

CONFLICT BETWEEN STATE POWER AND THE CHURCH IN MOLDAVIA DURING THE COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

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Abstract: The article analyses the circumstances of the origin, the course and after-life of a folk religious movement that emerged in 1986, during the time of the communist dictatorship. The religious movement arose in a region inhabited by an ethnic group constituting a religious and linguistic minority, the *Csángós* of Moldavia, in one of the most economically backward zones of Romania. The *Csángós* of Moldavia (a Hungarian-speaking, Roman Catholic ethnic group) in many respects resemble pre-industrial ethnic groups; their world view and religious practice have mediaeval characteristics. The Romanian communist regime had one of the community's leaders killed; a doctor who was also a consecrated priest. After his death people began to attribute miraculous, healing power to the well in front of his house. As a result the well soon became a place of pilgrimage attracting crowds of thousands. The Securitate (the Romanian secret police) tried to prevent the development of the cult; it dispersed what had become a constant crowd of believers around the well and placed it under police control. Despite the bans the pilgrimages did not stop, on the contrary they increasingly took on the character of a movement. After the area around the well was closed, the destination of the pilgrimages was shifted to the village cemetery where the doctor was buried and where the miracles, healings and visions continued.

Keywords: religious movement, myth, miracle, repression, conflict, crisis

This article examines the processes of the emergence of a folk religious movement in 1986–1987 in the zone of confrontation between the exercise of power by the communist dictatorship and the religious practice of communities based on traditional values. It tries to interpret the lines of force along which the community raised to the level of a cult the memory of one of its intellectual members (a victim of the dictatorship) as a strategy for reinforcing the challenged world view. Based on precedents in the literature¹ I use the term *religious* movement to describe the special social situation that arose in the crisis situation to strengthen the symbolical intellectual world.

The *Csángós* live in Moldavia, one of the economically least developed regions of Romania, where the network of civil institutions is on a very low level. The Moldavian

¹ See GAGYI 1998; GIDDENS 2000; HAMILTON 1998; ASSMANN 1999.

Csángós are Hungarian-speaking Roman Catholics. They constitute a linguistic and religious minority among the Orthodox Romanians and as a result they still live in considerable isolation. This is the reason why in many respects they resemble pre-industrial societies, many features of their world view and religious practice are mediaeval. At present the majority are engaged in traditional subsistence farming on land returned to them after the change of system in Romania (after 1989), while others find work in the industrial zone created in the vicinity of their villages. In recent years the young people have been migrating abroad to work on a mass scale.²

In Romania the totalitarian communist dictatorship used terror through its institutions of control as a technical instrument to attain its goals of social homogenisation.³ The continuous interventions by force in the organisation of production, the regulation of distribution and consumption, the attacks on the symbolical sphere (e.g., above all the restriction and persecution of religious life) and the various other forms of constraint created new conditions and relations in the local societies: they gave rise to social fears in relations within society.⁴ During the autocratic rule the society was subject to continuous stress and experienced a whole series of local crises. It is an indication of the social psychological stress of the period that visions were frequently experienced in public buildings and in representative places.⁵

The communist authorities tried to transform the society in Moldavia too. The intervention gave rise to many situations of conflict arising from the mutually exclusive ideological systems of the values proposed by the state power and the traditional Csángó values. In the different villages the conflict usually generated unconscious symbolical resistance. The traditional communities threatened in their world view responded to the "cultural colonisation" with a defence strategy on a cultic base. One manifestation of this was the religious movement that arose around the veneration of a doctor murdered by the communist dictatorship in Trunk (Galbeni).

In 1986 the miraculous well in Trunk became the scene of a cult that mobilised the entire Csángó region. Catholic believers from the villages came in their hundreds to the healing well to share in its miraculous power. The religious movement which in cases must have taken on the appearance of a large-scale pilgrimage, soon spread to the regions bordering on Bákó (Bacău) County. At first the movements organised around the cult of the miraculous well in Trunk did not have a political colouring, but they nevertheless

² They seek seasonal work mainly in Hungary and Italy, but there is also a substantial work migration to Israel. (See MOHACSEK-VITOS 2003: 102.)

³ The communist dictatorship tried to create a mythical legitimisation for all this by creating the mythical images of "the new world" and "the paradise on earth". The idols of the new faith were also created by making the leaders into cult figures. Anyone who was not prepared to identify fully with the basic elements of the communist ideology was regarded as an enemy of the regime and the totalitarian state punished them with merciless reprisals. Nation-building as a form of terror was practised with differing intensity in the different periods of the existence of the communist regime.

