

**THE MYTH OF THE TOWER OF BABEL
AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: THE INDIGENOUS
GRAMMARS OF THE MIXED WORLD.
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY
OF BORDERLANDS (BASED ON RESEARCH
IN BELARUSIAN-LITHUANIAN BORDERLANDS)**

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Abstract: The article is based on the results of ethnographic field research which the author has conducted over the last 20 years in multi-lingual and multi-faith villages of Belarusian-Lithuanian borderlands in the Grodno region in Belarus. The residents of kolkhoz villages of the region turned out to be unfamiliar with the scholarly term “borderlands”. They describe their pluralistic social and cultural reality by means of an underlying metaphor (conceptual archetype) of *a mixed world*. This emic (subjective) category of describing the social world is subjected in the article to an anthropological analysis and interpretation. The author considers also the emic conceptualisation of the significant differences between “ethnic” groups. Moreover, the article touches upon such aspect of *the mixed world* as a specific map of the *faith-nations* that function in the area, together with their associated languages, the local concept of the *mixed speech* and the phenomenon of the “new *mixing*”, that is, new changes which manifest in departing from the old rule of endogamy (mixed marriages) and shifting from religious categories to nation-state categories in terms of group identification. It presents the mixed world of the residents of the borderlands as an inclusive and multipolar universe.

Key words: borderlands, Belarus, Lithuania, emic/ethic, multilingualism, nationality.

“The network of primordial alliance and opposition is a dense,
intricate, but yet precisely articulated one,
the product, in most cases, of centuries of gradual crystallization.”

Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973: 268)

“The priest said:
‘Go ahead and build those crosses. Build a Russian Orthodox one
and a Catholic one. There’s one God, they won’t come to blows.’
That’s how we ended up with two crosses at Mazheikava,
the two roadside crosses.”
A woman in the village of Rouby in the Grodno region, 1997

1. Introduction

Linguists, sociologists, anthropologists and culture studies researchers have a long-standing interest in “borderlands” as a category. There is an extensive literature on the subject, and some scholars have postulated that a number of specialized sub-disciplines should be created to deal with the phenomenon, such as sociology of borderlands or anthropology of borderlands (cf. Engelking 2008; Kabzińska 2013).

To most Polish scholars, “borderlands” – as distinct from actual borders or political and cultural centres – are those areas where different “ethnic” groups with different “cultures” (involving different languages and religious denominations) coexist and influence one another.

Analyses of the various aspects of the borderland experience are usually bound up with problems of ethnicity and collective or individual identity, indicating the dynamic and contextual nature of the phenomenon. Broadly speaking, the category of “borderlands” in Polish literature is treated either in terms of naturalistic/objectivist approaches, where “cultures” and cultural differences are viewed in an essentialist way, or in terms of humanist/constructionist approaches, where more attention is given to self-identification and symbols (see Straczuk 2006; see also the discussion on the state of research in: Engelking 2008).

Having said that, those anthropologists who study local communities in borderland areas are often palpably sceptical about the concept’s usefulness in understanding culture. As early as 1993, Lech Mróz had this to say about research done in Lithuania: “The term ‘borderland culture’, which is in widespread use [...], is as self-explanatory as it is vacuous. For this reason I refrain from using it as a defining term (Mróz 1993: 56). A decade later, Andrzej Perzanowski pointed out: “In writing about the Vilnius region there is a strong temptation to discuss it [...] in terms of some kind of distinctive ‘borderland culture’ [...]. [T]his seems to be an [...] overexploited angle of approach. By habitually using this term we run the risk of stifling reflection – after all, borderlands between cultures (or: borderland cultures) are yet another root metaphor which we use to

organize our thinking [...]. Given the strong modelling influence of such metaphors, it is a legitimate concern that the term ‘borderland culture’ might cease to be informative and become a defining concept itself.” Perzanowski goes on to say: “The phrase ‘borderlands between cultures’ goes back to [...] the language of [19th-century] Positivist anthropology, whose theoretical glossary relied on spatial metaphors and the language of observation [...]. However, the language of observation may often lead to misunderstanding; just as nobody has ever seen a social relationship, a kinship bond or a cosmology, in the same way nobody can actually see cultures coming into contact.” (Perzanowski 2005: 10–11; see also Kabzińska 2013: 127–128)

Polish anthropologists’ skepticism is owed to the anti-essentialist perspective, promoted, among others, by Fredrik Barth (1969) and his Polish predecessor Józef Obrębski (2005 [1936]) who highlighted the processes of construction, maintenance, and dynamics of inter-group boundaries. Inter-group boundaries are conceived by them as a means of organization of cultural difference which serves collective identities. Such approaches invite us to deconstruct the idea of “cultural borderland”.¹ I thus want to ask if this category is useful for understanding rural communities, which have functioned since centuries in the context of multiculturalism.

An anthropologist’s job is primarily to discover the emic (immanent), subjective categories a culture uses to make sense of the world. Although anthropologists must be familiar with the conceptual tools used by researchers in their field, they should not rely on a priori definitions predicated on categories developed in the scientific discourse – such as, in this case, the metaphor of “borderlands between cultures”/“borderlands culture”. This is why I have posed myself such research questions as, How do the inhabitants of the “borderlands” I happen to be studying conceptualize the differences within their social and cultural world? What kind of nomenclature do they use to describe their own “borderland” status? What kind of definitions have they come up with to describe “culture borderlands”/“cultural contact” or “multiculturalism”? Which of the borders or differences within their complex reality do they perceive as meaningful? How do they construct the distinctive qualities and collective identities which help them

¹ Speaking about “cultural borderland” I leave aside political borders (see the concept of anthropology of borders in: Donnan – Wilson 1999). The conclusions of my field research presented here refer to a territory located inside one political organism – in the North-Eastern part of the Republic of Belarus. I deal with differences defined in works on the topic as cultural/religious/identity/ethnic/national. From this point of view “cultural borderland” can be understood as an equivalent of premodern multiculturalism.

make a clear and coherent sense of their world? What kind of metaphors do they find useful in trying to understand it?

Since 1993 I have been doing fieldwork in villages in the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderlands in the Grodno region.² This is an old borderland with overlapping languages and religious denominations: an area where Christians, Jews and Muslims have coexisted for hundreds of years³ as a multilingual speech community.⁴ Reconnaissance trips quickly made me acutely aware of the large gap between the way external observers problematized the complex dynamic social and cultural realities of the local “borderland” area on the one hand, and the meanings given to the same realities by the “locals”. Above all, I noted the obvious and manifest fact that the people I talked to in the Belarusian villages did not use the metaphor of “the borderlands”. Over a number of years I have worked to unlock the indigenous grammar of that local code which social scientists refer to as “borderlands” or “borderland culture”, and which its inhabitants themselves describe as a *mixed world*.⁵

2. The mixed world⁶

When asked what kind of people live in the local “borderlands”, villagers in the Grodno region say:

[husband:] “We are mixed people here, so to speak.”

[aunt:] “Kogel-mogel. There’s all kinds here.”

