Koszarek dated 10.10.2020.

¹⁸ M. Baraniak, *Sporty hipiczne...*, p. 57.

Young amateurs of snowboarding, wanting to try their efforts at racing, came up with a new competition, i.e. "horse boarding" (snowboarding behind a horse) that was held several times on the Bukowina track arousing great excitement especially among the young audience. Over the years the location of the competition has changed several times, in the first period the competition took place in "Pod Skocznią" and after the Bukowina Thermal Baths started to be raised there, the event was moved to Szymkówka clearing, then to Rusinski Wierch next to Rusin-Ski ski station.

In the seventies, the kumoter races were treated more like social gatherings and folk fun than as sports competitions. Horses competing at that time were used for daily work on land and were not specially prepared for racing. Many of them showed no desire to gallop during starts. The situation changed dramatically in the early nineties, after sport horses, once they finished their racing careers, were imported to the Podhale region. Since then, the kumoter races have turned into typical sports competitions. Older gazdas began to give up on speed competitions making way for the younger competitors¹⁹. The sporting rivalry and the desire to achieve the best time displaced the fun and social element of the event.



Photo. 3. The kumoter race, Kościelisko 2017

Source: author's collections.

Following the example of Bukowina Tatrzańska, the competition in Zakopane was resumed and competitions were also organised in Biały Dunajec,

¹⁹ vet. Józef Baraniak report of 10.110.2020.

Kościelisko, Ludźmierz, Poronin, Rabka and Szaflary (tab. 1). Detailed rules were developed based on the Polish Equestrian Federation rules, the competition was judged by the Provincial Agricultural Cooperatives Association referees. At the beginning of the season, a coordinator responsible for running the ranking is chosen from among the organizers based on which the best horse of the season and the winners of individual competitions are selected.

The political and economic changes that took place in Poland in the 1990s had a significant impact on the agricultural economy which resulted in a progressive decrease in the horse population in Podhale. The decisive factors in this process are, above all, the widespread access to agricultural machinery, the development of motorization, the specialization of farms, as well as the liquidation of many farms, especially smaller ones, mainly associated with the economic emigration of highland youth to Western Europe.

Despite the introduction of subsidies for breeding horses, the largest decrease in the horse population, amounting to as much as 50% of the population, was recorded in 2002–2015²⁰. In addition to the decreasing number of horses and riders, an increasingly common problem for organizers was also the lack of suitable areas to organize Kumoterki Races and Gazdy Parades. The places where the competitions were held over the past decades have been mostly built over with tourist and sports infrastructure

Tab. 1. Kumoterki Races in Podhale after World War 2

Year	City
1962	Zakopane – Opening of the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships
1964–1965	Zakopane – ‘Carnival of Zakopane’
since 1973	Bukowina Tatrzańska “Highlander Carnival”
since 1995	Biały Dunajec
since 1998	Zakopane
since 2002	Poronin
since 2003	Szaflary
2005–2006	Rabka
since 2007	Kościelisko
since 2007	Ludźmierz

Source: own study.

To face the above-mentioned difficulties, changes were made to the rules and youths over 16 years of age were allowed to take part in speed events. Additionally, a class of children’s sledges (ponies) was established in the parade ride. To make the competition more interesting, attempts were made to organize a teaming

²⁰ Polish Horse Breeders Association in Warsaw, statistics 2002–2015.

competition (according to Polish Equestrian Federation rules) for two-horse-driven carriages, and a so-called Horseboarding race (snowboarding behind a horse). Another measure to encourage more competitors to compete was the establishment of high cash prizes for the winners of various competitions.

Furthermore, to maintain this beautiful and unique tradition for future generations, in 2017, Podhale Equestrian Association based in Ludźmierz at the request of dr. Maciej Baraniak obtained from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage consent to enter the kumoterki race to the National List of Intangible National Heritage²¹. The entry documented the indigenous Podhale origin of this discipline and opened new possibilities of acquiring funds for documenting and organizing competitions.



Photo. 4. The youngest participants in the kumoterki race. “Highland Carnival” Bukowina Tatrzańska 2019

Source: Dom Ludowy w Bukowinie Tatrzańskiej [Folk House in Bukowina Tatrzańska].

Summary

The Podhale highlanders’ fondness for horses, native tradition and culture allowed the traditional horse-drawn kumoter carriage to survive until modern times. Small mountain sleighs were commonly used in the Podhale region as early as the 19th century, but with the development of civilization, they gradually lost

²¹ Decyzja Ministra Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego [Decision of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage] No. Doz.6480.71.2017 dated. 14.11.2017.

their utilitarian function and became a sports vehicle used during the now-famous kumoterki races. An important role in this transformation was played by the representatives of the military and intelligentsia who, fascinated by the Podhale, invited highlanders to compete in horse competitions in Zakopane. After the difficult post-war years, reactivated kumoter races permanently entered the calendar of sports and folk events in Podhale. To support this unique tradition and maintain the intergenerational transmission, the organizers have taken several measures, one of the most important of which was the inclusion of the "Kumoterka Race" on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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