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A R T I C L E S

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INVISIBLE BOUNDRIES: STUDIES ON ETHNIC ISSUES

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*Ethnologia Polona*, vol. 36: 2015 (2016), 7–12  
PL ISSN 0137-4079

INTRODUCTION

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“Invisible boundaries: studies on ethnic issues” is the title which joins articles published in the main part of this volume. They present some of the topics and issues dealt with at the University of Warsaw’s Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology by scholars working in the Department of Ethnic and Transcultural Studies. All of the texts relate to inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations. Even if the given author’s interests focus on a particular ethnos, there is always in the background another ethnic group and a different culture playing an important role in defining the former.

Individually and collectively, the texts address two types of issue: that of ethnic issues in the wider sense, and a more specific one on issues of ethnically-mixed marriages. Only one text, on Roma-Gypsies, falls, as it were, between these two sets. At the same time, however, all take up inter-cultural and ethnic issues. Whether or not the main theme of the given text is ethnicity or marriage between persons belonging to different ethnic groups and cultures, it is always rooted in a particular tradition, historical memory, or stereotypes relating to the nationality and culture of the partner, i.e. *the Other*. It is thus a confrontation with a representative of an alien group. It can therefore be assumed that the category of ethnicity is broader and, as far as the contents of this volume are concerned, better to the issue of mixed marriages, which refers to a form of ethnic, and thus also inter-cultural, contact.

Before we move on to the general comments on the issues discussed in this volume and the cases examined in individual texts, we need to point to the individual authors’ areas of research and the frameworks of their reflection. It should also be emphasised that all the articles contained herein are the result of field research, the vast majority concerning the post-Communist and post-Soviet areas. This is particularly important because this part of the world has only recently opened up to researchers from outside the countries in question. They are thus, at least indirectly, looking at political changes that substantially transformed the social and economic situation in this part of the

world about a quarter of a century after they took place. This is a very long period in the life of an individual, but it is not a long time in the history of a community or social group caught up in a variety of activities, often triggered by external factors.

Over recent decades, ethnicity has become one of the concepts that most frequently fall within the scope of interest of ethnology and anthropology. Contemporary political changes, including the expansion of the European Union, borders that are easier to cross, the opening up to newcomers from another countries and from different religious and/or political systems, and the global spread of the media, have not rendered ethnicity null and void. The post-Communist and post-Soviet area – the one that the authors of the texts presented here focus on – and the further transformations taking place there (today on a more local rather than national scale), provide intriguing examples to which the term ethnicity refers particularly well.

The authors of this volume are aware of how many theoretical works have been written and proposals put forward concerning the understanding of what we call ethnicity, ethnic attitudes, and creating one's own personality and ethnic identity. But they are also aware that often even the most convincing, logical and aesthetic theoretical constructs not only fail to explain the actual reality and make it easier to grasp, but due to their schematic character are in fact an obstacle to understanding the phenomena the researcher is dealing with. We realise that the multiplicity of the cases and the variety of the schemata of articulating one's ethnicity that we are dealing with today, often leads to the researcher feeling somewhat helpless. This may provoke a disturbing question: Is there anything concrete behind the concept of ethnicity and does it really make sense to focus on the study of ethnicity and attempt to describe it, or should I just get down to describing the cases without attempting any generalizations, and eschew the word ethnicity altogether?

It suffices, however, only to watch the processes occurring within European Union member states and those that aspire to membership, and analyse the cases occurring in the countries of the former Soviet Union and in its former satellites, to realise that the term "ethnicity" is not semantically empty. Furthermore, it makes good sense to refer to it in our research when trying to understand the phenomena we encounter in our work. Ironically, even a situation as unique as the union of two people from different cultures (with different traditions, history, and ethnic, cultural, and sometimes racial, characteristics) indicates that "there is something" behind the term, and that studying the variety of phenomena and factors that make up ethnicity – and that need to be explored if we are to understand what we are dealing with and how we should conceive of ethnicity – does make sense. If we have concluded that schematic theoretical constructs often make it difficult or impossible to understand the whole causality and contextuality of articulating some specific ethnicity and a specific case of it, it is obvious that we are aware of the variety of factors that condition the emergence or the experiencing of ethnicity. This leads us to the need for empirical experience and

understanding of the context, both via the synchronous exploration of interdependences and by evoking a diachronic description of reality (no matter how verifiable it might be or to what extent it has merely been created). This is not to say that our ideas and statements are completely individual, without reference to scholarly authorities on ethnicity; there is no need to list them here because explicit references are made to them in the texts, and they are easy to trace by the manner of description and analysis when no names are cited.

