

Istro-Romanians: a Study of Culture Identity and Environmental Dynamic

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Abstract: -This paper presents an interdisciplinary study of the relation between the cultural identity and environmental changes (be it natural, social, political or technological changes) in Istro-Romanian communities. Istro-Romanians were researched especially from the historical and linguistic points of view. There never was a systematic research of their culture. Or, Istro-Romanians and their culture are almost extinct. The Istro-Romanian dialect appears in the *UNESCO Red book for endangered languages* with the observation: *seriously endangered*. This paper comes as an answer to both the urgency of the research of this culture, and, respectively, the creation of a basis for strategies to maintain the identity of the Istro-Romanians.

Key-Words: - Istro-Romanians, culture identity, environment, tradition, value orientation.

1. Introduction

We hear nowadays all the time discussions about endangered species and we are made conscious that we should find strategies to save them. But there are endangered cultures too and it is the duty of cultural anthropologists and of researchers of culture in general to caution and explain the significance and consequences of the diminishing of the cultural diversity, just like ecologists warn us of the risks of the diminishing of the biological diversity.

The two aspects are interdependent and it comes as no surprise the establishing, at the border between human ecology and cultural anthropology, of a discipline whose names are the proof of its border character: *ecological anthropology, cultural ecology, culture and environment*. Whatever the name, this is the perspective of culture and environment dynamic which is made possible by such discipline.

This paper proposes an approach of a seriously endangered culture - Istro-Romanians culture. We realise this approach from the perspective of culture and environment dynamic.

2. The Istro-Romanian in Question

Scientists had given them the name of *Istro-Romanians*, but they were known as *Cici* or *Ciribiri* and, in Old Italian documents, they appeared as *Rumeri*. They called themselves *Vlași*

and their language *Vlaški*. They are an old Romanian population, after some historians from the time of Dacia; others think that they might be descendents of Roman legionnaires, while other historians think they are more than a millennium old.

There are, in fact, two main theories concerning the historical origin of the Istro-Romanians. On one side the theory sustaining that the Istro-Romanian dialect has its origins in Daco-Latin having originated in Banat, Crisana, Apuseni Mountains. Among the sustainers of this theory are O. Densusian, Al. Rosetti, and I. Coteanu. The second, with S. Puscariu, I. Capidan, S. Dragomir as its main partisans, says that Istro-Romanian originated south of the Danube.

The first clear attestation dates back to 1321, when there is a mention of a country of the Vlachs in the region inhabited today by Istro-Romanians. The Istro-Romanians were studied by Italian researchers – Ascoli, Mateo Bartoli Vasilici, Petru Kandler, Nerina Feresini – Croatian researchers – Goran Filipi, August Covacec – Romanian researchers – Ioan Maiorescu, Lecca Morariu, Traian Cantemir, Petru Iroaie, Radu Flora, Richard Sarbu. These researches were mainly historical-linguistic researches, cultural researches playing a secondary role. Among these cultural researches, interesting is the research on the Susnievita village, realized by Nerina Feresini.

Studies concerning the Istro-Romanians had in

mind mainly the historic and linguistic perspective, seldom the cultural one. It is imperative to gain knowledge of this culture now, having in mind its rapid disappearance (it is estimated that, if no change occurs, in about 30 years there will be no more Istro-Romanian speakers). The development of strategies concerning the stabilization of Istro-Romanian communities, maintaining their language, thus maintaining their cultural identity is very important.

This project's objectives were established having in mind these two main purposes.

The first objective concerns contributions at fundamental research in the fields of cultural anthropology and cultural ecology: observing and understanding the Istro-Romanian culture in view of the investigation of the complex relation between the cultural identity dynamic and the environmental (natural, economical, social, technological) dynamic. Starting from the hypothesis that the process of construction – and deconstruction – of cultural identity takes place in close relation with environmental particularities and dynamic, this project will try to explain how and how much changes at the level of the environment affect significant changes at the cultural identity level. To do this the research is based on the study of memorial material: folkloric narration type, life stories, cultural practices (the old tradition of the *zvonciari*, for example), commemoration and memory writings, the family memory patrimony and its integration in the public dimension.

The analyses and interpretation of the data obtained from all these sources will allow the concretization of the value orientation of the Istro-romanian culture. These will be completed with the explicit research of fundamental value orientation using a questionnaire based on research methods applied by Fl. Kluckhohn, Strodbeck, Salzmann in concrete scholar inquiries in the value orientation sphere of interest. The assertion of the fundamental value orientation of the Istro-Romanian culture – social and natural environment are comprehended here – will represent an important contribution to the existing knowledge on the particularities of Istro-Romanian culture, its dynamic, as well as its congruence with value orientation of Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian, Romanian cultures.

