
REGIONAL CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS AMONG THE ROMANIANS OF TRANSYLVANIA, 1861-1914

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The process of national rebirth among the nations of Central and Southeastern Europe demanded considerable effort on part of the intellectual elite to organize and institutionalize culture on national basis.¹ The numerous scholarly societies and associations founded during the first half of the 19th century included in their programs, beyond purely scientific purposes, the spread of national awareness throughout society, both vertically and horizontally. Thus, a dynamic phenomenon of cultural modernization took place within each nation, at a slightly different pace and the dialogue between culture and society took on new functions and dimensions.

During the 19th century, the Romanians of Transylvania undertook a series of initiatives that led to the foundation of cultural institutions in Arad, Braşov, and Oradea, but their results were rather modest.

¹ J. Chlebowczyk, *On Small and Young Nations in Europe. Nation-Forming Processes in Ethnic Borderlands in East-Central Europe*, (Warszawa, 1980), p. 142; E. Niederhauser, *The Rise of Nationality in Eastern Europe*, (Budapest, 1982), p. 91.

Unlike the Romanians, the Hungarians and the Saxons managed to set up, in mid-19th century, two cultural societies which were to gain fame: *Erdély Múzeum* and *Verein für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde*.

The gradual democratization of political life in the Hapsburg Monarchy after 1860 favored the dynamic development of various organizations that contributed to the movement of the Romanians for national emancipation. The institutionalization of cultural life through the creation of associations and societies was one of the characteristic phenomenon of this epoch of liberalization and cultural effervescence.

Through the establishment of regional cultural associations, such as ASTRA in Sibiu and the Maramureş Association in Sighet in the autumn of 1861 and the National Association of Arad in the spring of 1863, cultural activities extended over an ample geographical area, giving the Romanian cultural system in Transylvania a political organization. The writer Ion Agârbiceanu grasped the ambivalent character of ASTRA before the unification of Transylvania with Romania in 1918 when he pointed out that "the association was, from the beginning, not only a cultural one, but also a national one." His observation can also be applied to the cultural associations in Sighet and Arad.

ASTRA became the most important cultural society of the Transylvanian Romanians during the period between 1861-1914. The two institutions from Arad and Sighet had a predominantly local character, as a result of their specific circumstances (by "local" we mean a limited area of activity, rarely surpassing the administrative borders of the county). Our purpose here is to point out to what degree the programs and strategies adopted by these three societies contributed to the creation of an institutional Romanian cultural system in the period before World War I.

The appearance of regional cultural associations expressed the need felt by Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania to develop a higher level of culture among their people, in the way that many famous scholarly institutions did in other countries. The idea of founding a scholarly literary institution appeared at the end of the 18th century and remained a major goal of Transylvanian intellectuals during the first half of the 19th century.² The idea was resumed after the Revolution of 1848-1849, as a natural consequence of the connection between cultural modernization and the desire to become part of the "Europe of all nations." In this respect, the admission by George Bariţiu in 1867, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Romanian Literary

² Dumitru Popovici, *La Littérature roumaine à l'époque des Lumières*, (Sibiu, 1945), p. 280.

Association, the precursor of the Romanian Academy, in Bucharest, is significant: "the idea of founding a Romanian Academic Society is not new, as I, for one, learned of it already ten years ago. This idea was the inspiration for the creation of the three Romanian literary societies of Transylvania, Hungary, and Bucovina, created between 1861-1862."³ An analysis of the organization and the programs of these regional associations helps to identify the similar conceptions that led, some years later, to the founding of the Romanian Academic Society in Bucharest.⁴ From the very beginning, the scholarly sections of ASTRA were organized and they paid special attention to major problems of a general Romanian interest.

The first initiative came from Vincentiu Babeş, on the occasion of the general meeting of the National Association of Arad in 1865. He proposed that measures be taken to bring about the unification of Romanian orthography. ASTRA, the National Association of Arad, the Cultural Society of Bucovina, and the "cultivated men of Romania" were to work together to achieve this goal.⁵ At a time when the dispute between the Latinists and the Etymologists was creating great confusion among the publishers of books, magazines, and newspapers, Vincentiu Babeş called for the achievement of Romanian unity, across political boundaries, using means of creativity and spiritual communication. The unified orthography would be adopted by the three cultural associations, by all publications, and it was to be introduced in schools and in all national institutions.

Three decades later, another revealing example was the elaboration of the first Romanian encyclopedia, on the initiative and under the auspices of ASTRA. The elaboration of the three volumes (coordinated by Constantin Diaconovich) was the result of the contribution of over 200 scholars from all the provinces inhabited by the Romanian people. It is significant that such initiatives came from the Romanians who were under foreign rule and that they preceded, by several decades, similar efforts by the Romanian Academy or of other institutions in the Old Kingdom.

