



PRESERVING ETHNIC SYMBOLISM THROUGH CULTURAL TRADITIONS: EXAMPLES FROM THE MULTIETHNIC AREA OF BIRDA-MORAVITA PLAIN, SOUTH-WEST ROMANIA

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***Abstract:** Research on ethnic symbolism has drawn particular attention to analyzing different cultural attributes in preserving ethnic identity. The present article aims to highlight the maintenance of traditions and customs with symbolic function in the case of the ethnic groups from the multi-ethnic area of the Birda-Moravița Plain, south-west Romania, and tries to answer the questions: a) to what extent do traditions and customs as ethnic symbols remain ethnic identity marks at the local level, and b) which of these customs are still active nowadays for the major ethnic groups. There is a known tendency for considerable attenuation of the ethnic specificities to certain cultural habits of ethnicities, due to a variety of globalization causes, and the findings of the present research come to confirm the cultural (and mainly the religious) elements that trigger the persistence of traditions in the researched area.*

***Key words:** ethnic symbolism, customs, traditions, ethnic groups, Birda-Moravița Plain, Romania*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability of each ethnic group to maintain its ethnic specificity and uniqueness within the other ethnic groups, to maintain the degree of originality that determines it to identify itself as an independent ethnic group, is generated usually through ethnic symbolism. Currently, each community maintains more or less its identity through the language spoken in the family or in the groups of friends, the specific folk costumes and the celebration of holidays, ethnic music and gastronomy.

Theoretical issues on the social construction of ethnic groups have been much debated worldwide. The position of this study is constructivist, based on the notion of ethnic symbols. Starting with the great theorists on ethnic symbolism (Gans, 1979; Smith, 1988) and from its geographical cultural impact (Creswell and Holloway, 2009) to mapping the forms of manifestation of identity and multiculturalism at Banat regional



level (see Cretan, Turnock and Woudstra, 2008), this study proposes to answer the questions: a) to what extent do traditions and customs as ethnic symbols remain ethnic identity marks at the local level, and b) which of these customs are still active nowadays for the major ethnic groups. It is known the tendency of considerable diminution of the ethnic specificities to customs and traditions in multi-ethnic areas in the world both in the case of the majority ethnic group as well as of different minority ethnic groups. Through empirical examples at the local level, this study highlights what are the elements that underlie the diminution of the traditions or the preserving of some customs for major ethnic groups in the area of the Birda-Moravita Plain, a multicultural space at the border between Romania and Serbia.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

By ethnic symbol it can be understood the way in which the elements of capital importance for the ethnic specific of each community are preserved. The space with all its locations is also a very important factor in maintaining the identity marks, because the specific customs and traditions are manifested most often in the central part of the localities - the place where the buildings specific to culture as symbol are located. (cultural institutions, churches etc.). From this point of view, we can say that human cultural actions give significance to places. All these notions confirm some theoretical aspects of Cresswell and Holloway (2009), regarding the polarization of human activities in the cultural space, mainly in the center of localities (see also Covaci, 2016; Covaci, 2018). According to Gans' symbolic theory (1979), people express a desire to return to that past which allows them to manifest their specificity through schools, churches, the media or other symbols that thus receive the value of an ethnic identity. This aspect can be verified in the case of numerous ethnic groups in multiethnic spaces (Covaci, 2016). Smith (2009) considers that the cultural elements of the symbol, myth and traditions are of major importance in the analysis of ethnic identity and in establishing the specificity of an ethnic group. The same author (Smith, 2009) assumes that the establishment of differences between ethnic communities is achieved only through the existence of language, religion and customs deeply rooted in the consciousness of individuals (p.25).

The basic method used to produce the article was the unstructured interview. The sample used in the research is made up of 52 persons (53.6% of the female gender) aged between 19 and 90 years (the predominant age-group in the localities taken as landmark being 40-60 years) in six localities : Deta, Banloc, Soca, Breșteța, Ciacova and Giera (see Table 1 & Table 2).