⁴ OLÁH 1998: 106.

⁵ The authors cited were referring mainly to the practice of the communist regime in the late 1940s, but it seems likely that these phenomena occurred with varying intensity throughout the whole period. (See GAGYI 1998.)

took place despite the strict bans and restrictive measures of the authorities. The emerging movement was regarded as a manifestation against the regime and was always under the control and pressure of the internal security organs. The threat affected the dimensions of the social identity of entire communities.

The especially strict supervision the communist authorities exercised over the emerging folk religious movement in Trunk was due to the fact that the healing well was located in the gateway of Márton Benedek, a man who had previously been tortured to death by the political police. The political police had placed Márton Benedek, chief physician of Ónfalva (Onești) under surveillance because he continued the theological studies he had begun earlier and was ordained in 1980. According to the information available to date, after repeated harassment, he was executed by the Securitate (Romanian secret police) in 1986 because of his religious moral principles.

The social roles of Márton Benedek in the village community were those of *miracle-working doctor* and *holy man*. These roles of religious folk life have long traditions in Csángó folk religiosity. The persons in these roles always enjoy great respect and have important social functions not provided for by official religion. They represented a very archaic form of religious experience in which the most important components are ecstatic experience, adoration, emotionality and the acceptance of *imitatio christi*. He too was characterised by a very deep interpretation of the Christian ideal, the mediaeval concept of faith which is frequently mentioned in connection with the Csángós of Moldavia. Before his death he expressed the wish to be buried without shoes, saying that Jesus too went barefoot.

We know from an interview with his sister that during the last year of his life Márton Benedek was under intense police surveillance, and during this period he was in the Securitate torture chambers several times. We do not fully understand the unusually aggressive action taken in the 1980s by the Securitate against Márton Benedek. It seems likely that the extensive western church connections maintained by the doctor in Ónfalva (Onești) probably also played a role in this, as well as the fact that he also had contacts with a number of folklorists and collectors from Hungary (among others, Pál Péter Domokos). During the communist dictatorship there was a strengthening of the efforts by the Romanian nation-state to assimilate the Catholic Csángó of Moldavia linguistically and to instil in them a Romanian identity. For this reason, anyone who maintained contacts with Hungary was regarded as an enemy of the regime since such persons could potentially spread and strengthen Catholic Hungarian identity. Márton Benedek must also have appeared especially dangerous to the authorities because he was one of the few Csángó intellectuals who could have a Hungarian identity.

The well began to become a cultic place in the summer of 1986 when women working on the local collective farm reported on the miraculous experiences of villagers at the well. The women drank water from the well of Dr. Benedek who had died not long before, and they all felt that it had a special perfume of roses. Around this time news also spread in the village of the vision seen by the doctor's sister who was a nun: the dead doctor appeared to her and prophesied that his well would have such healing power that it would benefit all diseases. At first public opinion was dominated by the claim that the rose perfume probably came from a piece of soap dropped into the well. But the restless-

ness grew as a few days passed and more and more curious people felt the rose perfume. Rumours spread of an unsuccessful attempt to poison the chief of the secret police made by envious colleagues. According to the narratives, the attacks against him finally succeeded: a doctor colleague who operated on him left scissors inside his abdomen and this caused his death.

Through local party officials and the police, the authorities tried to prevent the memory of Márton Benedek being transformed into a cult and his well being called miraculous. Despite this, great numbers of people from villages in the district appeared at the well to draw water from it and wash in the water. The well very soon became a sacral object attracting crowds of several thousand. According to our data large numbers of pilgrims came to Trunk mainly from the southern and south-eastern counties of Romania. It was only after the movement grew to such a scale that it became an “affair” for the party leadership in the county. Brutal methods were used to prevent people from drawing water from the well. Police were sent to guard the well round the clock and then chlorine was poured into it to destroy the rose perfume indicating its miraculous nature. After that the well ceased to perform miracles.

It is interesting that after the suppressive measures taken by the Romanian political police, the site of the cult shifted to the Trunk cemetery where the doctor was buried. In addition, people began to attribute miraculous power to earth brought from the grave. Local specialists in healing with earth brought from the grave emerged; people in the village who had earlier been active in healing undertook to treat those who came to them in this way. This helped people experiencing individual crisis situations to find a solution to their problems in the given social situation where whole communities felt that they could reorganise the symbolic dimensions of their lives through the rose-perfumed well.