³ See Vasile Curticăpeanu, *Mișcarea culturală românească pentru Unirea din 1918*, (București, 1968), p. 78.

⁴ P. Matei, *ASTRA și rolul ei în cultura națională. 1861-1950*, (Cluj-Napoca, 1986), p. 152.

⁵ Arhivele Statului Arad, Fond ASTRA, dosar 47/1865, f. 149; P. Oallde, *Lupta pentru limbă românească în Banat. Apărarea și afirmarea limbii române la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului al XX-lea*, (Timișoara, 1983), p. 162.

The organization and activities of the scholarly sections of ASTRA in Sibiu, together with the activities of the institutions from Arad and Sighet, emphasized the special character of these regional associations. Both ASTRA and National Association of Arad passed through a period of searching for a national cultural strategy during the first decade of their activities, oscillating between a scholarly program and one of spreading culture among the masses to popularize national values in the village communities. After the founding of the Romanian Academy, ASTRA gradually abandoned the first orientation, devoting its efforts, with remarkable success, to the task of raising the cultural level of the masses. A similar program of spreading culture among the lower classes was undertaken by the associations from Arad and Sighet in the following decades.

The founding of these regional cultural associations was part of the process of the institutionalization of Transylvanian culture on a national basis, as a consequence of the spread of the ideas of Herder and of Romanticism, in accordance with the regional public spirit. This required the foundation of cultural societies that were to assume responsibility for studying the history, language, and folklore of ethnic groups, over a large territory. This phenomenon can also be observed among the Slavic peoples of the region, whose cultural associations had many elements in common with the activities of those in Sibiu and Arad.⁶ ASTRA, the National Association of Arad, and the Maramureș Association all emphasized Romantic cultural objectives that promoted national feeling in their programs. For this reason, P. Cornea defined Romanticism in the political sphere as "the Romanticism of the fight for national liberation."⁷

The magazine *Transilvania*, published by ASTRA for many decades, reflects the association's interest in Romanian history, often glorifying, especially on the occasion of national celebrations, a series of national heroes of the past. The concern for the preservation of national folklore and ethnography, the organization of ethnographic exhibitions, and the promotion of national language and literature, were constant preoccupations of the

⁶ E. Niederhauser, "Die Geschichtsschreibung der nichtungarischen Völker Ungarns in Zeitalter des Dualismus. Zwei Fallstudien." in *Ethnicity and Society in Hungary*, ed. F. Glatz, (Budapest, 1990); and S.B. Kimball, *The Austro-Slav Revival. A Study of Nineteenth Century Literary Foundations*, (Philadelphia, 1973), p. 5.

⁷ P. Cornea, "Romantismul sud-est european (schiță de caracterizare zonală)," in *Regula jocului. Versantul colectiv al literaturii: concepte, convenții, modele*, (București, 1980), p. 204.

associations in Sibiu, Arad, and Sighet. These regional cultural associations edited numerous publications, and organized a vast number of conferences, exhibitions, and other manifestations.

Without a doubt, the Liberal period in Hapsburg history played an important part in the process of founding Romanian regional associations, just as it did for the Czechs and Slovaks.⁸ At the same time, the political component of the Romanian national movement also intensified,⁹ on occasion interfering with the cultural activism espoused by the associations from Sibiu, Arad, and Sighet. This period of prosperity for the national movement of the Romanians of Transylvania was also aided by the unification of the Romanian Principalities in 1859. The Romanian state began to propagate the new "national" model for organizing Romanian society, having a positive influence upon the spirit of the Romanians of Transylvania.¹⁰ In the name of the national ideal, lay intellectuals gradually took over leadership of political and cultural life. At the beginning of the Liberal period, national identity began to prevail over confessionalism. There was also increasing cooperation between the Greek-Catholic or Uniate clergy and Orthodox Church leaders, having positive consequences that led to united action in support of the national ideal.¹¹ It is significant that the Orthodox Bishop Andrei Șaguna was elected president of ASTRA on the occasion of the first general meeting in 1861, while a Greek-Catholic cleric from Blaj, Timotei Cipariu, was chosen as a vice-president. The same thing happened in Arad where, on the occasion of the first general meeting in 1863 of the National Association, the Orthodox Bishop Pr. Ivacicovici, was elected president, while a Greek-Catholic cleric from Lugoj, M. Nagy, was chosen vice-president. Confessionalism thus came to be overshadowed by nationalism as the members of these associations, regardless of their religion, considered the institutions in Arad, Sibiu, and Sighet as the main centers of their cultural and national life. The local branches of ASTRA, active throughout the villages of Transylvania up to World War I, included both Greek-Catholic and Orthodox Romanians.

