

AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO THE DANUBE GORGE (BRIDGING ETHNIC DISPARITIES BY ENSURING CULTURAL COMPETENCE)

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ABSTRACT: An Intercultural approach to the Danube Gorge (Bridging Ethnic Disparities by Ensuring Cultural Competence).

An area encompassing at least five ethnic groups that display a cultural heritage of their own, pieced together in the mosaic art as individual stones, merely to create a composite pattern that celebrates multiculturalism, or woven into a tapestry of ethnocultural interactions, this is The Danube Gorge of Romania. A celebration of the culturally diverse landscape of the area may be an incentive in itself, yet from acknowledgement of the demographic canvas to intercultural competence, the interactions in the aforementioned region and the cross-cultural exchanges need not be ignored. A correct responsive approach to such an environment, which accomodates Czech, German, Hungarian, Roma and Serbian communities, alongside the Romanians, as recorded in the 2011 Romanian census, require all-encompassing interactions, rather than the bare ethnocultural acknowledgement. Thus, in tailoring for the mechanisms and frameworks that would enhance awareness of the other and would nurture cultural exchanges, can cultural competence be fostered in the Danube Gorge. The present paper is a descriptive analysis of atheoretical framework based on historical complexities, never ceasing exchanges, with the case study of the Danube Gorge as practical example. Various pathways and recommendations serve as incentives for the intercultural tapestry to be woven in the future.

Keywords: *cultural acknowledgement, intercultural relations, social interactions, cultural competence.*

Introduction

The strive for that interculturality level which reflects the demographics of the Danube Gorge, triggers the sort of action that elicits, first and foremost respect, as well as cultural consciousness within the local community, a community that is a border story, defined by the Danube, between Baziaș / Ram and The Iron Gated Dam I (The Mouth of the Valley / Novi Sip), with overlapping language use, customs and traditions.

The ethnical diversities of the Banat region with its minorities and the specific "intra-cultural dialogue" alongside the "cultural harmonious confrontation"¹ constitutes the result of adaptation after numerous waves of colonisations in this border area, be those colonisations with Hungarians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Croatians, Germans, or, more specifically, the Danube Gorge Serbians. In the latter case, the term of "acculturation"² is often acknowledged. On the other hand, following the data collected by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) and using the national minorities maps provided by The Institute for Research on National Minorities (INSMP), the structure of the population in Caraș-Severin at the 2002 population census was : 88,25% Romanians, 1,75% Hungarians, 2,38% Roma, 1,88% Croatians, 1,84% Germans, 1,82% Serbians, 1,06 % Ukrainans, 0,74% Czechs and 0,28% other ethnic groups. In contrast, the 2011 population census, however, indicates a significant drop in the minority population: 82,52 % Romanian, 0,99% Hungarian, 2,46% Roma, 0,84% Ukrainian, 0,98% German, 3,42% Serbian and Croatian and 0,52% Czech, with effects on schools and the local communities. Faced with the abundance of evidence regarding the multicultural population of the Danube Gorge, as well as the existence of studies on the intercultural aspect of a region de-

1 E. C. Constantin, & G. L. Badea, "Interculturality in Banat", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116 3548-3552,3548-3553, sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814008179, (2014).

2 C. Bulzan, "Problema identității în spațiul frontierei. Reflecții asupra interdependențelor culturale româno-sârbe în Clisura Dunării", în *Sociologie românească*, Volumul V, Nr. 2/2007, pp. 130-148.

scribed also as "typical interculturality"³ a deep need for awareness amongst the layman within the educational landscape arises.

Taking the terminology clarifications a step further, acknowledgement in itself is not enough, and, therefore, the concept of cultural competence, defined primarily as "ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own"⁴ is essential.

