

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF A HARD TO COUNT POPULATION THE CASE OF MOLDAVIAN CSANGOS¹

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Motto:

*Dar ungurii aceștia, fără a fi români pe de-a întregul,
nu sunt nici pe departe așa de străini cum s-ar putea
bănuî*

(These Hungarians, not being entirely Romanian, are
not at all as strangers as they seem)

Nicolae Iorga

The Csangos/ Ceangai are a very hard to define ethnic/ religious minority from Eastern Romania (the historical province of Moldavia). The first problems appear when the Csangos are counted. According to the 1992 census, in the eight counties of the historical Romanian province of Moldavia from 276,650 inhabitants of Roman Catholic confession, 267,739 consider themselves to be of Romanian nationality, 6747 Hungarian, and 2165 Csango. In 2002 the recorded number of declared Csangos was 769. The huge discrepancy between these figures and the ones used by some scholars – 80,000 is the number of Csangos proposed by Kalman Benda; 62,000 is the number put forward by Vilmos Tanczos etc. – cannot be just a technical problem of counting and even less one of scholarly (dis)honesty.

My central hypothesis is that Csango population is caught between two antagonistic nationalizing projects; the Hungarian and the Romanian one. The Hungarian-based one is stressing the archaicity, the Middle Ages characteristics of the Csangos, transforming them, in the process, in a mirror for the modern Hungarian self. The Romanian nationalizing strategy appears, at first, as a counter strategy trying to unveil the “Hungarianisation” of Moldavian Cangos. The Csangos are, according to this point of view, essentially “hybrids”, half-denationalized Romanians, having, as the only alterity sign, differentiating them from other Greek Orthodox Romanians from Moldova, their Romano Catholic religion.

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MEDIA AND CYBER ANTHROPOLOGY

In 1993, Debra Spitulnik considered that “there is as yet no «anthropology of mass media». Even the intersection of anthropology and mass media appears rather small considering the published literature to date” (Spitulnik 1993: 293). The emerging topics that anthropologists were beginning to grapple with in 1990s were media constructions of difference, indigenous media (Ginsburg 1991, Michaels 1986, 1991, Turner 1992) and mass mediation of national identity (Spitulnik 1993: 294)

Nevertheless, media anthropology has been lately an important part of the discourse on reflexivity and objectivity and has been involved in anthropological metadiscourses that take account of the positioned nature of actors and interpreters. The fact that anthropology itself is embedded into various representational processes that do reflect political interests and the very core of this discipline consists of interrelated activities of cultural translations and interpretations puts the perspective of media anthropology in a central position.

The diversification and growth of mass media forms in the last decade, the appearance of new information and communication technologies (ICT), has posed new problems but also elicited large interest in anthropological milieus. The disappearance of the “Other” in classical, field-anthropology seems to find an analogy in the multitude of loci of sameness and otherness produced by the mirrors of mass media.

The border between studying and inventing identities can be very blurred when cyberspace becomes, in the same time, the background and the tool-kit for imagining autochthonous and/or authentic, pure ethno-national selves.

THE CYBERSPACE BETWEEN LIBERTY AND CATEGORIZATION

The fast growing of the new technologies of information and communication (ICT), like the Internet, seems to be undermining the dynamics and structure of the political, economic, cultural and national systems of modernity. Due to their capacity to transcend the temporal and spatial limits of modern types of organizations and to give new significations to social relations, this kind of technologies could lead to a major restructuring of the principal identity patterns.

The appearance of a new communicational network like the internet, a network which seems to modify, at least partially, the ways in which the members of the “network society” (Castells 1996) are interacting with each other; bring forward the problem of a new kind of social space: the cyberspace. This kind of social and cultural space is slowly becoming a legitimate domain of inquiry for cultural anthropology.

The understanding we have of this concept was determined from the start by some utopian and libertarian ideas and ideals very clearly formulated in the works of William Gibson, Mitch Kapor, John Perry Barlow etc. The way Gibson – the one who first used this term - sees it; the libertarian cyberspace is a “consensual hallucination lived on a daily basis by billions of legitimate operators... a graphic representation of the informations from all the computers’ data bases in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light arranged in the mental nonspace” (Gibson 1984: 51).