² For a detailed discussion of the methods, assumptions and course of my multi-year research see: (Engelking 2012b: 19–38). In this article I purposely steer clear from the Belarusian political and administrative context or of the discourse of the official culture; although the communities I study are obviously not isolated from those, I focus on the micro perspective to reconstruct the basic model of the local emic conceptualizations. The questions of their dynamics and modifications under the pressures of modernity are a separate research question.

³ In 2010, only four Jewish communities and eight Muslim communities were registered in the region of Grodno (http://www.belarus21.by/ru/main_menu/religion/relig_org/new_url_1949557390; accessed on 15.06.2013). Although absent after the Holocaust, the Jews remain symbolically present since as a group they play a key role in defining the Christian collective identity (cf. Engelking 2012b: 439–657; Engelking 2013: 269–275).

⁴ A speech community is a phenomenon which “comes into being as a result of languages living in close proximity in a given area; however, it does not require to have a uniform medium of communication, and may be served by several different ethnolects used in different cultural registers” (Bednarczuk 1999: 122); cf. (Smułkowa 2002: passim).

⁵ The first attempt to analyse the indigenous category of the mixed world was made by D. Życzyńska-Ciołek in: (Życzyńska-Ciołek 1996).

⁶ Sections 2, 3, 5 and 6 of this article are largely reworked passages from my book: (Engelking 2012b).

[husband:] “You get Polish folk [*polaki*] here, people speak Polish, people speak Lithuanian, and the plain language as well. As they say, we have more than one *natsya*.”

[aunt:] “More than one language.”

“What about the faiths?”

[aunt:] “There’s one faith for all, Polish or Lithuanian.” (MC 73, FC ca. 95, Dubintsy, Vor. 93)⁷

Or:

“Why is the world mixed up like this?”

“It must have been ordained on high, um, God must have made it that way.” (FC 65, Rouby, Lid. 97)

In other words, we are in a world of *mixed* people who are divided into different *faiths-natsyas*, and who speak different languages. They take it for granted that their society contains a number of differences, a condition which they see as sanctioned from above and perennial: a natural and self-evident state of affairs. An anthropologist would say that we are dealing with a system of primordial affiliations / bonds / sentiments / identifications / loyalties (cf. Geertz 1973: 291–352) – with “communities of custom, kin ties, religion and region [which] are the basis of people’s sense of self” (Fenton 2010: 78; see also the rest of the section). In the words of Clifford Geertz, “the patterns of primordial identification are not fluid, shapeless, and infinitely various, but are definitely demarcated and vary in systematic ways” (Geertz 1973: 268). The same applies to *the mixed world*. Believed by my respondents to have been created by God himself, this is by no means a world without order. It is governed by a system of constitutive norms and rules which are deeply rooted in tradition. Those rules make up its “grammar”, or “grammars”, which helps the actors to gain a conceptual purchase on the world.

Villagers in the Grodno region predominantly belong to two faiths-natsyas: Polish (*polska*, which is how Catholicism is locally referred to) and Rus (*ruska*, the local word for Orthodoxy). But there are others as well:

⁷ In abbreviations referencing the interviews the first two letters code the respondent’s gender (M = male, F = female) and religious denomination (C = Catholic, O = Orthodox, S = Starover, i.e. Old Believer); the figure which follows the respondent’s gender and religious identity code is the age. The name of the village is followed by an abbreviation which identifies the district (Lida, Mosty, Voronovo). The two digits at the end code the date of the interview (e.g. 97 = 1997).

“We have all kinds of folk here: *ruskie* [Rus folk], *polaki* [Polish folk], *prawosławne* [Orthodox folk]... Us, we are *starovery* [Old Believers]. We profess the old faith.”

“What does it mean, *the old faith*?”

“Well, it’s... I don’t know how to put this, it’s ours, that’s what it is. A *natsya* of our own, as they say.”

“Right. And this *natsya* is called the Old Believers?”

“Yes, yes. Well, it’s a *natsya*, just like the Polish folk, the Rus folk, they have their *natsyas*, and we have a *natsya* of our own among the Orthodox folk. We have churches of our own, everything. The Polish folk will have a *kościół* [a Catholic church], the Orthodox folk will have a *tserkov* [an Orthodox church], and we have a *molenna*.” (FS 72, Vavyorka, Lid. 93)

Created and upheld by God, this taxonomical system of *faiths-natsyas*⁸ brings order into the variegated substance of *the mixed world*. Predicated on oppositions, conjunctions and analogies, the system gives the world a logical structure, a point which the respondents often raise by saying that “every *natsya* has a faith of its own.” Certain differences between the groups in terms of religious practice or systems of belief are seen as distinguishing features which keep the groups separate, and which provide the building material for constructing collective identities. The classification grid of the *faiths-natsyas* consists of equal and analogical components, each with its own law (*zakon*). The structure is predicated not on antagonistic rivalry or hierarchical relationships of superiority/inferiority, but on horizontal conjunction: “A Catholic believes in the Polish faith and in priests. That’s a Catholic. A Jew will have the Jewish faith. Orthodox folk believe in *batyushkas* [Orthodox priests].” (FC ca. 70, Rouby, Lid. 93)

The symmetrical differences/parallels between the different *faiths-natsyas* are part of a multi-polar cohabitation model made up of more faiths than the two basic Christian denominations, *the Rus faith* and *the Polish faith*, along with *the Jewish faith*, which is seen as genetically and structurally different from the two. The model incorporates all the religious groups known to the respondents in the local area, i.e. Old Believers, Muslims and the numerous neo-Protestant denominations which are usually referred to locally as *baptysty* or “Baptists”. The following is a sample account of the different aspects of the religions they are familiar with: “There used to be a little house here, and they used to come here to pray. They

⁸ The connections and analogies between the *faiths-natsyas* and the system of *millets* known from the Ottoman Empire is a topic which deserves a separate research project in its own right.

called it a *szkola* [‘school’].⁹ We used to have a church, the Tartars had a mosque, the Orthodox folk had a *tserkov*, and they had their school.” (FC 70, Nacha, Vor. 98) “They used to call it *dziesięcioro* [The Ten]. We called it the rosary, they called it The Ten.” (FC 72, Vavyorka, Lid. 97) “We had *oplatek* [the communion wafer], they called it *matzo*.” (FC ca. 80, Krupovo, Lid. 93) Elements of Jewish or Muslim religious practice get associated with their Christian analogues not so much in terms of opposites (antonymy) as in terms of similarity (analogy, synonymy). “We” have a church (Catholic or Orthodox, as the case may be), “they” have a school or a mosque; “we” have a priest or a *batyushka* – “they” have a rabbi or a *mullah*, and so on. There are many more “analogues” of this kind: *ornat* (Catholic chasuble) – *riza* or *ryasa* (the exorasson, or the outer cassock of Orthodox clergy) – *tales* (tallit or the Jewish prayer shawl); *oltarz* (Catholic altar) – *prestol* (the Holy Table) – *aron ha-kodesh* (the Torah ark); the pulpit – the *bima*; the rosary – the *tschotky* – *The Ten* (the phylactery or *tefillin*); *oplatek* (host or communion wafer) – *prosphora* – *matzo* – *kurban*; Sunday – Saturday – Friday; the Bible – the Koran; the cross – the Star of David – the crescent moon; baptism – circumcision, etc.

