

MYTHO-MAGICAL STRUCTURE OF DISASTERS

JANUSZ BARAŃSKI

This paper addresses two tragic events that took place in 2010: the crash of Poland's presidential airplane and the flood that occurred shortly thereafter¹. Based on the media narrations, their contents and genres and the accompanying emotions, actions and discussions that took place at the time, anyone who has ever worked as a mythologist (a term used by Roland Barthes, 1957) would have little choice but to assume that the intense creation of a myth was taking place: the birth of a modern legend or even magical practices. These two events and the cultural responses to them are interesting from an anthropological view-point, and they shall be discussed in this paper in order of their occurrence.

It is important to note that while the second event, the flood, remains little more than a distant bad memory in Polish society, even though it continues to affect its victims to this day, the plane crash continues to be the centrepiece of a debate that far exceeds myth-making. The crash has become not only the subject of an investigation but, first and foremost, the subject of political disputes, which have amassed content so vast that they could cover numerous concurrent studies in various fields ranging from anthropology, through sociology, political science and psychology, to technical sciences. The debate has continued since the very beginning, including in the form of scientific conferences on the subject of the crash. However, the remarks below concern only the first weeks and months following both events and comprise information that was recorded nearly on the spot.

¹ In a plane crash near the airport in Smolensk (Russia) on 10 April 2010, the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, his wife and 94 other persons died (including members of parliament, military commanders, high-ranking officials, clergy, veterans and social activists). The passengers were planning to attend the 70th Anniversary commemorations of the Katyn massacre (the execution of over 20,000 Polish army officers under order of the Soviet authorities).

It should be noted that, even in the first few days after the plane crash, competent researchers pointed out that mythical scenarios were emerging at the time and that these were analogous to the various traditions and cultural circles of all ages. Let us mention two of these researchers here: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2010) and Mirosław Pęczak (2010). Both referenced Turner's (1967) notion of *communitas*, which, according to Tokarska-Bakir and Pęczak, perfectly reflects the trauma shared by nearly the entire society after the event. However, do the cultural practices associated with *communitas* have anything in common with the aforementioned mythical scenarios? They do, indeed, have much in common, even to the point of being identical. Perhaps the existence of the original identity of these two cultural categories, *communitas* and myth, is not widely acknowledged; that is, we are used to relatively constant conceptualisations that organise our thinking and that make us differentiate between *communitas* and myth. However, it should be noted that any terms we devise are only useful conventions that allow us to analyse reality, which continuously evades our attempts at sensuous and cognitive inquiry. With respect to the terms discussed in this paper, as well as the notion of magic, Jerzy Sławomir Wasilewski pointed out that all of these categories (myth, magic and ritual) form apices of the same cultural triangle (Wasilewski, 1979, p. 218). However, it should be added that cultural practice demonstrates something more; namely, an emic original undifferentiability between these apices. Only a comprehensive, syncretic analysis of the apices can determine the original, irreducible characteristics of the cultural practices and meanings that are denoted by them.

Thus, where there is *communitas*, we must search for both mythical and magical elements; and where there is magic, we must also search for myth and ritual. In other words, the rule of the transitivity of implications applies to culture. Even though knowledge of this kind remains outside the grasp of those who are unfamiliar with the subject, the opinions of the aforementioned specialists concerning the events discussed in this paper were accompanied by opinions and diagnoses from non-specialists, such as journalists, politicians and various intellectual celebrities. Immediately after the mourning rituals began following the presidential plane crash, the crash began to be "mythologised" according to the common understanding of myth-making, with many people ascribing lies, manipulation, fraud and unjustified values and meanings to the event. Many commentators who took advantage of the tools used by Barthesian mythologists and demystifiers criticised the media's frequent comparisons of the crash to the Katyn massacre from 70 years earlier, and of President Kaczyński to Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski² or to President Gabriel Narutowicz³, and Kaczyński's wife to... Queen Jadwiga of Poland⁴.

² Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile during World War II, who died in a plane crash in Gibraltar on 4 July 1943.

Indeed, the myth and all its variants and incarnations can be considered a logical fallacy, a cliché, an irrational belief or even ignorance, as with the blessed primitive ignorance of the “noble savage”. However, these mythomagical terms that are used to rhetorically sanction the dominance of critical argumentation over uncritical acceptance seem to resemble the criticised notion of a spell from linguistic magic, the goal of which is to achieve an epistemological, and thus an ontological, political advantage. However, this rationalist arsenal is equally as legitimate as the criticised arsenal, the rationality of which has an entirely different origin. The incompatibility of these two worlds was demonstrated some time ago by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1992), but the final word on the matter apparently belonged to various postmodernist critics.