Later the doctor’s grave was cemented over and visiting it was regarded as a crime. Around the same time some members of the community thought that they could occasionally feel the wind bringing the perfume of roses in still weather in the vicinity of what was once the building materials depot. It can be seen that the perfume of roses spread to places that were associated in the collective memory with notions of injustice, sacrilege and martyrdom. People visiting the grave saw in Márton Benedek the embodiment of their individual and collective fate because his well and grave reminded them of their fate. According to Gábor Barna, space becomes “sacred space”, a space intertwined with the history of the community and native land through such commemorative places. A people that has not “taken possession” in this way of the otherwise neutral space cannot feel at home in the land.⁶

The myth of the rose-perfumed well at Trunk strengthened the coherence of the community, generated solidarity and helped to overcome social fears. We can deduce the heightened presence of social fear also from the responses of Moldavian society to the strongest attack made on its way of life, the process of collectivisation resulting in the radical transformation of the economic structure. After the campaign by communists who went from house to house on behalf of the party with a jug of brandy for the “peaceful”

⁶ BARNÁ 2000: 695.

organisation of collectivisation in the Moldavian villages, the eschatological myth of the Anti-Christ tempting people into sin was revived throughout the Csángó region, as a symbolical manifestation of the emerging crisis. According to the story, the Anti-Christ galloping on a black horse offers the water of death from a small jug at the end of the world and those who answer the invitation and drink from the water espouse Evil for all eternity. They will be tortured by terrible thirst, the whole world will be consumed by a rain of fire and only those who resist the temptation of the Anti-Christ will survive. Joining the *collective* (co-operative farm) was made legitimate, ritually concluded, by drinking from the jug of brandy which became the metaphor for an alliance with the devil.

People's fear of losing their land resulted in serious social instability. The community experienced this as an existential crisis since being deprived of the land meant giving up the most important norms for the organisation of life, its symbolical content and their identity. The mythical story belongs among the notions of a broader religious ideology, the notion of steadily deteriorating, linear time fraught with eschatology.

The collectivisation in the villages was characterised by the manifestation of power and the use of open terror. There were villages where people were terrorised with the presence of armed soldiers, many people were beaten with sticks.

In addition, the period of communism was a time of strong social historical shifts for Moldavian society. As a result of the economic policy of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Moldavia, during this period the life space of the Csángó people changed radically because of the presence of industrial plants and factories. In the 1970s and 1980s the Ceaușescu regime continued the industrialisation begun in the 1950s.⁷ The region underwent intensive industrialisation from the second half of the 1960s and as a result an entirely unknown, man-made industrial and demographic landscape and environment was created in the vicinity of the Csángós who were overwhelmingly engaged in agriculture.⁸ At the same time the industrialisation, and at micro level the collectivisation brought modernisation changes resulting in the radical transformation of a traditional way of life. During this period the official, institutional conditions for the spread of atheism, secularisation, rationalisation and technical modernisation were created in Moldavia too.⁹ This process was also strengthened by the collectivisation, after which the industrial workplaces created in the towns absorbed not only the male population but also the majority of the young generations.¹⁰

The urban workplaces set off a wave of migration away from the area and parallel with this, commuting to the towns to work reached an unprecedented scale. At the same time this led to the appearance of a much wider communication gap than previously for the Csángó communities living in a closed social structure and relative isolation, giving them greater opportunities for contact with the foreign culture.

Adaptation of the new influences was not free of conflicts. The legends of belief collected in the 1980s show how widespread at that time were mythical stories predicting the

⁷ VINCZE 2002: 71.

⁸ POZSONY 1996: 174.

⁹ Cf. GAGYI 2004: 260.

¹⁰ POZSONY 1996: 174.

end of the world, in which objects and phenomena of the modern age appear as the works of the Anti-Christ. The rapid technical modernisation generated hidden fears and social tension in the Csángó communities with their closed structure. They felt that the symbolic universe operating their traditional way of life, their system of values and norms were threatened. The aversion to change (still found today) in the Csángó villages of Moldavia was the alarm felt by the pre-modern.

During the autocratic rule the society was subjected to constant stress and experienced a series of local crises. In the given historical/social situation the rose-perfumed well of the doctor at Trunk generated a mass transcendent experience in the midst of a social psychological crisis.¹¹

Looking back on the chronology of the events, the uncertainty of the internal security organs can be felt throughout in the way they tried to handle the "affair". This arose from the characteristic nature of the movement. The movement in Trunk differed from other religious movements or large-scale religious events in that there was no physically existing institution in the background (as in the case of church feasts), and it did not have a chief actor, or rather, he was already dead when the movement emerged.