When viewed from this perspective, the faith of non-Christians is simply another variant of general faith, analogous to Catholicism or Orthodoxy: one in a series of similar faiths where each has the same set of “phonological” components, even if the components get “voiced” in different ways: through a language *of one’s own*, churches, crosses, priests, masses, communion wafers, rosaries, holidays, baptisms, etc.¹⁰ The main function of this symmetry- and coherence-seeking conceptual grid is cognitively to organize the social and cultural reality of a multi-denominational and multilingual “borderland”. It is primarily a system of classification which operates outside of ideology or value judgments. Content with identifying the differences that stake out group boundaries, the system refuses to get entangled in hierarchies or antagonisms. Moreover, the arrangement is inclusive: it is an open system capable of admitting any new *natsya* that has a language and a faith of its own.

3. A mental map of *faiths-natsyas* and of their languages

Underlying the order of *the mixed world* is the myth of a unified humanity which split into a number of different faiths-languages or *natsyas*-languages following

⁹ „Jewish school” (*szkola*) used to be a widespread folk term for a synagogue. Rooms for Talmudic study used to be situated next to synagogues (Hebrew *bet midrash* – “house of study”), also often referred to as the *shul* or *shil* (Yiddish for “school”).

¹⁰ For an account of the folk system of describing and appraising believers of other religions through the prism of one’s own religion based on research in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, see (Belova 2008).

the collapse of the Tower of Babel.¹¹ The myth gives sanction both to the grammar of differences between the *natsyas*, and to the rules of everyday relations between the neighbour groups. It posits that the Jews, the Tartars or the various Christian denominations, each with a faith and language *of their own*, are all equal groups with equal rights. The people I talked to present this network of relationships – a specific mental map of *faiths-natsyas*, each with its own language – in the following way:

“There was one faith. And then, you know, then they built this Tower of Babel. They wanted to reach heaven. They built, and they built... And God mixed up [confused, confounded] their languages. From that moment on, they created different faiths depending on the language they spoke, and that’s that. The Tartars here, the Greeks there, the Turks there. And the faiths spread all over the world. Those who spoke Polish... That’s how it all spread out, languages spreading all over the world. Do you understand?”

“So, the way this works is that every faith has a language of its own?”

“Every faith has a language of its own. The Jews speak their in own way, the Lithuanians, the Greeks, the French, and so on. Take the Germans, they speak German.” (MC 69, Ghinely, Vor. 98)

“And from those different languages, different kinds of people took their beginning. Different people appeared, like.”

“Different kind of people, meaning what? How are they different?”

“How? Well, it’s *polskie* [Polish folk], *prawosławne* [Orthodox people], and foreign people, too – the Chinese, the Hindus. Like, like that. All the Slavs, the Lithuanians. Different kinds, like.”

“So this is like different nations, right?”

“Various nations have already emerged.”

“Or is that different *natsyas*?”

“What?”

“Is it *natsyas* or nations? Or is it different *natsyas*?”

“It’s *natsyas*, different *natsyas*. It’s *natsyas*, like.” (FC 63, Radivonishki, Lid. 97)

¹¹ In Polish, the word *mieszany, pomieszany* (“mixed”) also means *confused* or *confounded*, and is used in this sense in translations of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel. For the mythical justification of group differences see Zowczak 2000: 139–158. For the “Babel myth” in the Vilnius region see *ibid.*: 190–194. For the motif of the Tower of Babel in folk etiology and the folk conceptions of language origins and affinities among Eastern Slavs including parallels in medieval religious writings, see Belova 2004: 285–289; 2005: 64–65.

This mythical order of faiths – *natsyas* – languages – countries, where names of religious appellations are treated as equivalent to the names of the languages, and the ethnonyms are not part of the system, serves as the foundation of the local discourse describing the confessional-linguistic differences between people. This pre-modern discourse of the local peasant culture differs from the thinking of outside observers as shaped by the ideologies of nation and state.¹² For the people I talked to, that mythic order – which sanctions the differences within humanity after its expulsion from paradise, the flood and the fall of the Tower of Babel – is as self-evident as it is normative. They try to make it clear to anthropologists using examples from their own experience:

“God is everywhere in the world, in every country, right? Churches, God, everything.”

“Does every *natsya* have a faith of its own?”

“Well, it’s all one and the same thing. One God. One.”

“It’s one and the same God for the Orthodox folk and for the Catholics?”

“Right, for the Orthodox folk, too. They pray to God.”

“And the Jews?”

“The Jews pray to God, except they don’t believe in Lord Jesus or in the Mother of God.”

“Are there any *baptysty* [Baptists] or *evangelisty* [Evangelicals] here?”

“Oh, there’s all kinds here. Whatever you like.”

“And who is it that they pray to?”

“They, too... The Baptists, I guess they pray to God as well, but their way is somehow... They work on Sundays, they don’t work on Saturdays, everything about them is not quite as it should be.”

“What about the *litovtsy* [Lithuanians]?”

“The Lithuanians are Catholics.”

“What language do they use in prayer?”

“They have the mass in a church. It’s the same mass, everything is the same. Only the language is different.” (FC ca. 60, Meiry, Lid. 97)

¹² Unfortunately, modern researchers and observers often fall into the trap of interpreting this pre-national discourse in terms of familiar national categories; the best example is the widespread practice where terms such as *polak* and *ruski*, which are terms of religious identity, are treated in the literature as ethnonyms denoting national/state affiliation (for more information see Engelking 2012b: 34–37 et passim). In doing so, scholarly ignorance perpetuates the stereotypes from the times of anti-Belarusian tsarist policies, where every Catholic was seen as a Pole, and every Orthodox Christian as a Russian/“Western Russian”.

In the Grodno region, the symbolically and socially relevant relation between religious groups is not bipolar (as is the case with the Catholic-Jewish configuration which predominates in Poland), but multi-polar (with the various Christian denominations, Judaism, and Islam). Legitimised by the myth of the Tower of Babel, a pluralist kind of cultural myth has taken shape, where the principal norm is that there are many faiths, none of them superior or inferior to others, and that the best faith for any given group or individual is the faith of their own (cf. Życzyńska-Ciołek 1996: 203–204). Because they were created by God at the time of the cosmogony, all of the *faiths-natsyas* have equal value, and every person should practice *in their own way*, according to the *natsya* they belong to, safeguarding their own identity within a diverse world of equal identities. Every person owes loyalty to their own religious group, and every person should respect to the groups of their neighbours:

“Are any faiths better or worse than others?”