The crucial point is that the aforementioned rationalist spells have no bearing on the obvious facts. In addition to the random historical analogies that emerged during the week after the plane crash, other devices can be named: directly or indirectly comparing the crash victims to historical and literary characters (e.g. there was a television memorial broadcast about President Kaczyński that compared him to Colonel Michał Wołodyjowski⁵, accompanied by the music score from the television series *Przygody Pana Michała*⁶); or the reemergence of films related to the Kresy, or the Eastern Borderlands of Poland, that complemented the events of 10 April 2010 (an entire series of adaptations of various literary works were broadcast in the week following the crash, most notably *Nad Niemnem*⁷ and *Znachor*⁸). Thus, the image of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity reemerged and the secular linear timeline was, in a manner of speaking, suspended in favour of a sacral, uniform timeline of the everlasting present. Likewise, the society entered a state of primal harmony through such slogans as “There is no political right, there is no political left; we are all united”. Furthermore, the opinions of both politicians and “ordinary” people started to incorporate liminal and apocalyptic motifs; for instance, “An era is about to end” or “Things are never going to be the same again”. On the other hand, liminal and cosmological motifs could also be found, including those used by such scholars as Piotr Sztompka⁹. In an interview he gave to Katarzyna Janowska (Sztompka & Janowska, 2010, p. 29), Sztompka called

³ The first president of Poland who was assassinated on 16 December 1922 in Warsaw.

⁴ Queen of Poland (born 1373, died 1399), member of the Capetian House of Anjou, Catholic saint and patron of Poland.

⁵ A character in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Trilogy* who fought against the Cossacks, Swedes and Turks in the wars of the 17th century.

⁶ A film produced in 1968 based on the third novel of the *Trilogy*, *Pan Wołodyjowski*.

⁷ A novel by Eliza Orzeszkowa about the life of low-ranking nobility living in 19th-century Vilnius Region.

⁸ A novel by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz about the social relationships in Poland during the interwar period.

⁹ A famous Polish sociologist.

the plane crash “a homage in blood” in service of the country. Furthermore, he used the term “a founding sacrifice in Poland-Russian relations”, which indicated the “birth” of a new world including, according to Dariusz Baliszewski (2010, p. 68), “a new legend” being created in front of our very eyes. Other terms used in this context included “a sacrifice”, “heroes” and “the fallen”. Some suggested that the final act of a Polish messianic mission had taken place: “the fallen” were the saviours of contemporary world, and their deaths would lead to peace not only between Poland and “our Russian brothers” (a homily given by Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz during the funeral of the presidential couple), but also between Russia and the entire world. The sacrifice was not vain; after all, the world was able to learn the truth about Katyn, and consequently, the dark truth about the “Tsardom of the North”. We can mention other cosmological attributes pertaining to the day of the funeral, such as the sounds of sirens, bells (especially the Sigismund Bell¹⁰) and army trumpets, along with national and patriotic songs.

The funeral held in Wawel Cathedral¹¹, which marked the end of the period of the post-crash suspension, was again accompanied by a veritable pantheon of spirits, including Casimir the Great¹². The meeting of kings¹³ that he organised in 1364 was compared to the contemporary gathering of the world’s elite for the funeral, including President Barack Obama, and the event was called a post-mortem victory of the “Shy Warrior”, as Piotr Zaremba (2010, p. 11) called President Kaczyński in *Tygodnik Powszechny*¹⁴. Even though the latter meeting could not take place due to the eruption of a volcano in Iceland, the ceremony was attended by historical reconstruction groups, who in this manner eliminated the historical linearity and irreversibility, by introducing the mythical state of the everlasting present. General Henryk Dąbrowski’s cavalry¹⁵ saluted and Józef Piłsudski’s¹⁶ legionnaires became actors and witnesses to the death of the head of state, who was following the powerful Sarmatian commanders, heroic Romantic insurrectionists and the tragic victims of the Katyn

¹⁰ The most well-known bell in Poland, manufactured in 1520, which is currently located in the tower of Wawel Cathedral. It was founded by King Sigismund I the Old of the Jagiellonian Dynasty.