Problem statement

Attaining a valid heritage on its own, a cultural uniqueness, a sense of belonging that would define the Danube Gorge, we should start from a compelling historical question: Is there a mere symbolic recognition of every ethnic group within the area or do the people display healthy interethnic relations? Issheer acknowledgement of the resourcefulness of multiculturalism in the Danube Gorge pure ethnomethodology, or practical, harmonious interactions occur on a day-to-day basis? Cross-cultural inferences concur together, challenging discrimination and playing equal role incaterin for societal needs where ethnic groups have been present for centuries.

A Diachronic Approach – cultural rights, culture institutions

Steps have been taken in the course of time, ever since Serbians settled here in the 6th century and the Czechs, known here as "pemi" were accommodated in Banat during the first wave in 1823, not to mention the 200-year old German presence in the region, "die Banater Schwaben" originated from the Danube Germans, "die Donau Schwaben".

- ♦ To begin with, from official recognition of each ethnic group to the multi-faceted layers of elevated backgrounds, promotion and granted rights, lawful regulations as well as clear steps have politically and historically taken place."The 1923 Constitution established by art. 5 a non-discrimination clause Romanians, irrespective of ethnic origin, language or religion shall enjoy freedom of conscience, freedom of

3 E. Narai, "Maghiarii și cehii din județele Caraș și Severin în perioada 1944-1948", in *Banatica*, Reșița, 22/2012, pp. 381-396.

4 T. DeAngelis, "In search of cultural competence, Monitor on Psychology", *American Psychological Association*, Vol 46, No. 3/2015, p.64.

education, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and all the freedoms and rights established by law.”⁵ legislative means stipulated in further documents, as well. Thus, equal rights have been guaranteed to gauge the multiple facets of cross-cultural interactions, further review to the constitution alongside an organic law in this regard.

- ✦ Multiple opportunities for expressing the ethnocultural identity in the public space to ensure memory and data recording, to promote distinctive cultural values and to protect that sense of belonging have been on offer for decades. The Serbian Union(USR), with the most extensive network of local organisations in the Danube Gorge, 14 in total, organised by the 5 Caraș-Severin branches and the two in Mehedinți county, namely: CS1: Belobreșca, Divici, Radimna, Pojejena, CS2: Baziaș, Socol, Câmpia, Zlătița, CS3: Moldova Veche, Măcești, Liubcova, Berzasca, CS4, Lescovița and in Mehedinți county, still in the Danube Gorge: Svinița, and Orșova serves not as a sign of nationalism and individualisation, nativism and ethnic pride, but as a celebration of healthy ethnic awareness within the group. Monoethnic Serbian schools, folk artefacts displayed in local culture halls and diverse cultural activities for Serbians are a few of the preoccupation sin the domain. There are six officially recorded Serbian folk dance ensembles (according to the USR website): The Belobreška Ensemble, The “Dunav” one in Svinița, The “Mačević” in Măcești, “Soko” in Socol, “Stara Moldava” in Moldova Veche, “Stenka” in Liubcova, as well as the Tommyland association. Additionally, there is the Little Drummers Orchestra in Belobreșca and for many generations children have been learning to play the accordion in Serbia. The USR printing house, founded in 1994 is based in Timișoara, publishes extensive news about the Danube Gorge. USR publications include: „Našareč“ (monthly editorial), „Književni život“ (bi-monthly literary magazine), „Novi temișvarskivesnik“ (biannual magazine) și „Banatskialmanah“ (calendar-almanach). Additionally, The Democratic Union of Slovacs and Czechs from Romania, mentions the cul-

5 R. A. Petraru, *Protection Of National Minorities In Romania And Republic Of Moldova*, CES Working Papers, III, (2)/2011, pp.330-335.

tural centres in Eibenthal, Gîrnic, Liubcova, Ravensca, Sfânta Elena, Şumiţa and the regional organization of south Banat, based in Moldova Nouă. Folklore ensembles, magazines and publications are also present, among which Okénko is worth remembering. Okénko appears annually and presents the activities of the Czechs in Sfânta Elena, Gîrnic and Moldova Nouă. The Roma community in the Danube Gorge is part of The Mixed Work Group for the Roma by the Prefecture of the county Caraş-Severin, Eşelniţa also has a strong Roma organisation. The Roma from Moldova Nouă are represented by "The Roma League of the Danube Gorge". Gipsy dances ensembles gather regularly at the Technological High-school "The Danube Gorge" in Moldova Nouă. On the other hand, the German community is slowly declining in activities and numbers. The Catholic Church in Moldova Nouă being the only one to organise events and celebrations to cater for the small community of Germans' societal needs.