When the political police executed the doctor, the community quickly created a myth around him which in the given situation contributed to overcoming a collective confused identity and represented the finding of symbolical control over the world.

With its bans and by preventing remembering, the political authorities contributed to the break with the community's past. All the values that represented continuity with the past were questioned.

The communist machinery of power contributed to the violent termination of the normative values arising from tradition which in the long run resulted in disrupting the society's rhythm of life. It transformed the story of remembering the doctor into a founding story or myth, which contributed to tracing the right direction for actions, to the consolidation of values arising from tradition that had been attacked and emptied. In this way the myth contributed to strengthening the symbolical boundaries of the collective identity and the community.

From the 1980s, at a time when Romania's economy was declining and its significance in external politics was diminishing, the political police paid increased attention to all social movements, including those which were not of a political nature. In late 1985, for example, peasants in the Banat region tried to storm the fodder stores, in 1987 workers demonstrated in Brassó/Braşov, Temesvár/Timişoara and Craiova but were repressed by the regime. In contrast with these the religious movement in Trunk was not the result of conscious organisation. The cause of the intensified social and religious activity was not of a political nature either. The uniform movement nature of the activity arose from the fact that the different communities focused on a common problem that had not been consciously assessed and tried to solve it through religious imagination.

The initial phase of the movement was characterised by the practice of the cult, when people tried to apply a cultural therapy with long traditions according to the rules of their

¹¹ GAGYI 1998: 31.

religious traditions. Since at that time the church, an extremely important organisation also of social organisation, was unable to formulate satisfactory answers to the situation that had arisen, important emotional and religious demands remained unsatisfied. The fact that people perceived the action against Márton Benedek as an attack on the secular and church institutions which represented a violation of their entire life-world, resulted in the emergence of a total conflict. The necessity of change and the demand for resocialisation of the life space and rearrangement of the religious traditions culminated in a not specifically millennial expectation, although its archetypal manifestations undoubtedly also appeared here (end of the world, the coming to power of the Evil One, the appearance of a culture hero reminiscent of the Christ archetype).

When the people of Trunk could directly feel the presence of the state power day after day through the police guarding the well and the visits by the county representative of the party committee, nothing happened in the village apart from the circulation of the fantastical story, which clearly shows the absence of political behaviour and the nature of the movement as an irrational outburst.

The movement in Trunk was not without precedents: the expectation of miracles, collective and individual visions had appeared intensively also in the early 1980s in various villages of Moldavia. The cause of the collective expectation of a miracle that grew into general disorder was the occurrence of a highly emotionally charged event, the murder of the Trunk doctor.

The religious movement in Trunk was based on an ideology having broad social legitimisation (miracles happen and can occur again). Márton Benedek was a benefactor of his community. The murder of an innocent benefactor has cultural precedents with long traditions in the beliefs of the Csángós of Moldavia (the influence of Christian mythology, the martyr saints). The myth created the legitimisation for the role of the saint (the community interpreted the life career through the ideology).

The violation from outside of the symbolical sphere caused serious harm to the community's way of life. The mythomotor¹² of the religious movement was the memory of the doctor who had lived a holy life, which acted as an ideological driving force on the mass demonstration of traditional values. Because of its mass nature the ecstatic experience was regarded as a danger to the authorities because it legitimised a religious world view differing from the official one. The political police therefore attempted to suppress it by various means. However, because of the nature of the movement's ideology, at the same time as it was subjected to great pressure by the political authorities it reached the height of its intensity.

After the opening of 1989 the church channelled the myth into its own territory and through its intervention largely contributed to the fact that the cult preserved by the local community in the last decade of the communist dictatorship continues to serve a clearly emerging function in the sacral life of the local community and the people of the neighbouring Csángó villages. It played an inductive role in the development of new

¹² ASSMANN 1999: 77–167.

rites; it is increasingly present in the earlier rites developed by the local community and is increasingly taking over the initiative or leading role in conducting them.

The religious movement of Trunk was the response of an irrational nature organised on religious patterns having deep traditions given by Csángó society to intervention by the state power and modernisation influences and can be attributed indirectly to the presence of the state power and the cultural colonisation by communism.¹³

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