Table 1. Distribution of interviewees according to professions and age groups

years old / profession	19-65 years		More than 65 years	
	Fem.	Mal	Fem.	Mal.
Peasantry	2	3		
Workers in the industry	6	6		
Intellectuals	12	5		
Retirees			8	3
Other category	6	1		

Source: data obtained from field work

Table 2. Distribution of the interviewed persons according to locality

Locality	Banloc	Deta	Soca	Breștea	Giera	Ciacova
No of interviewees	6	12	13	14	5	2

Source: data obtained from field work

Depending on the area of extension of each ethnicity at regional level as well as according to the profession of ethnicities (industry workers, peasants, intellectuals, pensioners), the selection of interviewees was made. For example, with the Bulgarians I spoke only in Breștea, and with the Ukrainians only in Soca, these being the localities where these ethnicities are found, while for the Romanians and Serbs it had been a much wider area of analysis, these being found in almost all the localities under analysis. The interview information was completed with active observation (face-to-face discussions with the subjects) and social interaction.

3. RESULTS: TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS AS ETHNIC SYMBOLS IN THE BIRDA-MORAVIȚA PLAIN

Birda-Moravița Plain is part of the historical Banat, being located in the south of the Banat Plain, on the border with Serbia (Covaci, 2016). It is one of the most multi-ethnic areas in Banat (Crețan, Turnock, Woudstra, 2008), with 10 ethnic groups active in the area (Covaci, 2016). We will present the specificity of the most important of these ethnic groups as part of the settlements we have chosen. We will present the traditions and customs that have remained active for the Romanian majority, but also for the Hungarians, Serbians, the Roma people, the Bulgarians and the Ukrainians.

Representatives of *the Romanian ethnic group* have stated that, although there are many symbols that highlight the specificity of the Romanian ethnicity, most of them have lost their meaning and are only kept on some occasions. Among these we can list: the language that is maintained both as a literary language and as a dialect from different regions of the country (Banat-most frequent dialect, Moldovan, Transylvanian, Oltenic, etc.), some holiday traditions (at Christmas, specific carols, carving) the pig with all the necessary activities, the decoration of the fir tree, the arrival of Santa Claus, etc., at Easter the lamb cutting and the painting of the red eggs, etc.). A very important element in the life of Romanians from all the localities under analysis is represented by Rugă, with specific Banana music, dances and the Banat folk port as well as the specific Banat gastronomy that is combined with both the gastronomic elements of the people coming from the other regions of the country and with gastronomic elements of other ethnicities. The customs related to baptism, wedding and funeral, along with historical symbols such as the country's coat of arms, hymn or flag, have, in equal measure, always had a defining role in the Romanian ethnic community (Covaci, 2016). The above mentioned issues are based on the statements of the Romanian ethnic groups, such as the selection below:

- M.A., 59 years old, female, from Deta: "I think there are symbols of which the most important are: Romanian prayer with Banat music and dances, Easter and Christmas customs and traditions";

- I.C., 37 years old, female, from Giera: "yes, I consider the popular port, the popular music and the Romanian gastronomy as important as ethnic symbols";

▪ S.O., 53 years old, female, from Banloc : "I consider the most important ethnic symbols would be the traditions and customs of the holidays, the specific dialect of the different regions of the country, the gastronomy as well as the specific traditions of baptism, weddings and funerals".

The statements made by Romanian ethnicities attest to their desire to manifest their ability to belong to their own group, as noted by most ethnic groups worldwide (see, for example, African-American populations in Phinney's study, 1999), that is, a common space that is an element of particular importance and closeness due to the common language and customs (see similar examples in Canadian, Asian, US, etc. - Seamon, 2015).