“Well, you know what, everybody here has their own faith and everyone knows what’s what.” (MC ca. 70, Papyernya, Lid. 93)

“Everybody prizes their own thing. To each his own. They have their church, I have my *molenna*. Somebody else might have their *tserkov*...” (FS 72, Vavyorka, Lid. 93)

Reflecting as it does the specific nature of the local languages and religions, this kind of pluralist discourse does not filter the world through any axiology. The classification system predicated on *faiths-natsyas* is not meant to disenfranchise, antagonize or impose hierarchies; its function is to name, to distinguish, and to impose order. Everybody here knows who they are (i.e. which *natsya* they belong to), and who their neighbours are, created by the same God though they may pray in a different way. “There is one God in the world. Faiths can be, you know... everybody believes in their own way. But one way or the other, there’s only one God. One God for us and for them. There are no different gods.” (FC 57, Nacha, Vor. 98) In Justyna Straczuk’s apt formulation, the basic principle of the local borderland culture is that “In the ‘mixed world’, religious differences are accepted as variations within the same inventory (‘it’s all one and the same thing, it’s just that everyone does it their own way’). They do not extend to the structural level or create different value systems, symbols or mutually incomprehensible rules of communication” (Straczuk 2006: 247).

The myth of humankind becoming split into different *faiths-natsyas*, an idea which underlies the mental map of the local *natsyas*, speaks primarily of the relationship

between the Christians and the Jews. The first aspect is genetic: the Jews, known as *the old faith*, are the mythical ancestors of Christians. “We are descended from them. Lord Jesus himself was a Jew. Then he was baptised.” (FC 72, Serafiny, Lid. 93) The second aspect of the Christian-Jewish relationship is structural: those are the distinctive differences which constitute separate faiths that believe in *the one God*. Such differences are of a different kind than those separating a priest from rabbi or Sunday from Saturday, which I have compared earlier to phonetic variants on a single phoneme. Here, the difference is meaningful (“phonological”, as it were), amounting to a distinction between the Christians (the non-Jews) and the Jews (the non-Christians). “They don’t believe in Lord Jesus, to them he is a bastard. You know bastards, children born out of wedlock. A bastard. So that’s what they believe, the Jews. But our faith, we have faith in Lord Jesus.” (MC 66, Pyeluntsy, Vor. 93)

Belief in Jesus, or lack thereof, is the basic constitutive criterion of the different faiths-*natsyas*, but it is not the only one. The language of prayer is another. “You might say that we are all of one faith, the Orthodox folk and us. Because they believe in God, they believe in the Mother of God, in Lord Jesus, like. Except they speak Rus [*po rusku*]. In their *tserkov* they talk Rus.” (FC 84, Vavyorka, Lid. 93) Symbolised by the language of daily prayer, the language of religion makes for the separateness of *Polish* and *Rus* Christians (cf. Straczuk 1999: 40–46). An emic definition of the two nations which most of the respondents identified with could be formulated as follows: a *polak* (a *Pole* or, anthropologically speaking, a Catholic) is ‘a person who says their prayers in Polish’, and a *ruski* (a *Rus person* or, anthropologically, an Orthodox Christian) is ‘someone who says their prayers *po rusku* [in the Rus language]’ (cf. Engelking 1999: 192).

The Polish faith and the Rus faith, the Lithuanian faith or the German faith and others differ from each other not in terms of prayer as such, but only in terms of the language in which the prayer is spoken. There is one God who affords equal treatment to the different prayers spoken by the various peoples who make up one humanity divinely split into *natsyas*. This must be so because God himself divided humanity by destroying the Tower of Babel. God gave different faiths-languages to different portions of humanity, but he is still a single God shared by all. To that one God, the prayers of the different *natsyas* are variants of the same prayer, their differences limited to language: “After all, there is one God. It doesn’t matter what kind of person you are, Jewish or non-Jewish – whether your prayers are Jewish or any other kind, it’s still the same prayers directed to God.” (FC ca. 65, MC 67, Byeluntsy, Vor. 98)

To this map of *faiths-natsyas*, some of the *kolkhoz* members might also add Tartars/Muslims (*tatary* or *muselmany*). In constructing their descriptions of the

Muslim *natsya*, respondents rely on the familiar pattern of “phonetic variants” already mentioned in the discussion of the Jewish and Christian faiths: the primary distinguishing characteristics include celebrating Friday as a holy day, the taboo on eating pork, having a kind of Bible known as the *Koran*, and using the symbol of a crescent moon instead of a cross. The respondents incorporate the Muslim *natsya* into the same mythical, “natural” order of things, where identities are ruled by birth and affiliation. “When Lord Jesus redeemed the world, the Jews were those who stayed the same, without converting. It’s the same thing with the Tartars. But they are good people. They only believe in God. They don’t believe in Lord Jesus, the same as the Jews.” (FC 74, Alekshishki, Vor. 98) “They celebrate Friday as a holy day, and they used to have a mosque there. It had the sign of a crescent moon. Things are different with them.” (FC ca. 65, MC 67, Byeluntsy, Vor. 98) “Those Muslims, their book is called the Koran, they pray.” (FC 78, Meiry, Lid. 97) “They eat horse meat. They don’t eat pork. That’s their faith. They won’t eat it.” (FC 77, Ghinely, Vor. 98)

Among the *kolkhoz* folk, another important place on the mental map of *natsyas* goes to the Baptists [*baptisty*]. The way they are characterised is again a variant on the general pattern: “A neighbour has joined the Baptists. When Sunday comes, he’s working, and on Saturdays he goes to Lida, where they have those Baptists.” (MC 74, Matsyasy, Lid. 97) “They pray, those Baptists, and they don’t drink vodka. They do no harm to anyone. Um, they don’t believe in Lord Jesus or the Mother of God.” (FC ca. 60, Meiry, Lid. 97) “It’s like an intermediate faith between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. They reject the cross. They believe in God but they don’t make the sign of the cross. They reject images.” (MO 83, Lebyoda, Lid. 93)

The logical structure of this post-Babel ordering of mankind could be depicted in the form of a table where the first row would include all believers: all the *natsyas*; the second row would separate those who believe exclusively in God (such as Jews and, less prominently, Tartars/Muslims) from those who believe in Jesus Christ, i.e. Christians; the third row would subdivide the Christians according to their language of prayer. This is where we have *the Polish faith* and *the Rus faith*, possibly with other variants depending on the local social composition or individual interest: *the Lithuanian faith*, *tsygany* (the Roma), *baptisty* [the Protestants], *luterany* [the Lutherans], *evangyelisty* [the Evangelicals], *piatsidzhiesyatniki* [the Pentecostals], *shtundy* [the Shtundists], *starovery* [the Old Believers], *uneyaty* [the Union Church],¹³ or *yehovy* [Jehova’s Witnesses]. At this level,

¹³ *Kościół unicki* (The Union Church) is an umbrella term for a community of Christian denominations of the Eastern Rite which joined the Roman Catholic Church and recognize the authority of the Pope (translator’s note).

the criteria for distinguishing between the *natsyas* and the different rows in our table often overlap to create a “shimmering” world of individualised and dynamic variants that frequently break free of the overall scheme based on binary oppositions – for instance, there might be Lithuanians [*litviny*] who confess *the Polish faith*, i.e. “*polaki* [‘Poles’] who pray in Lithuanian”, or Baptists [*baptisty*], who pray *in the Rus language* (like the Orthodox folk do), but who reject the Mother of God (like the Jews do).