The texts in this volume describe only a small fragment of the reality we encountered during our fieldwork, but they show what a dynamic category we are dealing with here. What the texts make clear is that the understanding of ethnicity, identification with ethnicity, and constructing or creating ethnicity, are dynamic in character, even when some supposedly archetypal idea or pattern is invoked that is considered to be a constitutive factor for the given ethnos.

Each of the articles in this volume shows a different reality and a different way of reaching one's ethnic identity (underpinned by one's own understanding of history, cultural specificity, and the ensuing "otherness" of those from whom we distance ourselves or try to separate from with a mental border). Some of the situations described and analysed in them prompt the question "Why is it so?" when it appears that the political and economic changes that have taken place should have made the process of ethnic identification and self-identification (or self-categorisation) take a different course. Why is it that communities stemming from the past, held together with ancestral ties and defined with some proper noun, have now adopted a different ethnonym, imposed on them institutionally and unrelated to their history and prior identification? Despite their refreshed awareness of ancestral ties, they do not return to the former names but rather reject them, identifying with the ones given them rather arbitrarily or assigned to them by state institutions – as has been the case with today's Yukaghirs (erstwhile Oduls) or Evenks and Eveny (erstwhile Tungus and Lamuts). This cannot be put down exclusively to several decades of pressure from Russian administration and culture, whose impact was felt throughout most of the period of the Soviet state's existence. Such doubts are justified in the face of the many examples where, after the transformations and the cessation of pressure from the colonial administration (as the repressive Soviet administrative apparatus can be classified), we can see a return to the identifications and ethnonyms once administratively eradicated. Are those newly accepted identifications the result of permanent changes and unconscious subordination or of the weakness of the original identifications, or perhaps they testify to something else?

The power and efficacy of ancestral assignment plays an important but different role in the processes of creating the identity of the peoples inhabiting the southern part of the Siberian region. The memory of clan membership (although differently shaped) still functions in the awareness of the trans-Altai Torgut. However, neither forty years ago (when we first started our fieldwork there) nor today has it led to an

awakening of their ethnicity, to the process of shaping their cultural specificity. On the other hand, the increased migration of Kazakhs and the opening of a border-crossing with China has clearly invigorated that community, primarily in the economic sphere, but above all in building a supra-national pan-Torgut community. An important constitutive factor in this process has turned out to be the boosting of the Torgut's grandiose ambitions and their building of mental ethnic borders in relation to the Kazakhs and the Han Chinese. Amazingly, it was the Chinese, almost absent from Torgut awareness and experience (the Chinese border remaining closed as a result of the fighting that led to establishing the People's Republic of China), and the Kazakhs, not very numerous and formerly hardly present, that proved so important for the development of today's image of Torgut ethnicity. The Khalkha Mongols, constituting the majority of the inhabitants of the state, have not been required for this 'project'. What is more, even though the Torgut are a Mongolian group, they construct their history differently today. It is indeed revealing that they do not deem it necessary to erect a statue of Genghis Khan and in their tales of the distant past there is no mention of this character, either. Yet another course is taken by processes associated with the sense of ethnicity in the reported cases of Outer Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and the Han Chinese; what is particularly interesting here is the clear separation between Inner and Outer Mongolians. As a result of the variegation of ethnic processes in the above-mentioned communities, ethnicity, so closely associated with the tradition of ancestral origin and clan membership, has become a type of national symbol.

Perhaps the most intriguing case described and analysed in one of the papers here is that of Belarusians. If we note that the constituting factor here is neither the particular course of their history – real or imagined – nor symbols relating to the state, nor any foreign ethnos, nor a common language, the question arises: What is? What constitutes contemporary Belarusian ethnicity? For sure it is not just "attachment to the land" declared as a differentiator and a characteristic feature.

Still in progress is the process of the formation of Roma ethnicity. It is reasonable to ask the question : When Roma and when Gypsy? Even as far as those who are inhabitants of Poland, and who have been the subject of analysis, opinions among the members of this group tend to vary. Even though the author of the text deals mainly with patterns of motherhood, her interviewees constantly worry about breaking the unwritten rules, whose observance is deemed a necessary element of being Roma and of being accepted not only as "your own kind", but as someone who really belongs to "your kind". Consequently, they are constantly accompanied by a fear of crossing the boundary of their ethnicity and by anxiety about the opinions of their own group, lest they be accused of insufficient compliance with those rules.