Bulgarians and Ukrainians represent the ethnic community that still largely respects the symbols that define and characterize their ethnicity. These are two small ethnic communities, which retain their specificity. From this point of view, it is clear from the Bulgarian statements that they speak their language both in the family and when socializing with other members of the community at different events. However, the village of Breștea represents the ethnic nucleus in which the symbols that identify and maintain *the Bulgarian ethnicity* are best manifested. In addition to speaking the language, the church represents an element of defining importance for the Bulgarian ethnic group, as evidenced by the statements of our interviewees:

▪ B.I., 72 years old, male, from Denta: "Bulgarians are very faithful, every Sunday they go to church, in general, all dressed in popular costume";

▪ I.M., 63 years old, female, from Deta: "we put a great emphasis on the church, every evening, especially the elderly go and pray to the" rosals ".

It results that the Bulgarian ethnicity maintains the characteristic of each Bulgarian holiday, this being a proof of maintaining the most important defining ethnic symbols in order to preserve the ethnic specificity (see Gans., 1979; Smith, 2009; Covaci 2016).

For example, some of the interviewees confess the following:

▪ M.M., 49, female from Deta states that: "There is the tradition of Lazarus that is held on the Sunday of flowers, when the girls dressed in popular costume walk with the basket and receive raw unpainted eggs, handkerchiefs, money and chocolate".

▪ MM, 49 years old, female, from Deta considers that "near the spring of Bulgaria I keep Farshul - the Saxon name of the holiday - "fasching" - comes from the word" vastschang "fastschank, in free translation" last drink "last party, last chef before from the beginning of the Passover. - children's holiday, a show with masks to drive away the evil spirits of winter; at Deta de Fărșang the headquarters is circumvented until the center of the city with traditional music played on accordion and saxophone. A specific song is called 'Na Farsangj' ('La fărșang' – in Romanian). Returning to the headquarters takes place Burborenj (a game in the water with bubbles) and then takes place the specific farsh dance where the masks dance with the others ". The same person shares some specific Christmas holiday customs when the boys go to Bethlehem with neighbors and relatives. Every boy has the scene of Bethlehem. "

Other interesting items are captured below by two other interviewees:

▪ H.A, 44 years old, female, from Denta, added that: "there is still a tradition called Cucenete, (the day when he enters the post of Christmas) in which the children bring their relatives boiled corn sweetened with sugar, corn that is eaten and headquarters where sugar and chocolate or Novena tradition added before Christmas,

more precisely 9 days before we come to the Bulgarian House to pray, every evening for another family”;

- P.R., 45 years old, male, Deta, added that "before entering the Easter Lent, a plate of water is placed on money that the children must take out with their mouths, after which they receive money".

Thus, it can be said that the close relationship between the notion of ethnic identity and the preservation of ethnic-specific symbols is enhanced by these statements of the Bulgarian locals (according to the theories of Gans, 1979 and Smith, 2009), emphasizing the relevance of the space in which the ethnic groups live. they live and carry on their business. From this point of view, we can say that the space represents a support on which the Bulgarian ethnic group manages to constantly renew its specificity; it thus receives the value of the place of manifestation of identity ", according to Seamon's theory (2015, p. 25). It is also a way of maintaining solidarity within one's own community (Banks, 1996) or maintaining ideas specific to one's own group (Phinney, 2007). From this point of view, the notion of space can also be identified with the concept of 'home', home in the sense of place - that someone belongs to a place, based on the preservation and maintenance of customs and traditions (see also Covaci, 2016).

The ethnic symbols found in the Maramures area are very well preserved by the *Ukrainian ethnicity*. The Ukrainians have declared that they still maintain their language, especially the elderly, and in Soca there is a school with grades I-IV, which teaches the Ukrainian language, which represents an unique way of preserving the ethnicity. A.C., 32 years old, male, considers that "in the locality the Ukrainian language is done, we want our children to know the language in the future and to maintain the Ukrainian specific". Keeping the folk costumes for celebrations and events is another element of maintaining the ethnic identity for the Ukrainians (there being a specific Ukrainian folk costumes for each locality), along with respecting the church and the holiday traditions and all the specific ethnic customs. Here are some surprising examples of interviewees in this regard:

- AC, 32 years old, male, Deta: “Easter and Christmas traditions are strictly observed in the Ukrainians, so that on Christmas Eve 12 dishes are fasted, symbolizing the 12 apostles and the twelve months of the year, the family he prays, he sings a very old carol, then he eats. At the end the children go through the village, to the exit prepared by the Serbian ethnic group, after which the church choir goes to each family. Also, at Christmas, Viflaem is respected, the choir goes from house to house and sings around a ready-made family home”.