- ✦ Multilingualism in the aforementioned "acculturation" area of the Danube Gorge is not the American dispute over "the melting pot" or the "salad bowl" (Amoskala, 2020), or the "cultural mosaic" (European Center for Populism Studies - ECPS), it is the place where people understand each other's language as a sign of respect and understanding, customs and Christian holidays are mutually respected, culinary traditions overlap and each home has its own celebration. Each Serbian, Czech or German village or town has got its plate name in the respective language, and so have many other institutions there.

A synchronic approach. From a multicultural Danube Gorge to an intercultural one - a balancing act

Beyond the definition of "intercultural experience" as "the experience of everyone" (Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters, Council of Europe, 2009), be it face to face or mediated, through visual media, the intercultural competence encompasses multiple exchanges, the ability to communicate in multiple cultural contexts, the attaining of a set of values, knowledge and skills, a whole behavioural pattern. And for the "mosaic of ethnocul-

tural groups”⁶ to be turned into an intercultural Danube Gorge, one has to know, identify specific features, express oneself, own mechanisms passed down from generation to generation, keep one’s identity, yet overcome stereotypes, live in common neighbourhoods, marry in the other community, combat social isolation, integrate all. To do this, a balancing act is needed, one that takes the diachronic approach of the existing cultural rights and culture institutions to a new level of societal needs:

- Firstly, time has cemented, beyond the typically Serbian/ Czech/ Romanian /German and Romanian lifestyle patterns, shared day-to-day traditions, customary daily interactions within the extended family, social circles, workplace or marketplace trivia (the social and economic levels), religious gatherings of different faith groups, “facing economic and social problems, problems that have caused the depopulation of villages, by massive migration” to motherland, in the case of the Czech⁷ and Germans, or sharing a common religion with slight differences, the Orthodox Serbian and Orthodox Romanian, not just basic principles of societal laws, but also avenues for intercultural understanding.
- Secondly, it has become common place to state that opportunities for expressing the ethnocultural identity in the public space – personal or common – importance is given to cultural contact, exchange and impact. Cultural institutions, dance clubs, The Moldova Nouă Culture Hall, as well as The Technological Highschool “The Danube Gorge” have regularly initiated common events, regular intercultural celebrations, community projects that promote interculturality, to eventually enjoy a culturally competent region. As The National Unions mentioned in the previous chapter focus on monocultural events, joint events are devised by the previously mentioned institutions in Moldova Nouă.
- The Technological Highschool “The Danube Gorge” from Moldova Nouă, serves as a beacon for positive interethnic relations, high-schoolers leave their often monothnic communities and join the

6 L. E. Hall, “Ethnocultural groups”, In *Dictionary of multicultural psychology: Issues, terms, and concepts* (Vol. 1, pp. 65-65). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452204437.n82>, (2015).

7 S. Preda, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10, issue 30 (Winter 2011): 56-79 ISSN: 1583-0039 © SACRI/2011.

classroom diversity, multilingualism is present, language teaching is at the core of teaching, four mother tongues are taught: Romanian, Serbian, Czech and German. Students learn from each other in and outside classroom, parent engagement is encouraged to provide that intercultural dialogue at adult level, as well.