Based on religious distinctions, this emic system of classification constitutes a “post-Babel” community based on mythical descent and primordial identifications and sentiments. The pluralist discourse of the myth of the Tower of Babel emphasizes the unity of all people with “God in their soul”, it affirms their cultural diversity, and it validates the genealogy and existence of the religiously diversified community. The local rural communities do not identify themselves using the modern discourse of nations and nationalities. The way they make sense of the world and position themselves within the social context of the borderlands is through their religious identity, which binds the members of different *faiths-natsyas* through ties of *communitas* (“all people believe in the same God”), and structure (“everybody believes their own way”).¹⁴

4. The mixed language¹⁵

The metaphor of *the mixed world* goes beyond the mental map of *faiths-natsyas*. It also reflects the emic conceptualization or “grammar” of the broad multilingualism of borderlands. This is achieved through the “indigenous” concept of the *mixed language*.¹⁶

The inhabitants of the local villages who use the *mixed language* are multilingual. Although some of them use as many as four languages (Belarusian, Russian, Polish and Lithuanian) in their different functional variants, they seem to take this situation for granted:

“What languages do you speak?”

“I don’t speak any, just Polish, Russian, Belarusian.” (FC 65, Rouby, Lid. 97)

¹⁴ “The bonds of *communitas* (...) are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, nonrational (though not irrational), I-Thou or Essential We relationships, in Martin Buber’s sense. Structure is all that holds people apart, defines their differences and constrains their actions” (Turner 1974: 46–47).

¹⁵ This section partly summarizes the findings of my article, (Engelking 2012a).

¹⁶ The first attempt to problematize the category of *mixed speech* in anthropological terms was made by D. Życzyńska-Ciołek in: (Życzyńska-Ciołek 1996).

The *mixed language* is not considered to be a “proper” or “real” language: “It’s some kind of mixed language, I don’t know what to make of it. It’s not Russian or Belarusian, nor any other kind” (FC 63, Papyernya, Lid. 94); at the same time, its inter-dialectal nature instils its speakers with a special sense of pride since it makes it possible to mediate between the different languages used within the local speech community: “We have many languages here. When a Ukrainian comes here we can talk, the same goes for Poles or Belarusians, when a person comes from Moscow we can understand them, too. In the same way, I can read Polish and Belarusian. And I understand that. I understand Rus, too. So? I’m not a student, I didn’t go to high school, I make do with what I know.” (FC 67, Feliksovo, Lid. 97)

The *mixed* nature of the local language is seen as one of its distinctive defining characteristics (along with its *plainness* and *locality*). “The words are Polish, and *ruskie* [Rus/Russian], and Belarusian. It’s simply all mixed, it’s plain language. That’s the way we talk.” (FC 70, Matsyasy, Lid. 93) “Well, around here it’s closer to Polish, there’s a bit of Lithuanian as well. Polish, Rus... It’s just all mixed up.” (FO 64, Byeluntsy, Vor. 98) The *mixed* nature of the *plain* language is described through enumerating the languages which have contributed its component elements. By seeing their language as an aggregation of exogenous components, an entity made up of borrowings and devoid of a distinctive identity of its own, the users of the *plain* language refuse to recognize its autonomy – as if they were unable to describe it without making reference to other, more prestigious and systemically different languages. Just like the stereotype of their own group, the stereotype of their own language, spoken until quite recently by a group made up of illiterate peasants, is relationship-based: the inhabitants of the local villages construct it as a sort of photographic negative image of the “noble” languages which are perceived as superior. The *mixed language* can only be pictured in opposition to those established languages.

Unlike the *mixed* language, languages such as Polish, Russian, Belarusian or Lithuanian are standard, highly prestigious languages; they are accordingly perceived (again, unlike the *mixed* language) to be *pure*, *proper*, *cultured* and *grammatical*. The respondents know those languages from church, school or from the media, but they usually consider their own linguistic competence in those languages to be limited, a kind of peasant-speak; even where a peasant can competently use a standard language or several standard languages, that kind of language must by definition be *plain* and *mixed*. It is as if the language were condemned to be *impure* – linguistic *purity* being reserved exclusively for the language of the *nobility*. “What do you mean, pure?! It’s neither one thing or another. We can’t speak Belarusian. That’s because we can’t speak any language.

We can't speak any language properly, grammatically." (FC 60, Nacha, Vor. 98) Irrespective of the language or dialect he or she may be using for a given act of communication (be it the Belarusian or the Lithuanian dialect, or the Northern Borderland Polish dialect), a multilingual inhabitant of the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderlands believes themselves to be using the *mixed plain language*; the idea that a peasant might speak in a way that is *pure* and *proper* is not admitted under the stereotypical vision of social reality, divided as it is into the separate worlds of peasants and "nobility" (cf. Engelking 2012b: 191–325). Although the locals use the metaphor of the *mixed* language to describe their language in their own terms, this metaphor cannot be divorced from the social context. A "indigenous" linguist is always a sociolinguist and a normativist.

By definition, a language which can only be defined by reference to other codes (since it has no autonomous existence of its own and is made up of external borrowings) can only be described as something like *a mixed salad*, a hodgepodge (*kasha with cabbage*), *neither one thing nor another, without rhyme or reason* – a code which fails to meet the standards, which is *not proper*, as described by its own users. Unsurprisingly, they struggle to find a name for it: "It's kind of mixed speech, you can't even name it. It's just no language at all." (FO 65, Shpilki, Lid. 93) "It doesn't have a name. This language has no name at all. It's simply, how shall I put it, I can't find the right way to describe it. It's just mixed." (FC 74, Matsyasy, Lid. 97) This is *no language, a language just like that*, one which *cannot be understood or named*, it escapes the grid of categories operating in the mental map of the post-Babel world. The language *with no name* is positioned outside of the system of communication codes named after ethnonyms and ascribed to *faiths-natsyas* and nations-states. The logic is straightforward: there is a Polish nation, a Russian, Belarusian or a Lithuanian nation, but there is no such thing as a *mixed* nation or a *mixed natsya*.

The respondents see the origins of the *mixed language* pragmatically, primarily in terms of its communicative function.

"How did the plain language come into being, and how does it get described?"

"It's mixed. People got mixed." (MO 65, Skribovtsy, Lid. 97)

From this perspective, the *mixed* nature of the *plain language* is an obvious consequence of the social and political change recorded in the collective memory of the local inhabitants: the migrations, wars, transfers of power and statehood which entailed a series of changes of the official language. All this change has resulted in the *mixing* of people and, as a logical consequence, the *mixing* of the language. As an interdialect, the *plain language* adapts itself to the linguistic

competence of the speakers and groups engaging in acts of communication in the primary languages; the *plain language* absorbs borrowings and interferences from each of the primary languages – in other words, it becomes *mixed*. In this way of understanding it, the metaphor of the *mixed* nature of the language is an emic conceptualization of the mutual interference and convergence occurring between languages that come into contact.

