



ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE CSANGOS ON THE SIRET VALLEY

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Abstract: *Moldavian Csangos represent a minority group whose ethnic belonging is quite controversial. The issue is whether they are Romanians or Hungarians. This study tries to evaluate their ethnic identity and to outline the identity profile of the csangos on the Siret Valley. I have taken 57 interviews in several villages from Bacau County (Cleja, Galbeni, Faraoani etc). The questionnaire contained the following questions: What do you understand by the term “csangos”?; Do you accept this term? Why?; What’s your native language?; What language do you speak at home with your family and children?; Do you speak Hungarian? Where did you learn it?; Would you like your children to learn Hungarian?; Do you agree with Hungarian being introduced in schools and church?; What’s your nationality in your own opinion? The data have been analyzed following the monographic method developed by Dimitri Gusti (1968). Thus, I have studied the following aspects: geographic, historic, demographic, linguistic, ethnographic highlighting those relevant for the ethnic identity. I have analysed and explained the term “csangos” and I have emphasized the acceptance/ rejection aspect of the above mentioned term.*

Keywords: *ethnic identity, minority group, Csángós, nationality*

1. THE CONTEXT

The right to preserve a culture, a native language, a distinct religion is supported by several international documents. The *Moldavian Csángós* represent a "minority group", almost unknown outside Romania and Hungary. The research history on the *Csángós* is long, full of events and often full of useless searches. The *Csángós* have drawn attention by their strange, "Hungarian", dialect, which is still heard today in many villages of Moldavia. This dialect has caused controversies that have not ended until today. According to some theories, the *Csángós*'s ancestors, of an unknown origin, could have been assimilated into Hungarian in unknown circumstances; more recently, it has been alleged that the vast majority of *Csángós* have been denationalized by the Romanians in Moldavia. There has been an ongoing debate on the linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the *Csángós*.

The publication of the first works dedicated to the *Csángós* phenomenon marks

the beginning of trying to resolve this controversial issue. Rev. Dr. Iosif Petru M. Pal published in 1942, the work "*Originea catolicilor din Moldova și franciscanii, păstorii lor de veacuri*", and in 1946 the volume "*Problema iradierii românilor din Transilvania în Principatele Române*", written by Petru Râmneanțu. Later on, Nicolae Iorga in his work *România cum era până la 1918. II. Moldova și Dobrogea* (1949, 9) concluded, in relation to their traditional costume, that "they are not nearly as foreign as you might suspect." A representative work is "*Originea ceangăilor din Moldova* (1985); its author, Dumitru Mărtinaș (1985, 36)", "went up against the widely accepted theses of the bitterness and anger of someone who sees himself misunderstood even by his own people, dismantling methodically, *sina era et studio*, the false allegations, often made up out of dishonesty rather than ignorance, earnestly repeating his truth and, in the same time, arguing it little by little". The Hungarian researchers see the *Csángós* as a population of Hungarian origin. On the other hand, the

Csángós do not consider themselves Hungarian, but Catholics or Romanian Catholics by race and religion, as recorded also in "Descrierea Moldovei" (1716/1973) by Dimitrie Cantemir. Being asked about their nationality, Cantemir's "Hungarians" avoided to say they are Hungarian, "they called themselves Catholics" (82), a tradition held up till today in Moldavia.

2. METHODOLOGY

The overall aim of this article is to evaluate the ethnic identity of the *Csángós* population of the Siret Valley, using historic, demographic and ethnographic arguments. The study is an exploratory one; I conducted interviews in *Csángós*' villages in Bacău County; I looked for and analyzed various social documents, I read different studies referring to this area. I conducted 43 semi-directive interviews in several villages: Cleja, Galbeni, Pustiana, Fundu Răcăciuni, Gioseni (Tamași) and Bacău. The data I obtained are answers to the following questions:

I interviewed people from all social categories, gathering information and opinions about the speakers. Interviews have been recorded and then wholly transcribed. I've tried to capture those aspects that are relevant to ethnic identity. I was interested in speeches about the ethnic identity of *Csángós* that considered themselves to be Romanians. I have found it necessary to explain what the term *Csángós* means: what specialists mean by this term, both the Romanian and the Hungarian ones, as well as local people. I also considered it important to emphasize the phenomenon of acceptance / rejection of that term. The linguists have delivered over time a series of assumptions about the meaning of the term *Csángós*. In Romanian, *Csángós* is virtually meaningless, which proves that it isn't of Romanian origin (Mărtinaș, 1985, 35). It is said that the word could have been derived from the word *csángók*, meaning "crossing", "mixed" or an botanical equivalent - "hybrids", considered less pejorative. Another hypothesis is that the name *csángó* comes from the Hungarian verb *csáng*

meaning "to wander here and there", "to move away". According to others, the word would mean "man of noble, high-born" (Coșa, 1996, 61). Generally, the term is used according to the researcher's preference for one of the variants, either the pejorative or the non-pejorative meaning.