Similar and yet quite different are the concerns about crossing this invisible boundary among Moroccan Muslim immigrants in Europe. Here, it is not only the different bans and regulations relating to the sexual sphere that are subject to those fears, but the

entire religious system protects one against the temptations of integration and makes Moroccans and other Muslims, who declare willingness to integrate in Europe but only within the *umma*, a supra-ethnic and supra-national Muslim community. In practice, however, even integrating within the *umma* becomes too difficult because they feel safer only among their real “own kind” (not even among other Muslims), embracing their own ethnos, and with nationality understood, at most here, as identification with their country of origin.

These few examples alone illustrate the multiplicity of situations and the multitude of realities that create forms of ethnicity. Their specific form, with the consequent “ethnicity in conflict”, are inter-ethnic marriages, also referred to in literature on the subject as inter-cultural, bi-national, inter-racial or heterogamic. This last term also encompasses relationships between persons not only of different ethnic or national origin, but also of different religion, class or caste. In everyday usage, they are all referred to simply as mixed marriages, a term which all the authors of this volume use due to its widest possible scope. They can be defined as unions of persons defying the rules that are considered by definite ethnoses to be particularly important for their survival and internal cohesion. They violate such determinants as colour, religion, culture or, finally, nationality (citizenship).

The phrase “ethnicity in conflict”, already used above, highlights different understandings of shared moments in history and stereotypes about the other side, in the face of the awareness of his/her different origins. In the consciousness of Macedonians, for example, there are firmly imprinted negative stereotypes of Albanians, among Poles there is a common negative image of the Russians, with their perception of the Germans not being too favourable, either. There is firmly articulated reluctance to or fear of Poles to of persons with a different colour of skin, especially Africans, hence it is relevant to ask how this “ethnicity in conflict” is negotiated to make possible the union of a man and a woman belonging to different ethnoses mutually unfavourably disposed, and what role is played by the cultural background and context of each group whose members enter such a relationship. Indeed, when there is open conflict, escape by one of the parties, if possible at all, is usually very difficult to say the least. We need to bear in mind, however, that a different ethnicity provokes not only fear and aversion but also triggers curiosity and often true fascination, and in the case of a gender difference it may even inspire love. This explains to some extent the popularity of such relationships even though they are so difficult and have, for centuries, been banned or at least hindered, starting from biblical and Roman times up to the Third Reich and Apartheid-era South Africa; in these contexts relationships were entered into even when there were forbidden by law and punishable, in extreme cases, with the death penalty.

That is why today’s mixed marriages, increasingly common due to intensive migration, should, in our opinion, be viewed not only in the context of the theory of migration, kinship or sociology of the family, but also primarily in the context of inter-ethnic

relations. On the micro-scale, it is in them that, like in a test tube, all the difficulties of such relations, even those of an international dimension, will be found. These are difficulties which usually arise, despite the ambivalence of attitudes on both sides, from inflexibility in matters concerning one's own customs, beliefs and values, even in minor matters. But they can also result from linguistic confusion, even among speakers of languages as close to one another as Poles and Russians, or from some detailed aspects of origin, as in the categorisation of Albanians into the good *Albancy* and the evil "others", the "Shiptars"; or they may result from the policy of the state, as was the case with the attitude of the Communist authorities of the Polish People's Republic to Polish-German marriages. Successful examples of negotiations within mixed relationships can therefore prove extremely informative and serve as a kind of analytical key, also for broader inter-ethnic relations.

Finally, we would like to stress that individual authors have their own preferences, and sometimes different views on issues where there are no clear solutions. We have decided to respect the authors' individual approach while giving the reader an opportunity to become acquainted with some differences in how ethnic problems have been presented by Polish scholars. What binds the texts together is the fact that they are all based on long-term fieldwork, conducted as part of broader research projects in which the authors have been involved.

In this way the present volume of "Ethnologia Polona" may serve as an overview of the research work conducted in recent years by members of the Department of Ethnic and Transcultural Studies at Warsaw University's Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. It is our hope that it will, on the one hand, draw attention to those problems and phenomena of ethnicity that have escaped scrutiny and have been written about in a superficial way, and on the other, acquaint English-speaking readers with the work of Polish researchers who have, to date, only been published in their native language.

*Translated by Stefan Sikora*