⁸ S.B. Kimball, *The Austro-Slav Revival*, p. 10.

⁹ Liviu Maior, "Mișcarea națională a românilor din Transilvania. De la autonomie spre unitate statală," in *Națiunea Română. Geneză, afirmare, orizont contemporan*, ed. Ștefan Ștefănescu, (București, 1984), p. 405.

¹⁰ Nicolae Bocșan, "Unirea Principatelor și Transilvania. Implicații culturale," in *Anuarul Institutului de istorie și arheologie Cluj*, XXVII, 1987.

¹¹ Keith Hitchins, "Laic și ecleziastic în mișcarea națională românească din Transilvania," in *Cultură și naționalitate în Transilvania*, (Cluj, 1972), p. 68.

These associations arose out of the natural need for leadership in the cultural development of Romanian society in Transylvania. Being the first secular central Romanian institutions, they also assumed an important role in national life, at least up until the end of the 1860s when the first national political parties were created. These regional associations worked to achieve the unity of Romanian culture, but their activities also laid the groundwork for the organization of a political movement later on. The annual meetings of the cultural societies were occasions for the leaders of the institutions in Arad and Sibiu to discuss problems facing the Romanian political movement. This was especially important as the same individuals led both the cultural and political movements of the time. Thus, on the occasion of the general meeting of the National Association of Arad on 10 May 1865, Vincențiu Babeș proposed the elaboration of a memorandum addressed to the Emperor, asking that Romanian be proclaimed as an official language in all spheres of public life in Hungary (the Banat and Partium having been incorporated into Hungary in 1860). In 1866, a delegation was formed to make the same request of the Emperor.¹² Also, on the occasion of the general assembly of ASTRA in Alba Iulia, in the summer of 1866, the participants voted to forward a memorandum to the Emperor opposing the proposed union of Transylvania with Hungary and requesting the maintenance of the autonomy of Transylvania and the application of the decisions of the Diet of Sibiu (which accorded equal rights to the Romanians and made Romanian an official language in the province, together with Hungarian and German). Many of the leaders of the associations at Sibiu and Arad were among the organizers of the national conferences held at Timișoara and Miercurea Sibiului in 1869 that established the first Romanian political parties in the Hapsburg Monarchy: the National Party of the Romanians of the Banat and Hungary and the National Party of the Romanians of Transylvania. It must also be mentioned that some of the leaders of the National Association of Arad were also leading members of ASTRA in Sibiu. This cross-membership and the annual meetings of the associations helped to maintain a unity of purpose between the groups. Vasile Netea stressed the connection between the cultural and political aspects of these organizations, observing that these associations, made up of representatives of all Transylvanian Romanians,

¹² Arhivele Statului Arad, Fond ASTRA, dosar 55/1866, f. 41.

represented "a great parliament of Romanian culture that prepared the way for a political parliament."¹³

The smaller monthly meetings of the associations from Sibiu and Arad, as well as the annual general meetings of these organizations, served as occasions for the outstanding personalities of the national movement to meet. In the case of ASTRA, this representative character also continued after founding of the Romanian political parties in 1869, the cultural setting offering favorable conditions for the elaboration of the general strategy of the national movement.¹⁴

The Revolution of 1848-1849 demonstrated not only the relatively large social basis of the Romanian national movement, but also revealed the reduced political and cultural level of the peasants. In his discourse delivered at the cathedral in Blaj on 14 May 1848, Simion Bărnuțiu emphasized the necessity of orientating cultural politics toward the lower classes: "the benefits of science and art cannot belong only to a privileged class, but must be shared by all the people..."¹⁵

The abolition of feudal relations after the Revolution brought about a period of relative economic progress for the Romanians of Transylvania, reflected in a slight social ascent of the Romanian communities in the province.¹⁶ The reorganization of the dialogue between culture and society, as stipulated by Simion Bărnuțiu in 1848, raised the acute problem of the foundation of a series of cultural institutions that were intended to connect the village communities with cultural life. Several things demonstrated the peasants' receptivity and desire to become involved in the new modern national life: the enlistment of the 44 communities that made up the former Regiment of Frontier Guards of Năsăud as founding members of ASTRA; offers from numerous communities of peasants to deliver corn and wheat for "the promotion of Romanian culture"; and the enlistment of many wealthy

¹³ Vasile Netea, *Spre unitatea statală a poporului român. Legături politice și culturale între anii 1859-1918*, (București, 1979), p. 74.