3. RESEARCH

V.M. Ungureanu (1986, 105) proposed only the use of the name "Romanian Catholics": "the vast majority of Catholic inhabitants of Moldavia consider and call themselves Romanian Catholics. The nature of the term *Csángó* is here bookish and mostly unknown ... Those who know it and I'm thinking of Bacău's inhabitants, reject it as the most serious offense that one could bring them, and in my opinion, this rejection is closely related to the degenerated sense suggested by the etymology of that word."

Analyzing responses to the first two questions, we can say that *Csángós* are Romanian Catholics in a rate of about 80 percent. The 7-8 percent who still relate the name *Csángó* to the ethnonym Hungarian are exclusively part of the Hungarian population. Only 0.4 percent of the *Csángós* consider themselves as being something else, different from the Romanians and the Hungarians, without being able to define it. Out of the total of 26 percent people who consider themselves or are regarded by others as *Csángós* in Moldavia, 88.7 percent consider that they are firstly Romanians and 6.5 percent consider to be primarily Hungarians; 1, 5 percent consider themselves primarily *Csángós*, the rest of 0.4 percent consider themselves Germans and 2.9 percent do not respond. In conclusion, *Csángós* define themselves as being Romanians in a proportion of about 89 percent.

Csángós have drawn people's attention to themselves by a dialect that can be still heard today in some villages in Moldavia. It is well-known that language is a powerful indicator of identity. From the linguistic point of view there have been strong controversy regarding the origin of the local dialect that *Csángós*

speak. *Csángó* linguistic phenomenon involves two conflicting aspects: the Romanian origin based in Transylvania and the Hungarian layout, as a result of the process of turning them into *Szelcklers*. Dumitru Mărtinaş (1985.60) emphasizes the importance of paying attention to both aspects as "paying attention to only one of the two aspects to the detriment of other, as happened in all past research, the inevitable result was the failure to fully elucidate the origin of *Csángós*, despite all the effort made by researchers. Only the Hungarian aspect of the problem used to be revealed while the Romanian origin was ignored or concealed, and that happened because certain interests, not related to a scientific approach, decided it".

Some of the interviewed subjects, when asked what language they usually use at home, answered that they used both *Csángós* and Romanian. Others said they used only Romanian. "Romanian, of course. But we speak this *Csángós* too. We mix Romanian and *Csángós* words to better understand. As for the Romanian language...we are a bit confused because we have not spoken it all the time. We have spoken it only with our children. I for one did not want them to speak *Csángós*... they have picked it up from us..."

The native language of *Csángós* is the Romanian language. "Romanian. How should I say *Csángós* is my native language? We picked up from our parents but this is not a language... It does not exist. Romanian is our native language. We are Romanian." Very few of the subjects can speak Hungarian, but they don't know to read or write. Many Catholics in Moldavia have been in Hungary to work. Some of them have learned to speak the language in Covasna and Harghita counties. They don't watch TV in Hungarian, don't listen or read news in Hungarian. Most of them do not know this language.

In *Csángós* villages of the Siret Valley it has been proposed they should introduce the Hungarian language in schools as a language of instruction and in churches as well. Thus, I asked the subjects whether they agreed with the Hungarian language in school and church.

Most of the subjects didn't agree with an education in the Hungarian language, and those who agreed, meant only the introduction of Hungarian language classes, seen as a foreign language. "I do mind. Yes, because this is not an international language. The Hungarian language is known only by Hungarians from Transylvania and by the Hungarians from Hungary. We do not even agree with the introduction of Hungarian language classes in school. Our children have learnt Romanian, and now attend school and to be fooled. They should study international languages like: English, French .."

Regarding the religious service and, therefore, the language they would like it to be officiated, the vast majority of respondents (98 percent) would like the Romanian language to be used in church. "I do not agree. Because I do not understand it. I do not want to go to the Mass and not to understand what the priest says ..."