Some of the sociologists and anthropologists of the “informational society” (H. Rheingold, B. Loader etc.) believe that, using the technical support of the ICT, a paradigmatic change is going on in the configuration of the power relations between individuals, social institutions and states. This change would facilitate the disappearance, or, at least, the gradual fading of the modern forms of governance and of identification. The borders of the nation-states are, supposedly, getting weaker, more and more porous, because of the expansion of global economies and of the inadequate capacity for control that the national power centers have over the informational flux going on in the cyberspace.

Apart from this, the new politics of difference brought by the slow disappearance and weakening of the social classes and the social and cultural identities embedded in the “great narratives” of modernity, find an ideal frame in this new communicational space. The cyberspace appears, from this perspective, as a space of liberty, of multiple and disembodied identities free-floating on the World Wide Web. By an apparently small enlargement of the meaning of these “free” identities, the ethnic or para-ethnic identities that have politically failed or were marginalized by the modern nation-state system are incorporated in this category.

The perverse effect (Boudon 1993) of using a communication “tool” considered to be “more a social space than an object, so that its effects are more like Germany than like hammers” (Poster 1997: 216) can be traced in the case of the recent re-inventing of ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. The discourse of liberation, of understanding the internet, the cyberspace, as a place where the voices of individuals finally liberated from the instrumentalizing frames of modernity can freely express themselves can sometimes hide a classical attempt to categorialize groups and individuals in old fashioned, national identities.

THE CSANGO DILEMMA. A COUNTING PROBLEM

The Csangos/ Ceangai are a very hard to define ethnic/religious minority from Eastern Romania (the historical province of Moldavia). They have been recently recognized and instituted as a minority (“ethnic group” but also “nonhomogenous group of Roman Catholic people”) speaking an “archaic”

Hungarian dialect by Recommendation 1521/2001 of the Council of Europe, by the creation of various NGOs, the establishment of primary schools in Hungarian in the Bacău county etc. The first problems appear when the Csangos are counted. According to the 1992 census, in the eight counties of the historical Romanian province of Moldavia from 276,650 inhabitants of Roman Catholic confession, 267,739 consider themselves to be of Romanian nationality, 6747 Hungarian, and 2165 Csango. In 2002 the recorded number of declared Csangos was 769. The huge discrepancy between these figures and the ones used by some scholars – 80,000 is the number of Csangos proposed by Kalman Benda; 62,000 is the number put forward by Vilmos Tanczos etc. – cannot be just a technical problem of counting and even less one of scholarly (dis)honesty.

At least a part of this amazing difference in counting the Csangos can be explained by their very “strong” contextual identity. The same person can be Romanian, Csango, Roman Catholic, Hungarian etc. depending on who asks and what is at stake. Important is not just the existence of a contextual identity but its historical and anthropological underpinnings. The historical origins and even the etymology of the word “Csango” are subject to vivid debates between a “Hungarian based” and a “Romanian based” historiography.

My central hypothesis is that Csango population is caught between two antagonistic nationalizing projects; the Hungarian and the Romanian one. The Hungarian-based one is stressing the archaicity, the Middle Ages characteristics of the Csangos, transforming them, in the process, in a mirror for the modern Hungarian self. The modern national identity is naturalized, justified and also empowered by this “archaic” Csango mirror. The Csangos are to be saved as they are at the same time pure and lost, underdeveloped and essentially Hungarian.

The Romanian nationalizing strategy appears, at first, as a counter strategy trying to unveil the “Hungarianisation” of Moldavian Csangos. The Csangos are, according to this point of view, essentially “hybrids”, half-denationalized Romanians, having, as the only alterity sign, differentiating them from other Greek Orthodox Romanians from Moldova, their Romano Catholic religion.

Another hypothesis is that these two strategies are not as different as they first seem. The Romanian nationalist project is discovering the “archaicity” of the Csangos and their pure Romanian essence, while continuing to deny any possible ethnic construction of the “Csango” per se. The Hungarian nationalists are combining the tropes of purity with the ones of pollution and hybridity conveying in this way a sense of urgency for the Csangos national Hungarian redemption.

But, even if there is a certain amount of mirroring going on between the two antagonistic nationalizing projects there are important asymmetries in the nationalizing discourses and projects. What is the difference between projects like this in different historical, institutional and cultural contexts? How are the possible asymmetries within these antagonistic nationalizing projects affecting the identity (re)construction of the Csangos?