¹¹ The Royal Archcathedral Basilica on Wawel Hill in Krakow, containing crypts with the tombs of Polish kings, and known as the national necropolis.

¹² The last king of Poland from the Piast Dynasty who reigned between 1333 and 1370.

¹³ A meeting concerning a crusade against the Turks, organised by King Casimir the Great between 22 and 27 September 1364, was attended by the Holy Roman Emperor and the rulers of some European countries and duchies.

¹⁴ Many heads of states announced their attendance of the funeral, including President Barack Obama.

¹⁵ Polish general under Napoleon Bonaparte, who organised the Polish Legions in northern Italy after the partitions of Poland.

¹⁶ Organiser of the Polish Legions prior to World War I and later a head of state.

massacre. The commentators constantly reminded the audience that the tragic deaths of the crash victims, especially the head of state, were the price that the entire nation had to pay for a new quality in the relationships between Poles, political parties and nations.

This is a very brief and selective description of the national mythology, which manifested itself through texts, gestures, prayers, mass expiation and the crying of the mourners. Without a doubt, this is a vivid example of a contemporary myth that bears the signs of both ritual and magic. We may also be justified in referring to Eliade's concept of "myth in action" (Eliade, 1970), complemented with Turner's *communitas*, Durkheim's understanding of *sacrum* (Durkheim, 1968) and Tambiah's view on magic, which involves thinking *per analogiam* – not from the viewpoint of causality, but from the viewpoint of the persuasiveness and self-persuasiveness that human beings use to create their own worlds and meanings (Tambiah, 1990). However, the thousands of people who gathered in front of the presidential palace in Warsaw and in other public places, their honest tears, prayers, songs and entries in the book of condolence, the stage designs of the national history, as well as the notions, ideals, values, signs, coats of arms and emblems – all of these aspects form an image that cannot be described or interpreted solely through Barthesian demystification. This is because, in this case, a world is being created, at least according to Hegel's objectification. However, since this world is internalised and experienced in different proportions by human masses, groups and individuals, its ontological power cannot be underestimated. The objective truth of the demystifying mythologists clashes with the subjective truth of the consumers of the myth, and therefore, the ancient epistemological aporia must once again be considered if we wish to understand anything about the human condition.

Consequently, the tragic nation-wide event discussed in this paper should be clear: the category of myth (and the other categories) originating from the repertoire of critically interpreted classical literature (regardless of the type) is still useful, and is moreover necessary to understand the cultural reality. The role of myth in the creation of meaning is fully apparent in the aforementioned circumstances. However, events of this scale are limited in time, space and demography, perhaps with the exception of everyday religious worship, which also incorporates myth, and even non-religious everyday life comes with myth-derived content and logic. Barthes provided numerous examples, as do contemporary myth-hunters. We shall not discuss these examples in this paper; suffice it to say that they appear in politics, economy, literature, art, drama, films, history, family life and the aforementioned nation-wide affairs. Such cases produce myths that are dispersed and fleeting, i.e. they constitute individual symbolic expressions. Nonetheless, these expressions are a condensed form of mythological narration.

Barthes himself coined the term *mythicality*, which he said is a case of myth that “(...) is discontinuous. It is no longer expressed in long fixed narratives but only in “discourse”; at most it is a phraseology, a corpus of phrases (or stereotypes)” (Barthes, 1986, p. 65). This statement also adds to Ricoeur’s viewpoint about a myth becoming part of a symbol (Ricoeur, 1985), which may refer to an image, an idea or words, and thus to an idiomatic expression, rhetorical figure, poetic figure, cliché, stereotype, saying, political slogan, advertising slogan, religious phrase or ideological phrase. In this respect, myth is only an abstract concept used by researchers as a means of organisation; it never exists in the pure form of a narrative, an archaic worldview or, according to Leszek Kołakowski (1986), the universal form of consciousness. Of course, a myth may evolve into a clear narrative. However, a myth primarily occurs in the form of strongly dispersed, symbolic and axiological seeds, only some of which will sprout to become a true forest of symbols, as Victor Turner (1967) wrote. In turn, these symbols make up a mythical image of the world, which is reconstructed by a given researcher.

