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Introduction.

Present State and Perspectives of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw

More than half a century has passed since the establishment of the Committee of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. After seventy-five years of its existence, less than a year ago the Institute of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw was transformed into the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw. These are splendid jubilees of the two institutions. During many years of their existence there has been a recurring question concerning Oriental studies: what are they and what should they look like? Since the beginning of the 20th century a Polish debate over Oriental studies has been conducted incessantly. Among the questions posed was how the Oriental studies should be conducted to make them meet the expectations for elucidation of cultures and civilizations which are different from the Western. On the one hand, it has been emphasized that the lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural distinctness gives rise to false beliefs, groundless fears, suspicions and prejudices; on the other hand, it has been pointed out that European categories should not be transferred and employed uncritically to investigate other civilizations¹.

Oriental studies together with their research work have not infrequently failed to find their place within the framework of the existing scholarly disciplines². This research work requires an interdisciplinary approach in which a philological analysis of the source materials is equally important as the knowledge of a broad cultural context. Nevertheless, no favour or approval of the scholarly environments has been gained to define these studies as a separate scientific discipline. Reluctance of the academic environment to grant Oriental studies the right to enter non-philological domains is profound and, unfortunately, long-lasting. At the same time, representatives of the various scientific disciplines have barely undertaken research in Poland in the field of Asian and African problems. There is

¹ More about that problem in Byrski 2005.

² Popko 2007: 17.

no doubt that this stems from the lack of competence concerning languages and cultures of the broadly conceived Orient.

So let me return to the question of what Oriental studies are. In my opinion, Oriental studies are the branch of science which realizes two objectives: the first one is the elucidation, which is strictly scientific and cognitive, encompassing description, determination, analysis, etc. It cannot be done without (proper) understanding, that is to say deciphering the meanings, codes, signs, etc., which is the second objective of Oriental studies. These objectives are realized in the field of the various scientific disciplines including linguistics, history, literary studies, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, ethnography, religious studies, etc. Within the framework of these scientific disciplines, concepts and research methods that are necessary for elucidation and understanding, have been worked out. However, they are often insufficient to elucidate and understand different cultural paradigms and different understanding of the reality tackled by Oriental studies. That is why Oriental studies, by describing certain phenomena, finding the meanings, and working out their own conceptual apparatus, make their own contribution to scholarship through its verification or falsification, to use Karl Popper's concept here. And this is what determines their fundamental place in scholarship.

Are then Oriental studies or might they be a new scientific discipline having its own separate scholarly apparatus? In my opinion, it is more appropriate to define them as a macro-discipline which combines philological source materials and achievements of many scientific disciplines, such as the above-mentioned linguistics, literary studies, religious studies, history, cultural studies, etc. The multidisciplinary character of Oriental studies, which is based on language studies, allows us to define them as a macro-discipline.

In accepting such an understanding of Oriental studies, we have made an attempt to create a new course of studies which might be interdisciplinary, assuming that it should be based upon language. In preparing a new didactic programme for studies of the first and second grade, we have posed a question of what kind of a graduate we should educate so that they could hold a bachelor's and master's diploma in Oriental studies. When we started our work, we asked the following questions:

- What are the needs of the world today?
- What is the knowledge that young people have upon leaving schools within the framework of the system of school education?

Our conclusions are as follows:

- The analysis of the contemporary world points to global transfer of the chief economic and political centres to countries such as Japan, Korea, China, India and to Arab countries. A decisive increase in importance of these countries generates a worldwide demand for the highest-ranking specialists having a first-hand knowledge of the economy, politics, history, cultures and of current changes and tendencies in modern social life which comes from direct sources.
- However, the field of research and education concerning Asian and African countries is highly limited. Programmes of school studies disregard these topics almost completely. This gives rise to the attitudes of conscious ignorance and intolerance in our society,

which are especially visible among young people. It is necessary to supplement insufficient knowledge in this field both at school level and at the university level by changing approach to the education of students. Understanding of the contemporary world demands that their knowledge should not be confined to the knowledge of cultures of the West.

In the Institute of Oriental Studies, which has been upgraded to the Faculty of Oriental Studies, the awareness that it is not sufficient to educate Oriental philologists only has been growing for a long time now. We have deemed it extremely urgent to strengthen the studies and research on Asia and Africa which should become a scientific background permitting an agreement and cooperation with immense areas of our world. On the one hand, the world comprising two-thirds of humankind has been developing very dynamically but, on the other hand, it generates serious threats to global security. We have held numerous discussions and consultations in order to give final shape to the project of a new direction of studies.

The didactic programme has been based on two principles:

- We have started with a practical command of languages of Asian and African countries as a prerequisite for **understanding** distinct cultures. Hence the syllabus is supposed to encompass intensive courses of Oriental and African languages, both on the practical as well as theoretical side. This will enable students to prepare their bachelor's thesis on the basis of the original source materials.
- The second prerequisite is the knowledge of culture of Asian and African countries. Thus, the programme of the course envisages, in addition to the above-mentioned intensive learning of Oriental and African languages, both methodological lectures, such as the theory of culture or cultural anthropology, and lectures on the various aspects of culture of a given language area. Thus, the syllabus will incorporate comprehensive lectures (annual and bi-annual) on literature, history, contemporary social and cultural issues, religion and philosophy, as well as the arts of Oriental and African countries.

The second stage of studies (a master's course), envisages specialization in Oriental studies. It will allow students to expand their knowledge in the field of some selected scientific disciplines and comparative seminars conducted within the framework of the laboratories established. They include four laboratories: of languages, history, philosophy and religion, as well as literatures and cultures of Asian and African countries. The enrolment for the second-grade studies in the direction of Oriental studies will begin in the academic year 2009–2010.

In conclusion, we may say that an Orientalist is a humanist who has language skills and an in-depth knowledge of a given Oriental culture achieved through the knowledge of the language(s) of this culture, its religion, literature, history and the present day as well as its achievements in the arts and ethnology. At the bachelor's level his/her competence and skills will mean the command of two Oriental languages, including an advanced course in one language, as well as the knowledge of culture of the region and methodological preparation in the field of cultural studies. At the master's level, the

student will acquire additional competence in the field of selected disciplines of science which he/she will use in his/her master's dissertation to analyze source materials.

The programme and the direction of Oriental studies have been approved by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education as a unique direction to be realized at the University of Warsaw. We hope that the realization of the programme and the experiences gained during the teaching process will provide new arguments for our efforts to reconsider the place of Oriental studies in the world of science and to determine the status of Oriental studies in the system of scientific disciplines. We think that the need for interdisciplinary studies, which is so much visible in the world of today, will bring about a new solution, which might result in a macro-discipline, which, in my opinion, will comprise Oriental studies.

The establishment of the Faculty of Oriental Studies by the Senate of Warsaw University is a further step forward which will strengthen our endeavours to give greater importance to Oriental studies. This opens up a way to the development of new directions, specializations and research centres. Such new research and organizational undertakings effect in the establishment of the Faculty's Centre for Buddhist Studies and the upgrading the existing three Departments of: Arabic and Islamic Studies, South Asian Studies and the Languages and Cultures of African Studies into Chairs – a higher position in the structure of the Faculty. Furthermore, we do hope that in the future we will be able to confer scientific degrees in Oriental studies.

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