- N.V., 54 years old, female, Soca: “Prayer is especially important for Ukrainians, the job is done in Ukrainian and we all go dressed in Ukrainian folk costume. Towards evening the festival begins. There is a cultural-artistic program with specific music and dance in the area of Crasnei, which is attended by Ukrainians from Remetea Mică, Pietroasa, Criciova, Știuca, Dragomirești.”

‘The Passover’ also holds the value of symbol for the Ukrainian ethnicity, for the whole community, being very important the sanctification of the food and the preservation of the popular port, as stated by A.C., male, Ukrainian from Soca “ "on the night of the Resurrection, only Utrenia is sung. The resurrection, after which the world goes home. In the morning at 8 o'clock everyone comes (in proportion of over 80% dressed in folk costumes), each with the basket. The liturgy is made then the world goes out into the church yard. People sit on families (in front of the mother and father and in

the back the young ones), in front of each family being the basket in which it is found: Easter in the middle of which there is a candle, red eggs, garlic, cheese, onion, horseradish with red beet, boiled and smoked ham and a bottle of red wine. Pasca sits on a special cloth woven at war specific to the Maramures area. The food is holy, the people go home and on that day they only eat the holy food. "Also, the gastronomy specific to the area of Ukrainians in Maramures has been also maintained in the village of Soca, thus being a symbol of the Ukrainian ethnicity. All interviewees declared that in the family they use mixed or predominantly Ukrainian cuisine. In conclusion, the possibility of manifesting identity in the space of which they are currently part of, Ukrainians respect local holidays and events with symbolic value.

The most important customs of *the Serbian ethnic group* is marked by 'the slicing of the bread'. This custom is preserved even in the communities where the number of Serbs is small (Giera, Soca, Livezile, Ciacova, Sângeorge etc). The customs of the Serbs are maintained especially in Deta, mainly those customs relating to 'slicing of bread' for St. Sava, the holy protector of the Serbs. Every year there is a 'godfather' who slices the bread. An apple, along with pieces of 'the colac' (i.e a sort of bread), is offered as symbol to the ones who have the task of giving birth to a new baby in the next year." (D.T., 24 years old, female, Deta). Basically, we can say that the language spoken in families or less commonly encountered in the community for the elderly who are part of purely Serbian families, together with the slicing of the 'colac', are the only symbols that are still preserved in the localities where the number of Serbs is quite small (Giera, Gad, Sângeorge, Ciacova, Livezile) (see also Covaci, 2016). An important religious symbol for the Serb ethnicity is Lazarus, which is held "on Saturday before 'the Flowers Sunday', when the children receive the bell with the flag of Serbia at the throat and go with the priest to pick up the piece of willow, which is shared as vernacular tradition," states D.T., 25, female, Soca, of Serbian ethnicity. The Sveti Nicol ensemble (folk dance named after the saint protector of the Serbs, Saint Nikolas) represents an attempt to maintain the ethnic identity of the Serbs. The Serbian ensemble is composed of three groups: the small group, the general school (the middle group) and the high school (the large group). The church group does not necessarily count among the strongest symbols of the Serbian community, Serbs attend the church only on special occasions, which results from the statement of D.T., 24 years, female, from Deta: "The service in church is held in Serbian but Serbs do not frequent churches, maybe only the oldest ones". At the same time, S.B, 32 years old, male, from Ciacova states that: "in Ciacova, around 10-15 people go to church on Sunday and at St. Sava a few more come, generally elderly people". Within the Banij Dan, the badnjak - a young oak log that was cut from the forest - is now reduced to only a bunch of oak branches - signifying the entrance of Jesus Christ in the world, the burning of Badnjac representing the warmth of the heart of Christ and which for the Serbian ethnic group has always acquired the value of symbol (Buruleanu, Trăia, 2012, p. 219; Covaci, 2016).