Although it has no proper name in terms of religion or nation/state, the local language is referred to with a descriptive name derived from its defining quality, i.e. its *mixed* nature. Influenced by the Belarusian term *trasyanka* (literally “shredded fodder”), used to refer to “the use of a mixed language made up of various individual configurations of elements from Belarusian and Russian” (Smułkowa 2002), the language is often called *myeshanka* (“mixture”). “It’s a mixture. A kind of *trasyanka*. It’s not like it’s Belarusian at all.” (FC 70, Nacza [Nacha], Vor. 98) Like the term *plain*, the word *mixture/myeshanka/trasyanka* functions as a kind of ersatz label for a language which cannot be legitimately referred to as Belarusian, a name reserved for the cultured dialect of that ethnonym.

It is not enough to state that the local inhabitants of the borderlands use the term *mixed language* as an emic equivalent of academic concepts such as *mixed dialects*, *linguistic convergence*, *interdialect*, or simply *north-western Belarusian dialects in the process of interference with adjacent languages*. It must be borne in mind that the *mixed* nature of the local language/speech is a capacious and ambiguous metaphor.

For instance, when the respondents say things like: “We don’t only have *polaki* [‘Poles’] here, the languages are mixed here” (MC 59, Mitskantsy, Vor. 98), or: “It’s a mixture, and it’s always been so. We have various different languages here, too” (FC 78, Myezhantsy, Vor. 98), they apply the category of *mixed* not to just one code but to the many codes operating in their environment. They are talking about their linguistic identity: a speech community of the “borderland”, which is characterized by social multilingualism (cf. Straczuk 1999). When they talk about its historical dynamics or cite examples of diglossia and other rules governing the distribution of individual languages in different domains, they invariably use the metaphor of the *mixture/mixed language*:

[grandson coming in:] “*Zdrastvuytje*.”

[grandmother:] “Gee, won’t you look at that Bolshevik coming in! He didn’t say *dzień dobry*, she said *zdrastvuytje* [laughs]. Things are mixed up here these days. It’s Lithuanian, Rus, all kinds.” (FC 69, Shavry, Vor. 98)

In such contexts and usages, the metaphor of the *mixture/mixed language* can be treated as an emic equivalent of terms such as *multilingualism*, *bilingualism*, *speech community* or *language league*.

Unlike *mixture/myeshanka/trasyanka*, the origins of *mixed language* understood as multilingualism are not pragmatic but mythical. Like humanity at large with its many languages, the multilingualism of “borderlands” is legitimized by the biblical precedent of the *mixing (confounding/confusing)* of languages: “Great Solomon was his name. And he built this kind of tower. They used to speak one language, and then, when they moved to oppose God, he mixed up [confounded/confused] their language. So, that’s just like the way it is in Belarus, the languages are mixed. Take this place, the countries it’s been part of: for 20 years it was part of Poland, the schools were Polish, and the language became mixed. The Communists spent so many years here, and it was Russian then. So everything’s mixed up around here. The people are mixed, everything’s mixed. One person speaks one way, another speaks a different way, yet another speaks in a different way still.” (MC 70, Pyeluntsy, Vor. 94)

“They started speaking different languages.”

“Is that how different languages came to be?”

“Yes.”

“And Polish came to be spoken in the same way?”

“Polish too, I guess.”

“And this is how Belarusian come to be spoken as well?”

“I guess so, I don’t know how it’s all come about.”

“And the plain language?”

“Well the plain language is, um, it’s just... It’s just a matter of habit. A villager or a family member might speak like that...” (FC 78, Meyzhantsy, Vor. 98)

According to the respondents, the languages which got *mixed up* (i.e. the primary languages which God created, named and allotted to the different *faiths/natsyas*) are also languages of prayer and written languages. Anthropologically speaking, they are sacred languages and standard languages. Substandard codes are excluded from this set: this is the *plain, mixed language with no name*, a language in which “there are no prayers”.

When taken to mean *mixed languages* (multilingualism), the metaphor of the *mixed language* relates to the mythically sanctioned norm of linguistic differentiation in the world, both close to home and further afield. We are dealing with a traditional vision of separate ethnic identities, a folk philosophy of cultural (linguistic) difference which refers to the cultural *langue*. When taken to

mean the *mixed plain language*, it refers to the borderland inter-dialect used for mythically unsanctioned interactions, in everyday oral communication practice capable of disrupting and changing the original order. In this sense, the metaphor of its *mixed* nature operates at the level of cultural *parole*: a locus where the borders, norms and roles are constantly subject to correction from idiosyncratic practice. This kind of language is used for negotiating, redefining and reinterpreting cultural (linguistic) differences, alleviating the cognitive anxiety caused by the dynamic nature of ethnic difference.

One of the respondents defined the collective identity of the users of that language (or those languages) as follows: “We are mixed folk, we cannot know grammar...” (MO ca. 65, Byeshanki, Lid. 93); this could be interpreted as an auto-ironic affirmation of the expert indigenous competences in the post-Babel *mixed world*.

5. “The new *mixing*”. *Mixed marriages*

When decoding the indigenous grammars of the *mixed world* we must not overlook the local narrative of “the new mixing”, a complex and dynamic strategy of neighbourly coexistence in modern times where the post-war changes to the preexisting political and social order forcibly produced new areas of interaction and dialogue between the traditional *faiths-natsyas*, and, consequently, led to new interpretations of local ethnic differences. “When the wars began, those people got mixed up. The Lithuanians came, then the Lithuanians were driven out and the Soviets came, then came the Germans, then the Germans were driven out again by the Soviets. Then there were the Soviets for a long time...” (FC 74, Alekshishki, Vor. 98) “They mixed things up down here, they deported people. They mixed people up here something awful. They mixed and mixed, and now you get all kinds of people.” (FC 70, Nacha, Vor. 98)

This “new *mixing*” in Belarusian-Lithuanian borderlands makes itself felt primarily through *mixed marriages*. As growing social mobility results in increasingly frequent *mixed marriages*, a new dynamic and an element of disruption enters the traditional order of differences between *faiths-natsyas* as sanctioned by myth.¹⁷ The rules of social and marital endogamy which used to apply in the parents’ and grandparents’ generation are no longer capable of protecting the group differences in the generation of their children and grandchildren. “Nowadays things have got mixed up here. They get married at random: they marry

¹⁷ For religiously *mixed marriages* in Belarusian-Lithuanian-Polish borderlands cf., among others, (Engelking 2012b: passim; Straczuk 2006: 100–102, 105–107 et passim; Życzyńska-Ciołek 1996: 204–205).

whoever takes their fancy. That's how it is." (FC 68, Bogatyrevichy, Mos. 06) "In my family, we now get *polaki* ['Poles'] as well as Lithuanians and Rus folk. All kinds. A mixed family. I have two 'Polish' children. One in Vilnius who is a Lithuanian. And I have grandchildren, they're Rus. Like, that's the kind of family we've ended up with." (FC 74, Nacha, Vor. 98)