The second objective consist of the creation of a data base which will include an oral history, oral testimonies archive, historical sources: memorial, literary, images (including a documentary movie)

concerning the Istro-Romanian culture and its environment. This objective comes as an answer to two imperatives: the need to record and conserve data concerning a seriously endangered culture and, secondly, the need to build the basis for cultural identity strategies as well as the development of cultural and economical politics and projects (cultural tourism for example) which will concur to preserve and , respectively, help regain the cultural identity of the Istro-Romanians.

3. Culture and Environment of Istro-Romanians

The Istro-Romanian culture is a dying culture and there are at least two reasons why it should be researched: gaining fundamental knowledge and, respectively, the need to identify strategies to help its survival, maintain the conscience of linguistic identity and regaining the cultural identity conscience.

Istria receives a constant attention from travel writers and ethnographers. Some of them named Istria a certain *laboratory* of peoples, and even races. It is emphasized the Istrian example, where a peoples mixture had existed successfully and *naturally*, for centuries, even since Roman times [1]. Multiculturalism in Istria embraces nowadays Croatian, Slovenian, Italians, Istro-Romanian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Macedonian.

Situated in the centre of the Istria Peninsula, north and south of Monte Maggiore (Ucika Gora), the Istro-Romanians were exposed to powerful pressure: from the other languages from this area, who held, in turns, predominant positions – Italian, German, Croatian - as well as the pressures of an natural and economical environment, that is always more precarious.

The mountain, once covered with forests, pastures, lakes offered a propitious environment for the raising of sheep and cattle and coal wood production. Today the forests are almost gone; the lakes dried up or were drained, either because they were sources for malaria or when the tunnel across the mountain was built.

The traditional occupations disappeared. The soil in the area did not allow a profitable agriculture and thus poverty spreads.

The turn away from old forms of economic activity such as pastoralism, rapidly accelerates the pace of linguistic and, generally, cultural assimilation. Previously socially self-contained pastoral societies have modernised themselves, in some cases becoming urban societies. So, over

time, Istro-Romanians became economically dependent and the relations with other peoples intensified. In this new context, Istro-Romanian language largely restricted to use in the family. On the other side, the increase of access to education and administration explains both the high level of assimilation of Istro-Romanians and the drastically decline of the traditional employment of the Istro-Romanians as shepherds and wood coal producers. As result, the language becomes more and more economically irrelevant and is also increasingly losing ground even within the family circle.

The remarkable continuity over the centuries of Istro-Romanian culture was due mainly to the stability of way of life in an environment favourable to live-stock farming and wood coal production. In absence of formal institutional structures, this stability of way of life in connection with environment contributed to the conservation of Istro-Romanian culture. The changes at the level of ways of life and of environment are at the root of the decline of Istro-Romanian culture. It is obvious in the process of population's decreasing: the Istro-Romanian population, which was estimated at about 8000 in the XIXth century, decreased to be 2000 in between the wars, 500 in 1960, 450 in 1994, about 300 in 2000.

Although to this process are contributed the mixed marriages, nevertheless, the main reason was the migration towards neighbouring cities or, especially after the Second World War, towards Italy, the United States (in New York there are about 200 Istro-Romanian speakers), Canada, and Australia. If on a 1926 map almost all of Istria is covered with villages with Istro-Romanian names – *Catun, Bolovani, Carbune, Sucodru, Costarcean, Floricici, Murari, Ciobani, Vlasi* – today there are only about eight villages on the northern side of the mountain – the biggest being *Jeinani* – and, on the southern side, a few settlements grouped around the village of *Susnievita (Valdarsa, in Italian)*.

As result, Istro-Romanian is today a severely endangered language spoken on the peninsula of Istria in north-west Croatia. The majority of the 250 or so speakers are middle-aged and elderly; many use the language only sporadically, and few children are learning it. Istro-Romanian language contains today many Italian and Slavic words - which is understandable considering the environment in which they lived for centuries, but, in the same time, is evident the influence of Istro-Romanian on the neighbouring Slavs. Usually,

they are bilingual: they speak Croatian and, the older ones also speak Italian. American Istro-Romanians speak English, their American-born children are taught by their parents their maternal Istro-Romanian language – which they use to communicate with their relatives when they come to visit Istria, the land of their ancestors.