The constructing strategy is the oldest and we can trace it from 1896² onwards (Baker 1996) in a plethora of etymologies for the denomination “Csango” and of theories concerning their historical origins (Baker 1996, Baker 1997, Nouzille 2000, Tanczos 1998, Mărtinaş 1997). A large part of the Hungarian nationalizing discourse about the Csangos is combining the themes of the lost national self with the rediscovering of some imaginary archaicity waiting to be rescued. The archaicity of Hungarian-Csangos functions like a mirror through which the Hungarian nation can contemplate, in the same time, its modernity and its continuity with some supposedly pristine ethnic roots. The Csangos are distributed, in this scenario, as survivals, as the living memory of the ethnic, pre-national phase of Hungarians, conferring, in an oblique way, a kind of primordial legitimacy to Hungarian nation building by framing it as natural, spontaneous and uncontaminated with other ethnic groups. For Vilmos Tanczos the Moldavian Csangos are “the only hungarian-speaking group that was not incorporated into the Hungarian nation” (Tanczos 1998: 20) What explains away the big discrepancies between the numbers of Hungarians, Csangos and Catholics in the present day province of Moldavia is the existence of a certain historical identity corrupted by linguistic assimilation (Tanczos 1998: 21).

The Romanian nationalizing strategy appears, at first, as a counter strategy trying to unveil the “Hungarianisation” of Moldavian Csangos. In the works of Dumitru Mărtinaş, a quite disputed historian, the Csangos are essentially “hybrids” (Mărtinaş 1997), half-denationalized Romanians, having, as the only alterity sign, differentiating them from other orthodox Romanians from Moldova, their catholic religion. The two strategies are not as different as they first seem. The Romanian nationalist project is discovering the “archaicity” of the Csangos and their pure Romanian essence, while continuing to deny any possible ethnic construction of the “Csango” *per se*³. The Hungarian nationalists are combining the tropes of purity with the ones of pollution and hybridity conveying tough a sense of urgency for the Csangos national Hungarian redemption. The “folklorization” of the Csangos through a Romanian or Hungarian national objectifying gaze, implies a dislocation/relocation of the social imaginary (Castoriadis 1987) between global, local and national spaces.

Beside the fact that there is a differential access to resources by being Romanian, Hungarian, Roman Catholic or Csango, it is important to make visible the social and economic background of various “ethnic redemption” strategies. Is the “Csango” just an identity player using the resources of the Romanian and Hungarian nationalizers? Is s/he reconstructing a differential Csango identity apart from the Romanian or Hungarian ones? How is s/he being parasited by or is s/he

² In 1896, the Hungarian Kingdom celebrated “the Millenium”, a thousand years since the Hungarian tribes arrived in Pannonia

³ A collection of “Moldavian Catholics” folklore, stressing their Romanian roots, is being edited by I. Ciubotaru since 1998 (Ciubotaru 1998).

parasiting competing networks like the Hungarian NGOs, the Romanian state, the Council of Europe; how is s/he involved in nationalist or multiculturalist discourses; is there a “resistance”, “weapons of the weak”, non-national way of strategically vanishing beneath nationalizing discourses without claiming any “authentic”, endangered identity, except the religious (Roman Catholic) one?

It seems that, from an analytic point of view, there are discourses and projects on and about the Csangos – from “outside”; and individual and group strategies of the Csangos themselves. On the other hand this kind of distinction is due to possibly introduce, obliquely, another essentialization of the Csangos as an entity in itself outside the various discourses and practices coming from outside. I intend to be open especially to the blurred border between “outside” and “inside” – which is maybe more important, especially when we are talking about such a contested identity.

Any discourse on Csango identity trying to avoid the pitfalls of the two nationalizing strategies finds itself in the strange situation of having to find a way of speaking about an entity without constituting it (in a Hungarian nationalizing sense) but also without denying it any right of existence (in a Romanian nationalist way).