The forest grows extraordinarily fast in circumstances such as those surrounding the aforementioned events. Such events are ripe time for ideas that grow from the cultural soil: the White Eagle, Virgin Mary, Christ the Monarch, Katyn, *krakuskahat*¹⁷, Golden Horn¹⁸, Czarniecki¹⁹, Dąbrowski, Solidarity²⁰, *My, Pierwsza Brygada*²¹, *Bożecość Polskę*²², the bulwark of Christianity, “*Moskal brothers*”²³, “Poland as the messiah of nations”, borderland forts, Ramparts of the Holy Trinity²⁴, *Nierzucim ziemi*²⁵, *Jeszcze Polska niezginęła*²⁶ and the never-ending litany of other meanings and their contents that form clear syntagmatic continuities and structural homologies. Some, as Barthes wrote, will find them to be symptoms of ignorant worship; but others will see in them an expression of glory. According to Umberto Eco, this proves that a never-ending semiotic free-for-all is also taking place in relation to the event in question (Eco, 1996). Furthermore, the meanings occur in various representations and configuration,

¹⁷ Part of the traditional dress in Krakow and one of the symbols of Poland.

¹⁸ A symbolic attribute in *Wesele*, a drama by Stanisław Wyspiański written in the beginning of the 20th century. It symbolises a lost opportunity for Poland to regain independence.

¹⁹ A legendary marshal of the Polish military in the 17th century.

²⁰ An anti-communist socio-political movement in the 1980s.

²¹ *My, Pierwsza Brygada* (“We, the First Brigade”) – a well-known patriotic march of the Polish Legions led by Józef Piłsudski.

²² *Boże, coś Polskę* (“God, You [have protected] Poland”) – a patriotic and religious Polish song from the 19th century.

²³ *Moskals* (“Russians”) – A phrase from a romantic poem by Adam Mickiewicz.

²⁴ A fortress on the south-eastern borderland of pre-partition Poland, built to protect the region against a Turkish invasion.

²⁵ *Nierzucim ziemi* (“We shall not abandon this land”) – a line from a 19th century patriotic song.

²⁶ *Jeszcze Polska niezginęła* (“Poland is not yet lost”) – the first line of the Polish national anthem.

invoke different connotations and engage different mixtures of induction, deduction and abduction. In short, cultural practice makes them permanently polysemantic and polydiscursive. Nonetheless, their varying forms appear among group and individual personalities, as well as sometimes remaining hidden in the subconsciousness to help manifest fundamental archetypes, and sometimes resurfacing, as with the event in question, where the tragedy of a national transgression was made fully evident.

Again, the case of the plane crash is an exception. Everyday life, which dominates over the extraordinary intervals, shuns explicit symbolic manifestations. Nonetheless, these manifestations are our own creations and, at the same time, have an effect on us, which becomes combined into the image of continuous myth-making. Myth-making does not have to pertain to grand national affairs; it can just as easily be related to a given region, city or village, personal policy, family life, work, love, art or even the heart. Consequently, any images, emblems, understatements, sayings, clichés, genealogies, gestures, appearances or even material attributes become significant elements of the seemingly chaotic puzzle, which is founded on a mythical structure that is changeable yet logical enough to allow individuals who share a given viewpoint, ideology or religious belief to understand one another, nearly without words. After all, right-wingers and left-wingers can understand each other easily, as can conservatives and progressives, *hanysi* and *górale*²⁷, fans of Bach and fans of Doda²⁸, or the adherents of the medical ethos and the critics thereof. Through Lévi-Strauss's "odds and ends" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), all these groups subconsciously experience and construct their own worlds and are, according to Bourdieu (2000), themselves constructed by these worlds.

Note that we should not overestimate the impact of any permanent, deep structure of mythical narration. Lévi-Strauss's concept needs to be complemented with an element of agency, which is equally significant in the creation and consumption of myth as a tool for establishing meaning. This need was already acknowledged to a certain extent by a prominent mythologist, Joseph Campbell (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). Campbell, in addition to the metaphysical, cosmological and social functions of myth, which are easy to demonstrate with respect to the recent Polish mythology discussed herein, also underlined its psychological function, i.e. he indicated that myth served as a signpost for the individual. However, Campbell limited his consideration of this function to an understanding of the imitative aspect, even though the creative aspect also merits analysis. This is because, as John Fiske (1989) demonstrates, the individual is not a cultural simpleton, but rather is the creator of a trajectory of meaning, and Lévi-Strauss's *parole* should be applied not only with respect to vari-

²⁷ *Hanysi* and *górale*— popular monikers for the residents of Upper Silesia and the southern, mountainous regions of Poland, respectively.