- ✦ Tourism on the rise in the Danube Gorge, with focus also on cultural tourism in the sense that Czechs, Serbians, Germans, even Roma youngsters return for cultural routes in search of their ancestors or in the quest for understanding their own grandparents' values. Institutions such as: The Association "The Danube" from Moldova Nouă, together with The National Centre for Tourist Information and Promotion Moldova Nouă promote the Danube Gorge tourism across Romanian and abroad. The region has known a new beginning with the Balkan Fest 2022, a multicultural event, where musicians from both banks of the Danube delighted tens of thousands of tourists between 15th and 17th July 2022.

Conclusion

In order to foster a multifaceted perspective and encourage inclusive cultural projects as new generations rise in the Danube Gorge, the historical perspective has taught that in the pursuit of common goals, interethnic cooperation is necessary. Simply beginning to think in new ways, from assertiveness to empathy, critical and flexible thinking, a conscious way of expression, frames of mind that develop through cognitive growth, we pathways for generations to come. Thus, by promoting "the rich multicultural heritage of a region", in this case study the Danube Gorge⁸, tolerance, in all its conceptual forms, will replace discrimination, dialogue will replace individualisation and nationalistic pride. A graphic representation by operationalisation of the main concepts of the survey can be seen in the following mind map:

8 J. Buzalka, "Multiculturalism and National Cultures in Eastern Europe", *Sociologia*, Vol. 40, No. 6/ 2008, pp. 495-513.

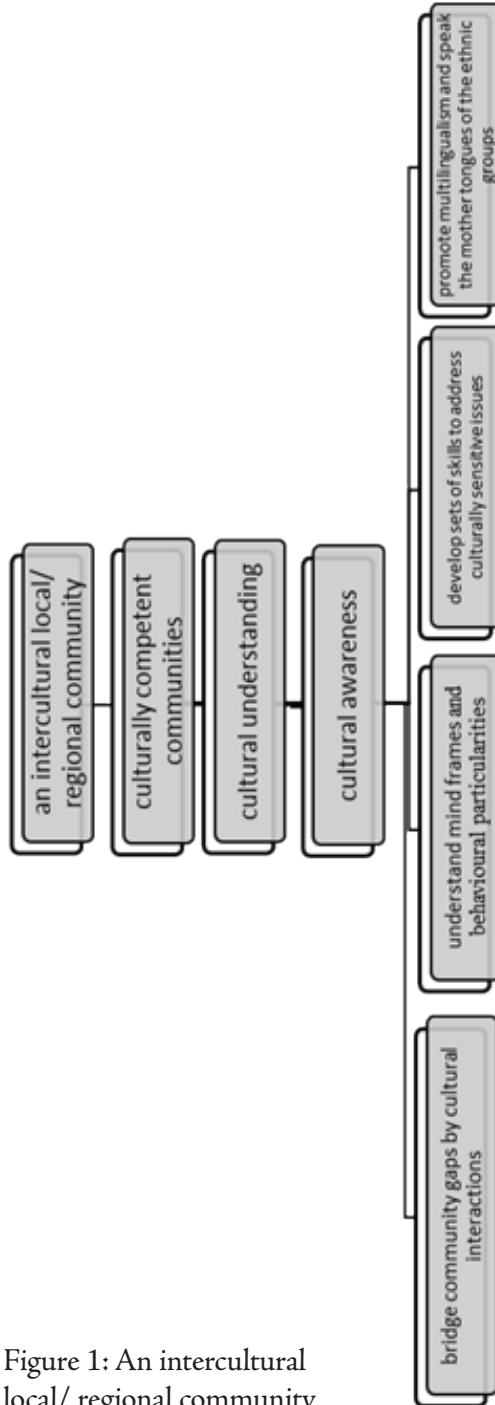


Figure 1: An intercultural local/ regional community

To sum up, ethnic groups, weaving together the a for mentioned tapestry of common values towards a greater mission, galvanising a unique community of the Danube Gorge, remain adamant that the cultural expression should have this very uniqueness at its core.

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