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**DENOMINATIONAL COEXISTENCE, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN
COŞNEA**

ABSTRACT

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Keywords: denominational coexistence, religious and ethnic identification, Greek Catholics, religious conversions, changes in language use, demographic processes, contact zone, in-between-ness, local religion

Statement of the problem

The dissertation examines the village of Coșnea located in the religious, linguistic and ethnic contact zone on the border of Transylvania and Moldova. The basic finding of previous research in the region is that due to long-term acculturation and assimilation processes among the Romanian and Hungarian populations settling here, as well as the parallel Romanian and Hungarian nation-building efforts, a specific “intermediate”, mixed culture and identity came into being. The people living here became associated with Romanianness and Hungarianness with varying intensity and in various ways; following the political-religious reorganizations of the 20th century, and especially since the abolition of the Greek Catholic Church in Romania in 1948, religious ethnic segregation between locals has strengthened. Orthodox began to be considered Romanians, Roman Catholics Hungarians, and ecclesiastic and secular elites sought to strengthen denominational and ethnic boundaries in local communities.

In Coșnea, in my opinion, there is no point in talking about ethnic groups nowadays, we should not understand the Romanian and Hungarian designations to mean ethnic groups or at least not exclusively. My findings suggest that there is a distinctive „web of meanings” behind the varied and (over time and situationally) variable religious and ethnic identifications, frequently even in the case of the self-same person, which the villagers constantly negotiate in the course of their social practices. In my dissertation, I present the historical, political, social and everyday contexts of the formation of denominational and ethnic differences and attachments in Coșnea today. I attempted to map in fine detail the processes and social practices that have led to the formation and reproduction of divisions and of intra-community boundaries, which, however, at times are reinterpreted; I also identify the situations and relationships in which these divisions are manifested, become visible or are ignored by the locals.

Research methods

My study is based on anthropological fieldwork and archival research conducted between 2013 and 2017. During the total 9 months of fieldwork, I followed two types of research methods: through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, as well as participant observation, I became familiar with the local conditions and sought answers to my research questions. I carried out archival research in four institutions: the Archives of the Archdiocese and Cathedral Chapter of Alba Iulia, the Harghita County State Archives, the

Bacău County State Archives (Romania) and the Archives of the Greek Catholic Archeparchy at Nyíregyháza (Hungary) In addition, I uncovered a large number of documents in the Roman Catholic parishes of Frumoasa and Coșnea.

The inclusion of archival sources allowed me to approach issues related to the community's past from multiple perspectives. Although different perspectives (local/central, ecclesiastical/lay, Romanian/Hungarian, Greek Catholic/Roman Catholic, etc.) often resulted in conflicting stories, I did not regard written and oral sources as “objective” and “subjective” readings of the past, respectively, but rather I considered them to be equivalent and complementary interpretations of the past.

Structure of the dissertation

Following the introductory chapter, which presents an overview of the problematic of the dissertation (1), I first present the nature and methodology of the research, the resources I have used, and the possibilities and limitations of the analysis in this context (2). Next, I present a review of the literature thereby contextualizing my work, which I then follow up with a discussion of the theoretical framework and conceptual apparatus of the dissertation (3). In the first two major units of the actual analysis, I deal with the history of the community from the settlement of the village to 1948 (4) and from the period of state socialism to the present day (5), respectively. Within this, the subchapters mark the alternating periods of Hungarian and Romanian state level national and religious policy aspirations, and certain points in this history that I consider to have had especially great significance for the life of the community. My aim here was to analyze how the religious division of the community was created during the 20th century, and how and through what processes the religious and ethnic ties and boundaries that can be observed today came into being. In each sub-chapter I present the political, administrative, and ecclesiastical changes that took place and how the relationship of the different churches developed in the given period, what consequences did this have on the pastoral supply of Coșnea, and what events and changes did state- or regional-level processes induce locally. I also followed the changes in the educational and demographic conditions of the village and in the language use and marriage habits of its inhabitants (endogamy, exogamy, language of immigrants, religion, etc.). The subchapter presenting the period after the regime change deals with language use in different arenas of religious life and in everyday life, as well as the impact of churches, schools and the Csángó Educational Program on language use and identification.

In the next chapter (6) I present in two subchapters the current system of denominational coexistence, the forms of religious and ethnic ties, boundaries and border crossings, as well as the institutional, family and individual frameworks of these that can be observed to this day. In the first part, my main goal is to present the system of local customs and of social norms that determine the coexistence of the two denominations today, and the room for maneuver available to individuals within this system. I discuss in detail how and to what extent religious division structures the village spatially, how religious and ethnic ties are manifested in today's religious and social practices, and in individual life courses. In connection with the latter, I describe the most important social institutions for the crossing of boundaries between denominations: mixed marriages and godparenthood practices. I follow up this general description with a case study that illustrates how, along what rules and individual motivations, changes in religious affiliation take place, and what factors play a role in choosing compadres. In the second part, I review the more general characteristics of local religious life and the religiosity of the villagers. The latter had for a long time been characterized by “self-sufficiency”. I illustrate my points through discussing the relationship between priests and believers, the syncretic nature of local religiosity and its expressions in everyday and festive situations, the use of sacraments as well as various paraliturgical practices, and conceptualizations of death and death rites. By way of a conclusion I summarize my findings (7).