²⁸ A popular contemporary Polish singer.

ous cultural sociolects, but also to so-called *personalects*. Even Barthes himself pointed out this fact in his later works, indicating that his textualistic theory involved two types of texts: texts that are read (“readerly”) and texts that are written (“writerly”) (Barthes, 1973). The former are addressed to a passive, disciplined audience who accepts the relatively permanent meanings contained within the text; while the latter constitute open texts that provoke the audience to rewrite them and imbue them with a new meaning. Fiske introduces a third category of “producerly” texts that are produced and the textuality of which is mostly conventional, as they exclusively concern individualised cultural practices (Fiske, 1989). Whereas this subject slightly exceeds the aspect of myth-making being analysed in this paper, it is a logical consequence, and thus should be allotted some attention.

As has already been mentioned, the theoretical categories of myth, magic and ritual in cultural practice form an indistinguishable whole. However, the analytical techniques that are fundamental to a scientific pursuit indicate that we should apply each of these categories only in proportion to its usefulness, which in the case of the fateful flood suggests the category of magic or, in a broader perspective, the rationality of participation. The story of the rationality of participation begins in a distant yet fully justified goal that Lévy-Bruhl decided to pursue. This goal was to solve the mystery of the incomprehensible cognitive meanderings of various indigenous people from faraway corners of the Earth, which had baffled many a Western traveller, missionary or even researcher.

As we know, all manner of strange and cryptic cognitive structures of the indigenous peoples of Australia, New Guinea or even North America have been explained through what Lévy-Bruhl called *prelogic*. Prelogic was a mode of thinking that is different to European thinking, which originates from classical Greek philosophy – it is noncompromising in its execution of the principle of non-contradiction or the principle of excluded the middle that both guarantees the reliability of truths about the world and their laws, which the people of the West discover using this form of classical logic. On the other hand, prelogic is unconcerned with either of these principles, as well as with the general laws of causality or set theory; instead, it tends to reduce the former to the principle of sequentiality, and the latter to the identity of all things that have ever been in any relation to one another. The classical European approach is supported by the musings of Plato, Aristotle and the other sophists and fathers of philosophy, who formulated useful principles to eliminate logical fallacies. The same sophisms and paralogisms they discovered helped Lévy-Bruhl to characterise the aforementioned prelogic, which was unable to defend itself against accusations of fallacious thinking.

Thus, fallacies underlie not only the belief that one is the brother of parrots (as in the famous case of the Brazilian Bororo), that burning the hair of

your enemy will bring misfortune upon him, or that one's rulers are the incarnations of deities. Prelogical explanations also underlie the events that shall be discussed below, such as plagues and other disasters. Let us take drought as an example. "A certain drought in Landana was attributed to the missionaries wearing a certain kind of cap during the services: the natives said that this stopped the rain" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1979, pp. 71–73). Likewise, for pestilence:

A missionary from Albion reported that following the outbreak of a disease, the natives blamed a poor unfortunate sheep I had, that was killed to please them; but the epidemic raged as violently as ever. Now our two goat were blamed; these animals, however, lived it all out. Finally, they levelled their abuse and accusations against a large picture of Queen Victoria, which hung in our dining-room (Lévy-Bruhl, 1979, pp. 72–74).

However, it should be noted that Lévy-Bruhl suggested that Westerners such as himself also used this type of thinking. He stated that the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* was as prevalent among civilised peoples as among the primitives (Lévy-Bruhl, 1992). This is not the only sophism that has proved useful for such a paradigm of explaining strange and cryptic cognitive structures, as Lévy-Bruhl also explained them using the term *mystical participation*. Therefore, regardless of whether we are dealing with the aforementioned principle of sequentiality as understood through the categories of consequence, with the mystical understanding of consequence from alternation (*juxta hoc ergo propter hoc*) or with representation as identity (*pars pro toto*), we can, according to Lévy-Bruhl, also encounter all such logical fallacies in the Western civilisation of the 21st century. Does this mean that there is no need to travel to the Trobriand Isles or to the neighbouring New Guinea, which to this day is considered as a limitless reserve of primitive thought, social structures and religious beliefs?