¹⁴ Ioan Bolovan, "Cultură și politică în activitatea Asociației naționale arădene 1863-1914," in *Cultură și societate în epoca modernă*, eds. Nicolae Bocșan, Nicolae Droiu, and Aurel Răduțiu, (Cluj-Napoca, 1990).

¹⁵ Cornelia Bodea, *1848 la români. O istorie în date și mărturii*, vol. I, (București, 1982), p. 482.

¹⁶ Simion Retegan, *Dieta Românească a Transilvaniei 1863-1864*, (Cluj Napoca, 1979), p. 13.

peasants as members of the National Association of Arad (they represented 27.3% of the total membership in 1864).¹⁷

The foundation of regional associations gave the national cultural movement a dynamic aspect, extending it over a large geographical area. For example, in 1864, the 1,017 members of the National Association of Arad came from 220 communities from the Banat and Crișana,¹⁸ a fact that clearly reveals the territorial extension of the activities of this institution. The Liberal period was characterized by the access of village communities to cultural life for the first time (even if this access was achieved at times only through the agency of the rural elite: priests, teachers, and village officials). The implication of peasant communities in the national movement also resulted in a reorientation of the relationship between ordinary people and public life. The local branches, and later the offices, organized by ASTRA in almost all parts of Transylvania created the background for the political activities of the rural elite and wealthy Romanian villagers.

The associations from Sibiu, Arad, and Sighet adopted a "social program" that included activities such as conferences on popular culture, editing books and other publications for peasants, the founding of village libraries, and the organization of courses to teach peasants to read and write. From this point of view, the activities of these regional associations during this period, which tended to popularize the sciences and to educate and spread culture among the masses, interfered with their preoccupation for scholarly creation and higher culture (especially in the case of ASTRA). The cultural strategy of these regional societies resulted from the compromise between serious scholarship and efforts to popularize national culture among the masses. After the founding of the Romanian Academic Society, the task of popularizing culture dominated the activities of the associations from Arad, Sibiu, and Sighet, laying the groundwork for the political movement established after the creation of the dual monarchy.

These regional cultural associations expressed, above all, the need for modernizing Romanian society. Their establishment resulted from a combination of complex internal factors that characterized the specific, economic, cultural, and political situation at the local level and the existing

¹⁷ Vasile Curticăpeanu, *Mișcarea culturală românească pentru Unirea din 1918*, p. 68; and Sorina Bolovan, Ioan Bolovan, "Evoluția cantitativă și compoziția socio-profesională a membrilor asociației naționale arădene 1863-1910" in *Crisis*, XIX (1989), p. 235.

¹⁸ *Catalogul membrilor și statutelor Asociațiunii Naționale în Aradu pentru cultura și conversarea poporului român*, (Arad, 1864), p. 1-33.

institutional and cultural background in Transylvania and the neighboring parts of the Hapsburg Monarchy in the middle of the 19th century. During this period, cultural contacts, the exchange of ideas, and the individual relationships between intellectuals all played an important role in the rise of national movements. Matica Srpska, founded in 1826, served as a model for other similar associations created during the period of cultural rebirth among the Slavs within the Hapsburg Monarchy.¹⁹ Romanian associations incorporated elements of the Slavic cultural associations, as well as those created by the Hungarians and Saxons of Transylvania. This assertion is supported by many aspects of the organization and programs of Romanian cultural societies; a document referring to the foundation of the National Association of Arad begins: "We, the founders, when we observe the impressive work of the associations of the Magyar nationality and those of other nations, such as the associations of Saint Stephen, Saint Ladislas, Matica..."²⁰

The creation of these regional cultural associations among the Romanians of Transylvania and Hungary gave a spark to the national cultural movement, extending it over a large geographical area. This meant the direct involvement of the community in the national movement, surpassing the Enlightenment phase of cultural development that emphasized cultural creation. The dialogue between culture, society, and nationality, carried on through the agency of the associations from Sibiu, Arad, and Sighet, emphasized some of the essential aspects of cultural modernization in Transylvania and, not least, of the development of a national strategy. ASTRA was the most important cultural society of the Romanians of Transylvania during that period, being the principal coordinator of general cultural progress among the Romanians of Transylvania up to World War I.

¹⁹ S.B. Kimball, *The Austro-Slav Revival*, p. 14.

²⁰ Arhiva Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române. Arad, group I, dosar 229, document 24/1861, fila 3V.