The fact that the ancestors of the present inhabitants of the Siret Valley are Transylvanians is eloquently proved by the ethnographic features of area. Analyzing the elements of material culture of *Csángós* population, you meet everywhere Romanian characteristics: the way of organizing the household, the use of terms and names, decorative ornaments, all are Romanian. Transylvanian reverberations are evident both in the calendar customs, and within the family. On festivals, on New Year's Eve, at popular dancing, weddings and funerals, *Csángós* wear the Romanian popular costume, preserved from centuries from ancestors, with all its characteristics: the Dacian wrinkled neck shirt, belts, peasant sandals, long peasant coats, sheepskin coats. We must emphasize, first of all, the unity and uniqueness given by the use of the same raw materials in manufacturing parts of the popular costume. We can add also a second element, the same cut in straight pieces. In the same time, the ornamental elements in diamond shapes on *Csángó* popular costume pieces, as well as the styling of geometric patterns for elements taken from nature are characteristic for the Romanian folk costume and ornamentation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

While in the past, ethnic identity could be regarded as self-defining of individuals, deriving from joining a specific group - which was given by birth: language, culture, history of relations between their group and other groups in the society, currently this meaning cannot be fully accepted. Due to fast modernization, evolution of technology and increased mobility, the individual can choose his own ethnic identification. Most people are members of multiple groups, and their membership is emphasized or minimized depending on the situation. Family legacy can be irrelevant to an individual belonging to an ethnic minority if it's more important for him, psychologically speaking, to belong to the majority culture. Also, there are situations when there is no correspondence (or there is some little correspondence) between the identity which is psychologically important for the individual and how it is perceived by the others.

The environment consists of social relations on the one hand and, on the other hand, of existential problems that relate to social, political, philosophical and cosmological dilemmas. The meaning of identity occurs when one makes clear some of these problems and learn how to place the entire configuration of social relations and ontological questions.

Objectives attributes are fundamental to guide and regulate collective behavior, but don't give a complete understanding of the ethnic identity. Therefore, I think the subjective dimension is very important because it focuses on psychological aspects - the individual identification (or lack of it) with his own ethnic group. Thus, it is now possible to analyze all generations belonging to minorities whose lifestyle may be the same as most people, but still maintain different degrees of identification with the original group.

Ethnic identity is not fixed and does not represent a permanent commitment, an unshakable one. It is not necessarily unique: ethnic identities can coexist. In conclusion, we

believe that ethnic identity is one of many identifying strategies. Ethnicity is only an option for identity and its meaning is very important for the individual.

Hungarian researchers see the *Csángós* as a population of Hungarian origin. On the other hand, *Csángós* do not identify themselves with the Hungarians, but as catholic or Romanian catholic by race and by religion, as recorded by Dimitrie Cantemir in "Descrierea Moldovei" (1716/1973). Asked about their nationality, Cantemir's "Hungarians" avoided to say that they were Hungarians, "they called themselves Catholics" (82), a custom preserved until today in Moldavia.

To understand the situation today, we must take into consideration the approaches on the origin and evolution of these communities: the origin of *Csángós* and their ancestors, their original homeland and native language. The study is organized and presented according to the objectives presented, each analyzed frame has been completed with "local people, voice" to the extent of the information obtained from interviews. I considered it necessary, before proceeding to a detailed presentation of each frame, to explain what the term *Csángó* means: what Romanian and Hungarian specialists as well as local people understand by this term; I've considered it important to highlight the acceptance / rejection of this name.

Settled down by several steps in Moldavia, the *Csángós* are of Transylvanian origin, forced by circumstances to pass through a process of forced Magyarization. Before finally being liquidated as Romanian ethnics, they were forced to pass the Carpathians in Moldavia, where they could preserve their language, customs, their entire Romanian lifestyle, forming and developing a strong and alert ethnic consciousness demonstrating their membership of the Romanian nation.

Statistical data shows too the Romanian ethnic origin of the *Csángós*. I do not know the sources quoted by Hungarian experts. They point out in their work a large number of *Csángó* -Hungarians in this area: they mention

figures varying from 60,000 to 300,000 people. Documents provided by Romanian researchers, published in scientific works and official documents containing public figures are being completely ignored by the Hungarian "experts". Summarizing grouped data on the grounds of nationality, native language and religious denomination, we get to the conclusion their majority,... about 235,000 people - said they were Romanian Catholics, while the total number of Hungarian Catholics does not exceed 5,000 people.

In terms of ethnographic, research results show that the "Csángós" are Romanian from Transylvania. This fact is obvious in all events and traditional customs. Houses are built in the Romanian traditional type house, with all the changes that have occurred over time. The interior designs show the way of thinking and of living specific to the Romanian people: the selection of certain folk motifs, the preference for certain ornamental compositions. Catholic peasants in Moldavia wear the same costumes as their fellow Orthodox. This can also be seen in areas with mixed population. This is the Romanian traditional costume inherited from ancestors. And if the Catholics traditional costume has drawn the attention, this happened because it was much better preserved than in Orthodox communities and not by some features that differentiate them.

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