The character of pregnant natives gives the Serb ethnicity the desire to maintain their ethnic identity in the place where they are identified through celebrations and events with a symbolic value, all of which now are under the phenomenon of increasing aging and increasing mixed families.

Among the most important symbols defining *the Hungarian ethnicity* are the preservation of the language - for the role of language in the social construction of ethnicities see also Brubaker, 1996, Phinney, 2007 - especially for the elderly, as well as the traditions specific to Catholic holidays: for example, sprinkling girls with water or

perfume on the second day of Easter, is evidenced by the statement of K.I., 55, female, Deta: "Both Easter and Christmas in Deta are respected traditions by the Hungarians. For Christmas 'we walk to Bethlehem', meaning the children walk from house to house and bring the blessing of the Lord. Also, with the 4 weeks before Christmas, the Advent is celebrated, the ritual of lighting the candle with specific songs, a tradition that is kept both in the church and in the houses of the people". Other holiday traditions that are still respected by the Hungarian community include: Hungarian 'Ruga', when Hungarian music is brought and church service is held but the number of Hungarians is low in Giera and Partoş. Most of Hungarian cultural activities take place to a large extent in the town of Deta, as we find out from a statement made by K.G., 45 years, male, from Deta: "For the Hungarian 'ruga', the children walk on streets dressed in Hungarian folk costume and Hungarian-specific music is played". On the other hand, M.M., female, 49 years, also from Deta, considers that: "The tradition of 'Sânziene' is nice here, when four boxes with flowers and wheat are made, boxes that are sanctified and kept from one year to another. The following year the old ones are burned and new ones are put in place".

The town of Deta is mentioned for its cultural activities as well as for a school with classes I-IV with teaching in Hungarian, class which has a dance team. For example, K.M, 53, female, Deta, considers that: "In Deta I co-ordinate the Margareta folk ensemble, which consists of Hungarian folk songs and dances. The name of the ensemble was given in honor of the teacher Margareta, who had countless generations." The Buzavirag dance group, established in 1999, which has 20 choreographers having for each choreography an area-specific popular port, an internationally renowned group, is invited every year to the Bordany, a locality in Hungary, and to other countries as Germany, Belgium, France, Turkey. This can be considered as another symbolic element in maintaining the Hungarian identity (Buruleanu and Traia, 2012, p.146). The ability of the representatives to interact in the society represents for the Hungarian ethnic group a way of manifesting the ethnic specificity. As Massey (2005) mentions, space becomes place, that is, in the case of Hungarians analyzed in Deta, the space for human interaction often becomes place - an area dear to the respective ethnicity (Covaci, 2016).

The Roma ethnicity, although it is a relatively compact ethnicity, with specific features, is not noticeable by certain cultural symbols or artistic cultural activities in the analyzed villages, with the exception of specific prayers in very few localities. Most of Roma in Banloc, Giera, Ciacova, Deta, Jebel, Voiteg speak their language, although it is not a general feature, as there are Roma especially in the urban environment of Banat, who do not declare their ethnicity nor speak their language because of stigma or other elements specific to the environment in which they live (see Cretan and Powell, 2018). Older women keep their specific port with long skirts and scarves. In contrast, traditions related to marriage are still preserved in some communes where Roma live today (Banloc, Giera). In order to maintain these traditions, the girls marry at very young ages (12-14 years old). From the desire of cultural integration, there are also cases in which a sharp loss of identity is noticed. There are Roma who do not keep anything that maintains their traditional identity in localities such as Banloc, Deta, Moravita, Padureni, Birda, as it appears from S.M.'s statement, 65 years old, male, living in Banloc: "Some of the Roma do not keep their folk costumes and language anymore. Either we have been assimilated by the Romanians, or modernism has influenced us. But some of us try to be employed in the factories in the area but it is a bit difficult for