A seasoned scholar such as Lévy-Bruhl would avoid making rash judgments, such as concluding that a fallacy is predominant even among civilised people, with respect to himself and other persons like him. Admittedly, Lévy-Bruhl does not provide any examples to support his claim. However, this lack is remedied by a contemporary researcher and commentator on the works of the French philosopher, Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah:

(...) when Americans, young and old, terrified by nuclear devastation and industrial waste turn out in droves to protect their environment and their ecology, their flora and their fauna; when the romantic poets, waxed eloquent in the presence of, and communion with, nature; when national monuments like the Lincoln or Jefferson memorials, or graveyards like the Arlington Cemetery, or battlefields like Gettysburg, are believed to enshrine a people's history or radiate their national glories – in all these instances, we have manifestations of "participation" among people, places, nature and objects (Tambiah, 1990, pp. 107–108).

Of course, we may all add our own prominent national writers to this list, along with their attitudes towards nature or the nation, our monuments, cemeteries, battles, blood ties, loved ones, business partners, places we remember from our childhood or the objects that we find invaluable because they belonged to our ancestors. Seemingly trivial sayings and superstitions also play a major role, as they shape our choices, thinking and actions and closely resemble the paralogisms discovered by the sophists: “who keeps company with wolves, will learn to howl”, “like father, like son”, “the house shows the owner”, etc.

Tambiah also emphasises the component of mystical participation within Western culture. After all, every religious belief involves mystical participation, especially in the US, a country that is considered as a bastion of the Western *ratio*. This indicates that the coexistence of the two modes of thinking, prelogical and logical, is mostly independent from time or place; both modes are ubiquitous, even if they occur in different proportions. It should be noted that Tambiah owes his observational skills in no small part to his provenance. Tambiah is a Tamil from Sri Lanka, who gained the foundation of his education in his homeland, and only moved to the circle of the American academia in recent decades. His natural distance from the subject of his analysis, Western culture, is invaluable in searching for such prelogical structures in a seemingly logical world, including in the classical, binary approach to reality.

Let us return to the aforementioned plagues and other disasters that intrigued Lévy-Bruhl and that relate to the subject of this paper. In 2010, a hecatomb took place: two waves of flooding that affected thousands of residents in southern Poland. However, opinions circulated that the flood was not coincidental, and not solely in terms of its geographical and cultural determinism. In this paper, religious beliefs have been mentioned as the primary locus of prelogic and mystical participation with respect to a particular approach to reality. This done for two reasons: every religion, according to its original function, meets the criterion of rationality, but at the same time, it also affects the other, non-religious spheres of life, which always involve some understanding of the world, its laws and the resulting events. In other words, elements of prelogic also occur in the non-religious world, especially if they concern extraordinary, mysterious or dangerous events or else events that undermine the current order.

As far as the flood in question is concerned, the spokesman for the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa (a prominent religious centre in Poland), Father Stanisław Tomoń, claimed that it had been caused by water-condensing substances left in the atmosphere by airplanes, which led to excessive, artificial rains. He quoted witnesses and even posted a photograph on the monastery’s website that showed the criss-crossing trails of condensed water vapour caused by the hot exhaust fumes coming from airplane jet engines. Even though no persons were blamed for the affair, Tomoń still asked, “Who owns the planes

in these photographs? Who is responsible for this? And how is it possible that someone is flying around in Polish air space, leaving chemicals behind, without the local residents being publicly informed about it?" The spokesperson went on to suggest that since the person responsible for the incident did not inform the residents, he or she must have been an outsider, and it could not have been a passenger flight nor the local spraying of crops, as this is never performed from a height of several kilometres. An earlier hypothesis that the fog in Smolensk which caused the plane crash had an artificial origin provided a clue to the identity of the outsider. But what good was this clue if the authorities avoided any involvement, appearing only coincidentally on the destroyed flood banks? "So watch the sky!" Tomoń warned his audience. "Especially since we have had no official statement on the matter in the media" (Jasna Góra, 2010). Perhaps, then, we are dealing with a conspiracy between the government, the media and foreign powers. "Be ever watchful!" – was a phrase used by the communist authorities of the People's Republic of Poland to warn the country's citizens against imperialist agents and interventions.