Richard Handler draw attention to the presuppositions on the nature of culture that anthropology could share with nationalist ideologues and the pitfalls of sharing “narrative authority” uncritically, calling for a “destructive analysis of the familiar” (Handler 1985). The Csango case is probably an extreme exemplification of such a “destruction” happening in the field by the clashing of antagonist nationalizing projects, each using its own variant of national “possessive individualism”. Despite more than a quarter century of constructivist theorizing in the social sciences, ethnic groups continue to be imagined as entities. The works of Rogers Brubaker are particularly important for this project as the author moves beyond the standard, commonplace constructivist tropes, avoiding, in the same time, the pitfalls of what he calls “groupism”. However, the triadic nexus formed by national minorities, “nationalizing” state nationalism and external “homeland” nationalism is not able to describe completely the case of the Csangos as the “homeland” nationalism is mediated through another national minority – the Hungarians and Szeklers from the western part of Romania (Transylvania) – and the cultural and ethnic “credentials” of the Csango minority qua minority are still hotly debated. Nevertheless, by shifting the focus from identity to identification, from group to conflict-ridden group-making projects, from shared culture to categorization, Brubaker opens the theoretical ground on which “old-new nationalisms” – different from state-building and nation-building “classic” nationalism – can be understood as a heterogenous set of “nation” discourses and practices available at a certain point in modern political and cultural life (Brubaker 1995).

The ethnography of the Csangos implies an ethnography of the state effects. The respatialization of various state functions and effects is taking place in a context already marked by the differential spatialization of markets and the emergence of new types of governmentality. These incongruent spatialities inevitably produce tensions in the location of state power – including the power of national identification. Extended networks of organizations, associations, scientific institutes, forums, ethnic tourism networks etc. using at the same time global technologies and old or new national myths are modeling and forging ethnic and national identities using state-like effects. I think this is part of what is happening to the Roman Catholics of Moldavia who are being antagonistically and agonistically imagined – through global networks and technologies – as “national”.

The imagining of Moldavian Csangos can also be seen as a kind of emergent autochthony movement. What differentiates it probably from other likeminded movements is its antagonistic ways of articulating itself (or of being articulated) with conflicting nationalisms: Hungarian versus Romanian.

By using Arjun Appadurai’s and Comaroff & Comaroff’s insights into the problems raised by “autochthony” and globalization, we can locate the imagining of Csango ethnic identity at the level of certain articulations between the local and the global having, nevertheless, the nation-state as an essential actor. In analyzing the processes and politics of hybridity and, respectively, autochthony, following James Clifford, I take as a starting point of the analysis the fact that the politics of hybridity are conjectural and cannot be thoroughly deduced from theoretical principles. What matters from a political point of view is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony (Clifford 1997). The ethnographic research is important in disentangling various hybridities and autochthonies, for dissolving false dichotomies and opening new paths of inquiry.

In Arjun Appadurai’s view men, technologies, money, images and ideas are set on increasingly non-isomorphic trajectories. The speed, volume and dimensions of these global flows are due to bring in the forefront of the politics of culture the disjunctured face of globalization. This “perspectivist” way of understanding globalization and autochthony implies the existence of an imaginary/global character of these cultural flows, strongly modulated by the historical, linguistic and political position of various social agents: nation states, multinational corporations, diaspora communities, groups and movements (religious, political etc.), subnational groups, villages, families etc.

The “autochthonous” identity can be seen, using Appadurai’s model, not only as imagined and perspectivistic but also as “nested”, in the sense that the global, national and regional are actually internal relations constituting the “autochthony” of the local. The content of “autochthonous” identities are post-national, making claims on and sometimes even entering in conflict with nation-states but the nation states themselves are in the process of becoming more local and global at the same time.

THE “DARK SIDE” OF THE INTERNET

Before we can determine the role of internet in the invention of the “authentic Hungarian/Romanian Csango self” we have to look a bit at the “dark side” of the cyberspace.

The cyberspace is a fragment of the new technologies of surveillance, cultural and social control or, a cause of the rapid advance of the social fragmentation, paralleled by a growth in the flexibility and power of the centers of new capitalism, of the new global industries of the imaginary. Cyberspace is not only libertarian but also an instrument in the advent of what Negri and Hardt call the “new empire” (Negri & Hardt 2000).

The cyberspace is not only ambiguous; it is also mythologized (in a barthesian sense). The ludic, postmodern configuration of the cyberspace, like a total identity pastiche that allows, supposedly, for the appearance and exploring of new types of subjectivity and cultural decentering, is sometimes hiding less pleasant things. The ICT can transform itself in a new instrument, of an amazing scope and dynamics, of the kind of surveillance identified by Foucault in his analysis of modernity.