us because we are still marginalized as Gypsies". The problem of the circulation of preconceived ideas in the society regarding the Roma is a much debated in the current literature and between the causes of marginalization we can mention the populism manifested by certain extreme currents against the Roma but also the restoration of prejudices regarding the behavior of the Roma (Crețan and O'Brien, 2019). These can also have a long-term effect on the loss of Roma traditions. It has also been shown that social capital and interpersonal relationships as well as place attachment can play a decisive role in improving Roma poverty (Malovics et al, 2019; Mereine-Berki et al, 2017).

The only ethnicity in the analyzed area, related to the preservation of symbols in the true sense of the word, is *the German ethnicity* but the number of ethnic Germans remaining in the studied localities is very small, part of the third generation, elderly people. The only ethnic symbol that remains is the German language and the Catholic holidays. It is worth mentioning that in the past the most important symbol of the Germans was the Kirchweich, which was celebrated at the church's dedication by the participation of several young couples and by carrying out activities that with the migration of the Germans from the area disappeared. The quotation given below is relevant in this regard: "Two leading couples are chosen and on the day of the Feast the whole convoy of couples, dressed in folk costumes, go in the morning to the church. The couple marches through the streets of the village to show the Kirchweich" (P.M., 27 years old, female, from Deta).

The link between territory and space is highlighted by the customs and traditions with symbolic value that are still well preserved in the area. From this point of view, the territory of the Birda-Moravița Plain can be considered "a space endowed with a symbolic value", with a real significance, where disparities of population could be seen (Ancuta, 2008; see also Di Meo, 1998; Covaci, 2016).

Gastronomy is another type of symbol for all ethnicities in the studied area - which can be considered a key element in order to define and maintain the ethnic specificity for each community. Given the symbol value attributed in the past to the gastronomic specificity of each ethnicity, the questions which arise is: is the gastronomic specificity still preserved and has the power to influence the maintenance of ethnic identity? An example in maintaining gastronomy is given by the Ukrainian ethnicity, which shows an inclination towards maintaining the ethnic identity. In this regard, over 70% of those Ukrainian surveyed said they respect the Ukrainian cuisine not only at holidays but without any special occasion. About 20% of the interviewed Ukrainians stated that they use a mixed gastronomy, the combination being between Ukrainian and Romanian food and around 10% stated that they generally use Romanian food, the reason being the long time spent in Banat. Certainly, the existing multiculturalism in the Birda-Moravița Plain is due to some extent also to the gastronomic influence, a large part of the Romanian ethnic group declaring that they use Romanian gastronomy from Banat, with Moldovan and Oltenian influences, but also with influences from other ethnicities from Banat region (Serbian, Hungarian, German), but even Italian or French food. This gastronomic mix is due to the interaction of Romanians with all the other ethnic groups in Banat, but also is due to the work performed abroad from local ethnic groups borrowing various western-type gastronomic elements (Covaci, 2016).

4. CONCLUSIONS

It could be mentioned that in the space subject to this analysis the traditions and customs of the Romanian ethnicities as well as of the ethnic minorities are still elements that ensure the continuity of the ethnic specificities at the zonal level. Bulgarians and Ukrainians represent the ethnic groups that have the most intense preservation of ethnic symbols, the reason being the compact and unitary character of ethnicities located in a relatively small space, but with a high capacity for preserving specific traditions. Generally, the weakest manifestation as the mark of the ethnic symbols is noticeable in the fall of the Serbian and German ethnic groups, the main cause being the increasingly aging population and the smaller number of the locals who migrated abroad or/and to the urban areas. Ethnic symbols are well preserved for all the studied ethnic groups because the forefather languages are still spoken in the family or in the community, evidence of the desire to perpetuate an ethnic specific that is becoming more and more heterogeneous.

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