Similar opinions on the matter appeared soon after, even though the similarities were vague in some cases. It is important to note the sheer number of suggested connections, as it indicates the contextual contents and meanings that make up the entirety of the cultural (political?) competences that are necessary to maintain particular worldviews. For instance, the aforementioned hypothesis provoked anti-Russian sentiments on an online forum (the original posts in Polish contained grammatical and spelling errors that are not reflected in the translation): "Would any Poles be involved with this? Or would it rather be Russians? Because the plane must have been loaded with the chemicals and adapted to carry them (?)."

There were also references to the plane crash in Smolensk: "Note that after Lech Kaczyński died, the flood seemed to get bigger. Cataclysms in general grew in scale. Is that not strange? It's as if someone wanted to weaken our country. For me, there are too many coincidences and ambiguities." The matter goes even beyond the troubled state of Poland: "I also think that our country may have been targeted with this weapon. It is just like what occurred with the murder of our president and the earthquake in Haiti (they found giant oil deposits there, and took them over). Has it ever occurred to you that the Iceland volcano was used to cancel flights in Europe?" However, things did not end with manipulating the forces of nature: "Vaccines, spraying, poisoned medicines, floods (who caused the tsunami?) – who knows, maybe they are also manipulating our minds here?... Speaking of which, did you notice that when Klich and Miller²⁹ came back from Russia they were 'different people', who sympathised with the Russians about the crash in Smolensk?"

²⁹ Members of the Polish government at the time.

Finally, there was the mandatory mention of the Jews, who were always on hand as subjects of these discussions: “If I were the prime minister, there would not have been a flood... The question is who is responsible? PS. I am going to add something about Georgia, because I am fed up with people blindly defending this matter... First of all, look up Georgia on a map, and think about the implications for Russia if they dragged it into NATO, which is exactly what the late silent friend of the Jews/Zionists wanted... They supported the whole conspiracy you people are writing about here, even though NATO was their official armed force that wanted to expand their influence thanks to a few Jews that they brought to power... They have already used the Jews in the past to bring down Russia...” At this point, the author starts losing his train of thought. The trajectories of the consequences, relationships and influences become complicated, and the mysterious “silent friend of the Jews/Zionists” appears – did the author mean Bronisław Geremek?³⁰ Another party comes to the aid of the previous, inept speaker: “Your view is strangely one-sided and different, and does not take into account many aspects of geopolitics whereby ‘the nation eternally disadvantaged by other nations’ is trying to influence, while in reality, they are leeching off the life-force of those other nations. And to top it off, they have the audacity to take offence if the other nations they abuse start to protest. Perhaps you know who I am talking about?”

Finally, a truly politically mature conclusion appears, with considerably Job-esque undertones:

In 1997, people also suspected that the strange rains were artificial. Our country is being taken apart, as it has been for 20 years. When will the Poles finally wake up? When will they start thinking and choosing true Poles and patriots? When everything has already been sold out? It is going to be too late then!!!” And in another post: “I think so. Germany and Russia have been plotting together to partition Poland, but this time, economically. We all know who the late President Kaczyński was. He was a thorn in their side, because he wanted to unite the eastern countries and he supported Ukraine and Georgia. The plan to destroy the Polish economy began with the attack on the presidential plane, and was followed with the floods and the volcano. This was all done with the premeditation to weaken Poland and make it succumb.

In the end, a sober overall diagnosis alleviates the discussion:

All you have to do is pray to God for peace and paradise on Earth, change your inner self, re-evaluate your life, stop participating in the rat race, stop shopping in supermarkets, avoid most medicines, stop buying cars or unnecessary luxuries to cripple their economy, avoid all sick religions and churches, and stop participating in any strange religious rituals. Love all people, animals and plants, follow your conscience, live in harmony with your mind and spirit, do not discriminate against races, do not take part in war and em-

³⁰ Famous Polish politician in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

brace the Muslims, Jews, Chinese, Russians, black people and other nationalities and races, and wish them well. Do not watch TV or listen to the radio. Read a lot of useful books, share your knowledge with others and believe in your power. And, most importantly, stay clear of all banks and forget about loans. Let them go bankrupt one by one (Prawda.xlx.pl, 2010).