Under the grammatical rules of the *mixed world*, when people from different *natsyas* get married, one of the spouses should *sign up for* the other spouses religion and formally change his or her religious identity. "My daughter married an Orthodox Christian. He came to the church, he went to confession, and the priest married them. Like, he is of our religion now." (FC 63, Dubintsy, Vor. 93) "Even a Jew was a Catholic with us once. There was this young Jew who took fancy to a girl, he went to the church, got married and signed up for the 'Polish' religion. So, you get a Jew who was a *polak* ['Pole']." (FC 87, Radivonishki, Lid. 93) After *signing up* for the spouse's *natsya*, the person who changed their religious affiliation should also change their language of prayer to adapt to their new group's. This way he or she changes their *natsya* identity, and consequently changes their own personal identity as well. When joining through marriage a new group *of their own*, a person (usually the woman) allows his or her individual identity to be governed by the rules of collective identity. There are no obstacles to such a course of action: after all, there is one God who understands the new prayers just as well as he understood the old ones.

Once safeguarded by marital endogamy, the differences are now becoming neutralised not only in practice but also, increasingly, in terms of norm: the norm which says that "you should like all people." *Mixed* marriages are widely accepted, and the new norm is often considered to be superior to the old one, which said that "people should get married within their *natsya* for ever and ever" (FC ca. 70, Rouby, Lid. 93). Although the older norm is still remembered, it is becoming superseded by the new model. When talking about mixed Catholic/Orthodox or Christian/Jewish marriages, my respondents saw the axiology of the fundamental social ties (i.e. *communitas*) as more important than the grammar of differences and borders separating the *natsyas* (i.e. social structure) (cf. Turner 1974). The new norm is founded not on ethnic stereotypes relating to religion or nationality, which tends to strengthen difference, but on the unifying experience of human solidarity: "We used to have a family here where a guy married a Jewish woman. They were good people. [Being good] is nothing to do with *natsya*, it's a personal thing." (FC 60, Gornyaty, Lid. 93) "This is how it is in our family: we've got different religions. Rus folk and Ukrainians, we are one Jewish person away from the full set. The way I am, I like all people. Just

as long as they are good people. I don't mind if someone is Jewish, no." (FC 59, Chesheyky, Lid. 93)

As Justyna Straczuk writes, "Locality and strong ties between family members and neighbours [...] turn out to be the most important markers of identity and they supersede religious difference. [...] The socially recognised and respected values of peasant culture [...] result in a willingness to cross denominational boundaries. This is why differences which somewhere else might be significant and divisive are treated differently here, where they are validated or ignored" (Straczuk 2006: 246). Although they come from different *natsyas*, such *mixed* spouses and *mixed* families are to our respondents primarily "the children of one God" or of "one planet".

6. "The new *mixture*". An advent of national categories?

As a result of structural change on the macro scale, the traditional *mixed world* is subject to yet another kind of "new *mixing*": anthropologists working in the area often come across various instances where the pre-modern nominative model, which describes society in terms of a mental map of *natsyas* or religious groups, becomes contaminated with the modern model of national identification. 20th-century national discourse, with tools such as censuses or the "nationality" (Russian *natsyonalnost*) rubric in Soviet-era identity papers, had caused considerable confusion in my respondents' thinking. Baptised into the "Rus" or "Polish" communities, the respondents were forced by the authorities to identify themselves as "Poles" or "Belarusians" in terms of nationality rather than religion, a fact which positions them in an area of conflicts and cross-contamination between discourses. An extra degree of confusion is introduced by the distinction between phrases such as "to put oneself down as", which refers to the formal identity option in official documents, and "to consider oneself as", which refers to the personal sense of identity. The respondents' comments demonstrate their efforts to reconcile those differences, and they show just how disempowering they may find them:

"Back at home I was *polska* ['Polish'], but now that I'm married, I'm Lithuanian."

"So now it says *Lithuanian* in your passport?"

"Lithuanian, my husband put me down as 'Lithuanian' straight away. When I was back at home I was a *polka* ['Polish woman']."

"But in your heart, which do you consider yourself to be?"

"Well, I can't speak a word of Lithuanian. So there's no way I'm Lithuanian. I can speak Polish with you a little bit. And in our village, it's one word from

this language, one word from that. But in my passport it says *Lithuanian*. That's what he's put me down as, he's misrepresented everything.”

“And you count yourself as?”

“I'm a *polka* [‘Polish woman’], I'm no Lithuanian. I can say my prayers in Polish, I taught my grandchildren in Polish, I taught my children in Polish, they went to the communion and to their confession in Polish. How can I be Lithuanian when I don't speak Lithuanian? I'm Polish.” (FC 70, Pyeluntsy, Vor. 94)

Or:

[wife:] “It's all mixed around here, how many Lithuanians? Likely just seven villages. The rest are Poles and Belarusians.”

[husband:] “There are no Belarusians around here.”

[wife:] “If that's the case, what language do we speak?”

[husband:] “The plain language.”

[aunt:] “We only have Belarusians here, there are no Poles here.”

[wife:] “What do you mean, no Poles? In the parish at Raduń it's nothing but Poles.”

[aunt:] “Goodness, they're all Belarusians.”

[husband:] “Belarusians? Aunt, what are you talking about! Take Boltsishky, take Voldotsishky – they're all *polaki*. *Polaki*, all of them. Stop talking nonsense, there are no Belarusians here. It's only near Grodno that you get Belarusians.” (FC 63, MC 73, FC ca. 95, Dubintsy, Vor. 93)

In my research, respondents who relied on the modern frame of reference with national categories of identity were a minority: several isolated cases of people who were young, educated and well-travelled. When they used the word *natsya*, they treated it in the modern sense, synonymous with *natsyonalnost* (‘nationality’), and distinguished it from the word *vyera* [faith] meaning religious denomination: “*Natsya*? A *natsya* is a nationality: Polish, Rus, Belarusian. Those are all nationalities. A faith is something completely different. It can be Orthodox or Catholic. You could be Belarusian in terms of nationality and a Catholic, or the other way round. You could be an Orthodox Pole. Nationality has nothing to do with faith. *Natsya* is *narodnost* [i.e. nationality]. The Polish *natsya* is a *narodnost*. You get nationalities like Poles, Belarusians – do you understand?” (MC 42, Meyry, Lid. 93) Such people can no longer be considered as representatives of the *mixed world* of *faiths-natsyas*; they are members of national groups in the modern sense of the word.

This “new *mixture/confusion*” may one day lead to the emergence of nation-state collective identities in the area; perhaps the pre-modern *ruskie* and *polaki*

will become modern Belarusians and Poles, and their *mixed world* will undergo a transformation from a borderland between religions, as is primarily the case today, into a borderland between nations; however, I believe that this remains an open question. Perhaps the identity of the younger generations in the local *mixed* community will find expression in some kind of new, post-ethnic/post-national categories, unknown and yet to be seen?