The main reason for the decline in Istro-Romanian is that the language is economically unattractive: it appears to offer no advantage in any modern, future-oriented profession. Thus, in the Istro-Romanian village only old people are active speakers (usually they are bilingual), those over the age of 40 are potential speakers, and the young men are making their careers with a little knowledge of the mother tongue.

Another reason is the absence of the prestige that explains the willingness to abandon the Istro-Romanian identity. It is the case of the young men that often shy away from their identity: to the suggestion that they are Istro-Romanians, they are responding that they are Istrian and nothing else. Nowadays there are two types of Istro-Romanian speech: the northern, in Zejane (Jeinani) and the southern in a few villages around Krsan (Crâșan), with a total of 250 speakers, which counts also the people that moved to larger cities. The most numerous are in Nova Vas (Noselo), Susnjevica (Susnievita), and Jesenovik, in a smaller number in the villages of Letaj, Brdo, Kostrcani, Zankovici, Miheli, Drazina, Draga, Jelavici. According to the memories of the current speakers, Istro-Romanian used to be spoken also in villages Trkovci, Dolinscina, Perasi, Grobnik, Gradinje.

The increasingly small community, lifestyle changes, occupational changes in relation to environmental changes, the lack of schools in the Istro-Romanian dialect, the lack of a cultural elite led to a recede and even to the loss of the cultural identity conscience. It should be marked the exception represented by Andrei Glavina and the school he established. At the end of the XIXth century, Teodor Burada brought Andrei Glavina to study in Romania. Becoming aware of the link with the Romanians, Glavina returned to Istria and founded, in Susnievita, the first Istro-Romanian school, which operated between 1921 and 1925. We must remark, in this context, that the ethnic links to the area of today's Romania are still being questioned.

In the long term, a culture will have no chance of survival if it is not given greater appreciation and if its carriers do not identify a form of support. It is necessary, in consequence, to

mobilise different modalities of promoting the Istro-Romanian cultural identity, its specific values and traditions. The recent resolution of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia represents a significant path on this way. By this resolution, adopted on September 27 2007, it was declared that the Istro-Romanian dialect is one of the most endangered cultural treasures on Istrian territory, and will be listed as a protected cultural treasure of Croatia.

By proclaiming **Istro-Romanian to be a protected endangered cultural treasure**, is intended the tradition transfer to new generations through formal and informal education and inclusion of Istro-Romanian speech, as a mother tongue, into the educational programs. Also, is concerned the revitalization of abandoned segments of the treasure and the protection to avoid the danger of its extinction, destruction or commercialization.

In view of aiming this purposes are founded associations like that from Susnjevita: Association for cultural preservation and promotion of Istro-Romanian identity. Another remarkable initiative belongs to Doctor Emil Petre Ratiu. He had put the foundation on 29 April 1994, at Trieste for the *Istro-Romanian Association Andrei Glavina*. The purpose of this association is to preserve this society and this dialect. Since 1995 this association published books in the Istro-Romanian dialect, starting with *Calendaru la rumeri din Istria*. Beginning in 1996 they published the first journal in Istro-Romanian: *Scrisoare catre frat Rumeri*. Doctor Ratiu participated at the organization of a seminary (summer 2007, Triest, main organizer Edvino Curtis) - which benefited from the presence of circa 200 persons: Italians, Slovenians, Croats and Romanians - as well as an exhibition regarding the history, traditions and language of Istro-Romanians. Such associations might be a successful instrument for bolstering Istro-Romanian self-confidence.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of our project is the study and understanding of the dynamic of the cultural identity of Istro-Romanians under the pressure of environmental changes. The methodology used includes field observation, the research of value orientation of Istro-Romanians using the Kluckhohn-Strobeck-Salzmann questionnaire, as well as the comparison of different sources and different records (written, pictures, monographic).

Our project concerned a fundamental research dealing with the role played by memory in defining the cultural identity of Istro-Romanians in the dynamic relation to a changing environment and, both, the creation of a date bank - which includes an oral history archive, historical sources, memoirs, literature and images – concerning the culture and the environment of Istro-Romanians. We appreciate that it is useful for the implementation of new cultural politics as well as economical projects, including here cultural tourism. All of them are necessary in view of regain the self-confidence of Istro-Romanians in their own culture and so to preserve Istro-Romanian cultural identity.

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