All of the above posts highlight a political perspective that should not be underestimated; we might even go as far as to say that the requirements of the ongoing political debate are involved. In fact, since Ernst Cassirer's (1946) analysis of politics according to the categories of contemporary magic and Clifford Geertz's (1973) analysis thereof according to cultural categories, it has become obvious that politics is deeply rooted in objectivised symbols, myths and worldviews. Reactions, interpretations and comments always carry some of the local culture, and the same time, they enrich and modify that culture and update it with new content (Adeney-Risakotta, 2009). Even someone who is unfamiliar with the Polish political scene will recognise which environments the authors of the quoted posts are representing. However, this does not mean that such posts are the only sources to suggest explanations related to mystical participation, as the representatives of the other side of the political scene also seem to possess this type of cognitive sensitivity:

The floods are God's punishment for Wawel. Notice that the flood hit the electorate of the former Samoobrona party, who now support Jaroslaw Kaczynski³¹. So ask yourselves: even if this is a far-fetched theory, would you like a member of PiS to be your neighbour?! Would that not be a bit scary? (Nadblog wszystkich blogow, 2010).

Such opinions do not appear in a void, but in the blogosphere – the contemporary political forums in which anyone can respond to the previous person's post. For instance, the following post, "God is demanding retribution – for the crosses we took down, for our wickedness, bigotry and greed" was met with the following response: "You are the bigot here, as are the clergy. God is punishing us for your hubris." It is only natural that diagnoses of a disaster will mention God's punishment in a country where the vast majority of citizens declare themselves as Catholics. The issue lies in which political option supported by the Catholics is responsible for the disaster. Accusing others means absolving the accusers of guilt, and consequently, helps to alleviate the tensions caused by the disaster. Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, when he addressed the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia and the similar explanations for it that were being suggested, observed that the convincing meanings accepted by the community altered both the meaning of the memory of the event and the future of the community (which is shaped by its memory) (Adeney-Risakotta, 2009, p. 229). In our case, this primarily concerns political communities. Other posts on the forums

³¹ Famous politician and brother of President Lech Kaczyński who died in the plane crash, as well as leader of the party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS).

support the political ecumenism: “Fellow Poles! There is nothing left for us but to look to God’s mercy. Let us fall to our knees and beg God to save us. We must all come back to our Lord and King!!! Mary, Queen of Peace, save us!!!” (InteriaFakty, 2010). Therefore, one may even claim that the flood performed the sacred role of salvation, which should be a waking call for the people, and that the explanations of the flood have helped to avoid the ever-present issue of theodicy.

However, it is worth noting that the internet forums provide explanations not only for the origins of natural disasters, but also for their eschatological meanings. According to one person posting on a forum dedicated to the predictions of Nostradamus, “Truth be told, the end of the world has already started: the floods in Australia and Poland are the beginning.” Unsurprisingly, such interpretations terrify those who are only just approaching adulthood:

So will the world end or not? I am asking because I do not know if I should bother studying for school. If I am not going to make it to the end of high school anyway, then maybe at least I will get my driver’s licence... Screw all of this.

Another young person added: “It is my 16th birthday this year. I am not even going to live to 18.” Fortunately, a clever, and likely more mature, optimist reassures the teenage pessimists: “You are all sick in the head... Our duty is to do everything we can to survive this cataclysm and rebuild civilisation! Instead of dropping everything, learn how to build a generator and an electrical engine!” (Koniec świata, 2010).

We are apparently dealing here with an entire Pandora’s box filled with the negative dimension of Lévy-Bruhl’s mysticism. Is there not a single positive aspect to be found? In his work written a few decades after his *Notebooks on Primitive Mentality* (1949), Lévy-Bruhl states:

In every human mind, whatever its intellectual development, there subsists an ineradicable fund of primitive mentality (...). It is not likely that it that it will ever disappear (...). For with it would perhaps disappear, perhaps, poetry, art, metaphysics, and scientific invention – almost everything, in short, that makes for the beauty and grandeur of human life (as cited in Tambiah, 1990, pp. 91-92).

It is to the fund of this mentality that we owe the existence of beliefs about conspiracies and visions of a world created through a divine act, as well as the beauty of this world expressed through philosophy and poetry, and the harmony of scientific theories that keeps this world an unfathomable mystery. For what would the extraordinary achievements of thought be if not for the slightly uglier ones that provide a background for the existence of the axiology of human presence in the world. In fact, it is difficult to discern the proportions of the positive and the negative; all assessments thereof depend on a given individual or a collective viewpoint, which is impossible to demonstrate in any ulti-

mate form. Even Archimedean mechanics have failed to demonstrate it. Thus, we should abandon the hope that any final form can be found within the field of anthropology.

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