7. Summary

My research aimed at decoding and understanding the indigenous grammars of the *mixed world* has brought to light a different conceptualisation of the locally relevant group differences, where borderlands are described in terms which have nothing to do with the products of scholarly study. This procedure has also shown that the emic metaphor of *mixing*,¹⁸ as expressed in various verbal and verb-derived forms, has a richer content than the nominal metaphor of “borderlands” as used by external observers. Unlike the spatial, two-dimensional and static concept of “borderlands”, the *mixing/confusion* has a number of dynamic dimensions – space and time, activities, actions and processes, social actors and relations. It connotes a social world in becoming rather than in being (cf. Turner 1974: 24). What is more, it creates distinctions which are primordial bonds, and because it is legitimised by the myth of the Tower of Babel, it is also sanctioned by the sacred dimension. “Borderlands” as a metaphor whose connotations are primarily topographic-historical-political are far removed from the sphere of the sacred; they do not extend beyond the rationalistic scientific discourse with its tendency to dominate and to keep a distance from the subject of study. Conversely, the metaphor of the *mixed world*, which is autonomous and subjective, seems to offer a coherent and adequate reflection of the sense of identity of the local population and their image of the social world. It is a root metaphor (“basic analogy” / “root metaphor” / “conceptual archetype”) amounting to “a systematic repertoire of ideas by means of which a given thinker describes by analogical extension some domain to which those ideas do not immediately and literally apply” (Black, cited in Turner 1974: 26). The test of such an essential metaphor consists in “the quality of semantic transformation that is brought about” (Wheelwright, cited in Turner 1974: 25).

The Babel confusion/mixing – a conceptual archetype which by definition cannot exist without being rooted in a *communitas*, is “eminently synthetic”, but

¹⁸ For a proposal to use the category of the *mixed world* in descriptions of phenomena such as culture borderlands, multi-culturality or multiculturalism see (Kabzińska 2009).

also ambiguous and dynamic, “engender[ing] thought in [...] coactivity”, engaging in an interplay with a series of interactions with the structures which can be derived from it (cf. Turner 1974: 48, 29). These are the indigenous grammars of the *mixed world* as presented above, which, in the words of Victor Turner, do their “work of discriminating the structure of the root metaphor” (ibidem: 36).

The social actors of the local “borderlands” who are members of communities of descent and culture (cf. Fenton 2010: 12 et passim) conceptualise the differences, which they describe as the *mixing/confusion*, in terms of *mixed* people, *mixed* language and, above all, *faiths-natsyas* predicated on the idea of a shared mythical origin. The emic definition of *natsyas*, seen as a “natural” ascriptive category, is something like “a group of people of a shared descent, originated and named by God.” At the same time, such mythical origins validate the equal rights and values of all the post-Babel “communities sharing the same sacred origin.” Implied in this model is the requirement of mutual equal treatment which finds expression in a pluralist discourse. The logic of the myth of the Tower of Babel has no room for hierarchies, domination or disenfranchisement. For this reason, the *mixed world* must be inclusive rather than exclusive. It must allow for a variety of perspectives, and does not admit a single dominant discourse which would impose its own official perspective on the other subjects.¹⁹ Among those who have become *mixed* there are no inferiors and no betters – the structural matrix which models the cognitive and axiological categories used by the indigenous people is predicated on the principle of multi-polarity. Although it uses the concept of *mixing/confounding/confusing*, the Babel myth speaks about the establishment of order: following the collapse of the Tower of Babel, God’s demiurgic act does not leave humanity in a state of chaos which precludes communication; instead, it creates an order of differences, borders and names. For this reason, the post-Babel world of *faiths-natsyas* may be called a *mixed world*, but it is in fact a world of order and meaning: not so much chaos as a cultural cosmos. This is a pluralist cosmos whose day-to-day functioning is imbued by *communitas*.

“Both the language used (...) and the actual classifications which are deemed to be important are a consequence of historical and embedded social practice.” (Fenton 2010: 38) This observation from the American researcher of ethnicity applies just as well to the nomenclatures and classifications used by external

¹⁹ This is a striking difference between the strategies of coexistence in the “borderlands” of Belarus and Poland. Recent research findings on “multi-culturality” in southern Poland show that these essentially serve the interests of the dominant position of Polish culture and of Polonocentric discourse (cf. Pasięka 2012; 2013).

observers as to those used by indigenous people. Researchers of “borderlands between cultures” who ignore the indigenous metaphors and taxonomies, shaped as they are by generations of social practice, run the risk of producing an incomplete and non-objective take on their area of study and on their metaphors (as it seems to be the case with “borderlands”). These “may be misleading; even though they draw our attention to some important properties of social existence, they may and do block our perception of others” (Turner 1974: 25). The precondition to anthropological understanding is to take on board both perspectives: the *ethic* (that of observers/researchers) as well as the *emic* (that of participants/actors). Although it has been around since at least the times of Malinowski (who stressed the need to take the indigenous viewpoint into account) or Znaniecki (with his idea of the humanistic coefficient), this postulate still struggles to penetrate some of the modern studies on “borderlands between cultures” / “borderland cultures”.

It is not only the analysis of local taxonomies to be important in studying communities that represent “pre-modern multiculturalism”, such as rural communities inhabiting Belarussian-Lithuanian borderland. It is fruitful to look not only at the boundary but also at the difference (and the symbolism of difference), and not only at reified “cultures” but also the process of creation of social distance and social belonging (see: Herzfeld 2001: 193–204). Such studies should be a part of current debates on cultural pluralism and of anthropological debates on the very concept of culture as well.

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Následky babylonského mýtu neboli o domácích mluvnicích smíšeného světa. Příspěvek k antropologii pomezí (na základě výzkumu bělorusko-litevského pomezí)

Resumé: Článek je založen na výsledcích etnografického terénního výzkumu, který autorka prováděla během posledních 20 let v mnohojazyčných a mnohonáboženských obcích na bělorusko-litevském pomezí v horodenském vojvodství v Bělorusku. Dotázaní obyvatelé místních kolchozních vesnic neznají kabinetní pojem „pomezí“. Svou pluralistickou, společenskou a kulturní realitu popisují pomocí metafory (pojmového archetypu) smíšený svět. Tato emická (subjektivní) kategorie popisu sociálního světa je v článku podrobena antropologické analýze a interpretaci. Autorka se zamýšlí nad emickou konceptualizací rozdílů mezi „etnickými“ skupinami. Charakterizuje takové pojetí smíšeného světa, jakým je svérázná mentální mapa různých druhů víry a různých národností spolu s příslušnými jazyky, místní pojem smíšené řeči a jev „nového smíšení“. Tyto moderní změny se projevují odchodem od dávných zákonů endogamie a v rámci kolektivní identifikace přechodem od náboženských kategorií ke kategoriím národnostním. Smíšený svět obyvatel zkoumaného pomezí je předestřen jako inkluzivní a mnohopólový kulturní kosmos.