The power to configure identity narratives and to impose them, is a kind of power “which applies to the daily life who categorizes the individual, designates himself with his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes on him a law of truth he has to recognize and others have to recognize it in him” (Foucault 1980: 186). This form of power succeeds only if it transforms the individual into a subject, a subject of control and dependence to another person but also a subject of the connection with his own identity by his conscience and self-knowledge (Foucault 1980). The new industries of the imaginary are assuming this important power of imposing a law of truth, maybe also because of the fading of the “old institutions of the social imaginary”.

THE INTERNET AND THE CSANGO

When an important European bureaucrat, during a scientific seminar in the Moldavian city of Iași, said that “our job is to tell the Csangos that they have to sing by themselves their own ballads and songs, dance their own dances and tell stories to their children” we are in fact very close to the assuming of this kind of power by a relatively wide and lax network of European Council bureaucrats, nationalist intellectuals, ethnographers, historians, sociologists etc. connected by scientific institutes, NGO’s, internet forums and portals etc. In the replacement, competition or complementarities between such networks and national states in modeling identity narratives the cyberspace plays an important part. The “Csango dispute” exposes the inherent ambiguities and pitfalls of any project, regardless of

the institutional agent involved – nation state or national(ist) identity network – for inventing ethno-national identities when the cyberspace is an essential part of this project. The narratives are more or less the same in a void and decontextualized space having, apparently, no power configuration but in the life of the quotidian world, in the social world, the narratives disclose harsh competitions and asymmetrical power relations.

In the case of the invention of a “Csango” Hungarian or Romanian, the internet has a dual function. The Csango identity is a mirror image of a Hungarian/Romanian identity, an image of lost authenticity, purity and archaicity linguistically polluted by Romanians respectively Hungarians, is an imaginary identity imposed by a nationalist imagery on the self image of a population which tends to reject ethnical denominations, adopting a confessional, religious mark of its identity (Tanczos 1998, Cotoi 2002). There is, at first, an image of the Csangos (www.Csango.hu, www.ceangai.ro, www.asrocatolic.ro, <http://noborders.interfree.it/> etc.) in cyberspace. An image who, as long as it inhabits only this hypergeographic space, where the truth is not the adequation of reality and mind as in the aristotelic worlds, and where the ordering of the reality is based on simulation and seduction, any question about the representational value of the “virtual Csangos” is absurd. The virtual Csangos are autoreferential signs having absolute transparency. In such cyberspace designed groups “there is an invocation of community but not a production of it. There is a groupmind but no social interaction. There is on line communication but there are no true residents of cyberspace. Technosociality creates a synthetic world where history is blocked” (Robins 1995: 10 apud Dell’Aquila 1999: 29).

Major problems are due to appear when such “virtual tribes” are expelled in the world of daily social reality. These phantasms can parasitize historical, concrete social groups, who are caught in a perverse mechanism able to falsify and block their historicity by imposing on them some ideological and nationalistic models. Due to the auto-refentiality of cyberspace identities, any imagined identity in this non-aristotelic world has a kind of wholeness strangely similar to romantic, herderian views on nationality.

The ethnicisation, taking place through the new industries of the imaginary, cannot be accounted solely through the theories of the “nationalizing” states of Eastern Europe (Brubaker 1995). The nationalist networks, even if they can be used by nation states, are beyond the analyses in terms of antagonistic relationships among nationalizing states, national minorities and “mother countries”. We are probably facing a strange nationalist awakening that is using postmodern tools and discourses and can be analyzed and deconstructed only by a profound understanding of the role of the imaginary in the post-socialist countries in a permanent analogy and antagonism with the western models.

The second, related, function of the internet in the case of the invention of a Csango identity, strangely connected to the construction of a virtual, postmodern

identity consists in coordinating a classical, modernist national (minority)-building. So being, a cyberethnographic perspective is able to capture the whole dimension of this process by capturing the attempt to coalesce the two types of identity: virtual and traditional.

The presentation of the Csango self in everyday life, to paraphrase a famous book, is instrumentalized by strangely ethno-primordialist networks, who are archaizing and “folklorising” this self in order to transpose it from the frames of romantic-nationalist imaginary into the realm of real geography. There are agrotourism networks, tourist itineraries of ethnic display selling stories of ethnic resistance, online shopping for Csango souvenirs etc. where you can embark from cyberspace to Moldavia (www.Csango.hu, www.ceangai.ro, <http://noborders.interfree.it/>). It looks like Csangos are being now transformed not only in some more or less imaginary archaic pool for rival nationalisms but also, in the same time, in a resource for global tourism, for global capital.

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