Results of the study

Coşnea is a settlement that came into being in the second half of the 18th century on the alpine estates of the Szekler villages of Csík. By the beginning of the 20th century, the community of mixed (Romanian, Hungarian) ethnic origin, but of uniform Greek Catholicism, became almost entirely Hungarian-speaking. This was largely due to spontaneous population processes (large number of Hungarian-speaking in-migrants) and certain political-administrative measures (e.g. the establishment of a Hungarian-language school), which meant that the use of the Romanian language became limited to family and religious life. In the post-World War I period, both linguistically and religiously, certain fault lines began to form within the community. Many of the Roman Catholics moving in adhered to their original religion, and due to changes in linguistic competencies, the presence of a clergy providing Hungarian-language church services became important for some Greek Catholics in the village. In the 1930s, a rivalry began over the pastoral care of the people

living here among Roman and Greek Catholic priests in Csíkszépvíz. The most drastic changes in the religious life of the community occurred in the 1940s. During the return of Hungarian rule between 1940–44, most of the locals, who were labelled Romanian because of their Greek Catholic religion, were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism. Following World War II, the majority of the locals returned to their original religion, but due to the abolition of the Greek Catholic Church in 1948, they were faced with a choice again. One part of the population converted to Roman Catholicism and the other to the Orthodox religion, making the religious division of the community permanent.

Despite the high degree of ethnicization of the individual denominations, the decisions of the Coşneans in this situation were not driven by national considerations, but by complex social dynamics and extremely variable individual motivations. Belonging to certain denominations (Orthodox, Roman Catholic) subsequently gradually became filled with other meanings – on the one hand, it reflected the economic, linguistic and primarily social fault lines of the community at the time, and on the other hand created new fault lines and boundaries. However, these boundaries are flexible and for the most part easy to cross, especially as in the second half of the 20th century a new state of equilibrium of denominational/ethnic/social relations emerged in the community regulated and kept within a framework acceptable to all by unwritten communal norms.

Contrary to the finding of previous research, according to which religious-based ethnic segregation within the community strengthened in the second half of the 20th century, I argue that the categories of Romanian or Hungarian do not indicate ethnic differences primarily for the people of Coşnea. Rather, in my opinion, to this day the most important element of the identification of the locals is that of in-between-ness, a distinctive characteristic that is almost ethnic in quality, the most important aspect of which is a consciousness of being different from the inhabitants of the surrounding Hungarian, Romanian and Csango settlements.

In the place of this quality of in-between-ness, ecclesiastic and secular elites in the second half of the 20th century have sought to establish clear-cut, homogeneous religious and national affiliations. In the decades of state socialism, the identification of the people of Coşnea clearly shifted towards Romanianness, while after the regime change (and especially from the beginning of the 2000s) the Hungarian or Csango identity and attachment to Hungarianness gained more and more ground among the inhabitants. However, the majority of locals still cannot (often do not want to) fully identify with either Hungarians or Romanians. At the same time, this in-between-ness in all historical periods provided a high

degree of flexibility, allowing choices between different attachments and their subsequent, more or less problem-free overwriting from the perspective of the individual or family.

Religious differences, sometimes interpreted as ethnic differences, have little significance in the everyday lives of Coşneans, in local religious and social practices - I have illustrated this by presenting mixed marriages, religious conversions, compadrazgo relations and certain aspects of local religious practices and conceptualizations. Until the middle of the 20th century, in the wake of sporadic, irregular pastoral care, the coexistence of three religious traditions, and frequent mixed marriages local religiosity was characterized by “blended” religious notions and practices, which were more or less accepted by the clergy serving in the village. In my dissertation, I illustrated the mutual influence and intensive interactions of Eastern and Western traditions, as well as canonical and “folk” conceptualizations with examples taken from the rituals and concepts surrounding death.

The religious relations in Coşnea and the religious-ethnic attachments of the locals were influenced by the historical-political processes of the 20th century and the changing state and ecclesiastical frameworks. Political changes and the attendant *physical redrawing of borders* in each case created new situations for the locals. The combination of the transformations of secular and ecclesiastic power relations, and of independent demographic, linguistic and social changes played an important role in another process: *drawing and redrawing boundaries within the community*. The latter process can be interpreted both from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective, as the creation, strengthening, reinterpretation and reproduction of boundaries within the community continues to take place in the present. In my dissertation, I presented these processes in tandem, highlighting their interconnections. The very heterogeneous, seemingly inextricable image we see today in Coşnea in terms of the expression of both denominational and ethnic ties is the result of a combination of different political and social processes and a number of intra-community and individual factors. I have tried to capture these in a multi-level, long-term analysis, through the experiences and motivations of the individuals who are experiencing, suffering or just shaping the changes.

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