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Unlikely Brothers?

Entangled Székely and Moți Peripheries in a Contested Province: Transylvania 1900–1944

Over the course of a century, Transylvania was a hotly contested borderland that was subject to claims by both Hungarians and Romanians. Changing hands from Hungary to Romania from 1919 to 1920, divided between 1940 and 1944, and finally restored to Romania in 1947, the conflict produced images of alterity that posited Romanians and Hungarians as opponents, not only in the present, but at the origins of their common past. Thus, issues of precedence, such as whether the Hungarian conquerors around 900 A.D. had found Romanians in the province (either descendants of the Dacians or only of their Roman conquerors) or only Slavs, or the memory of armed struggles between Hungarians and Romanians, have shaped discourses on the topic of Romanianness and Hungarianness. Within these broader groups, however, regional and ethnographic varieties were acknowledged and often hailed as their most authentic, oldest and purest variety (see T. Szabó 2008). Perhaps not coincidentally, the discursive reflections of national rivals also noticed these regional groups and weaved them into their own discourse as significant others.

Two of these regional groups, the Romanian-speaking and predominantly Orthodox Moți, and the Hungarian speaking and Western Christian Székelys, figured prominently during the 19th and early 20th centuries within the respective national imageries in their dual roles, and signified the extreme opposite of Hungarianness and Romanianness. Still, starting at the beginning of the 20th century, a curious development occurred that brought them ever closer to each other and ultimately created an entanglement between Moți and Székelys. Arguments legitimating and facilitating state-led development efforts in these geographic zones were consciously created in a way that not only used customary tropes and figures to recast one's own group as deserving aid, they also did so through the deliberate use of elements that were typical for discussing the other group. Because both the Székelyland (*Székelyföld* in Hungarian, *Secuime* in Romanian) and the Țară Moților ("Mócvidék" in Hungarian) were economically underdeveloped and backward, life tended to be traditional and rural, and situated in the mountains. As a result, the above efforts targeted marginality, mobilised the centre and attempted to show why this kind of marginality was central to the nation's future.

Throughout this process, not only did political rhetoric evolve into entanglement, contemporary academic and quasi-scientific discourses followed suit and joined the political discourse in its effort to demonstrate the authenticity and centrality of marginal groups. Most of the scientific products of the pre-WWII era – in history, ethnography, historical linguistics, archaeology – were part of an ongoing effort to prove and substantiate nationalist political claims and to delegitimise rival demands. This does not mean they entirely lacked any scientific value and merit, but their context was – and this is especially true for the works cited in this text – political, and their use was politicised. Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that these academic currents within the broader national discourse also became entangled with each other across national boundaries. In this chapter, I will argue that the similar economic characteristics of the Moți and Székely regions, together with their analogous geographic and symbolic situation within the same contested region and within the respective national spaces, combined with the nationalising developmental model of the nation-state, facilitated this entanglement. In turn, the entanglement recast the respective groups, morphing the Moți and Székelys into a vaguely defined but tightly interconnected single group and challenging the usual distinction between nationalism and regionalism. In doing so, I will first briefly outline their regions and their socio-economic characteristics, describe their imagery from within and without, and, finally, analyse how the respective discourses appeared and morphed into each other during the first half of the 20th century.

1 Seclusion, remoteness, social ills vs. past heroism and purity: Țară Moților and Székelyland

Since the beginnings of modern nationalism, Transylvania was a contested territory that had been claimed by Romanian and Hungarian nation-builders. The union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Hungary was among the famous 12 points of the 1848 Hungarian revolution, while in May of that year, a Romanian assembly in the city of Blaj/Balázsfalva demanded the recognition of Romanian as an equal nationality in the principality of Transylvania and rejected unification in any form. In the armed conflict between imperial troops and Hungarian revolutionaries, Romanians sided with the emperor, and in 1863 they were finally recognised as one of the four nations in the province (see Deák 1979, Retegan 1979).
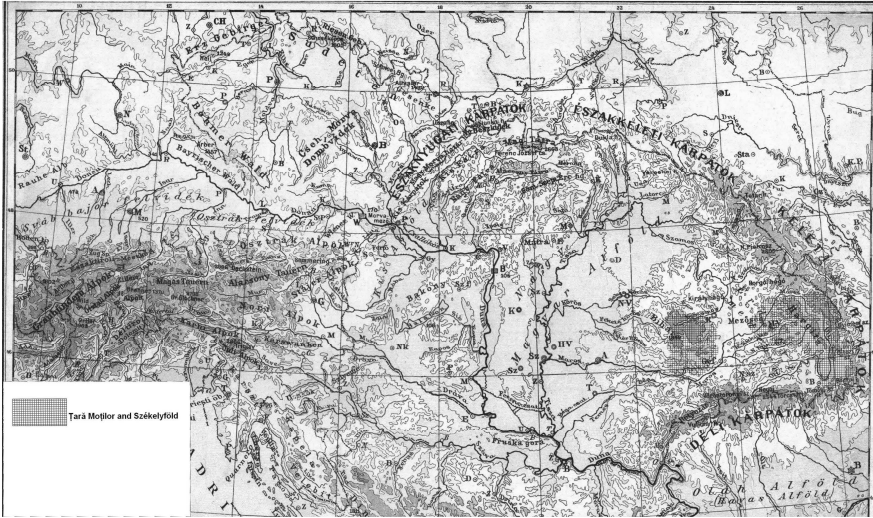
Fig. 1: Natural geography of Austria-Hungary.[1]

Fig. 2: Interwar Romania and Hungary.[2]

The *Ausgleich* in 1867 between the emperor and the Hungarian liberal elites again transferred the province under Hungarian rule. Within their newly independent

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[1] Kogutowicz Manó: Magyar földrajzi iskolai atlasz 1913, public domain.

[2] National Library of Wales, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

state, Hungarian elites pursued the goal of unification, the creation of a Hungarian nation state. Even though the Law on Nationalities from 1868 granted linguistic rights and civic equality, politics increasingly became nationalist and was driven by an ethnic understanding of the nation. As a result, school policies, administrative reorganisations and cultural policies attempted to assimilate minorities, including Romanians. Magyarisation was to bring strength and unity, the creation of a homogeneous national space that included Transylvania (see Brubaker et al. 2007, 56–67).

In turn, nationalist elites among the minorities vowed to fight for the autonomy of their nation and demanded the recognition of the political subjectivity of minorities. For Romanians, it meant Transylvanian autonomy, or, as a more radical demand, unification with Romania (see Fati 2007). Their moment came in 1918, when defeated Hungary, unable to contain the advance of Romanian troops, did not want its new, democratic government to suppress a Romanian national revolution. In the ensuing period, however, Romanian politics was driven by the same ideas as the ones that had motivated Hungary prior to 1918. They envisaged an ethnically homogeneous Romania, including all of Transylvania, and pursued this goal with methods similar to the Hungarian practices. Finally, the Second Vienna Award of 30 August 1940, an act of arbitration by the foreign ministers of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, reunified the northern parts of Transylvania with Hungary, bringing Székelyföld under Hungarian rule once again (until 1944), while leaving the Țara Motilor as part of Romania (see Livezeanu 2000, Brubaker et al. 2007 68–82). As the region inhabited by both Moți and Székelys was part of these rival national projects, it was imagined and discursively constructed against the backdrop of the Hungarian-Romanian rivalry.

The most palpable common denominator of the two regions is the natural geography. That is to say, the importance of high mountains and their impact on climate, agriculture and economy. As a consequence, communication lines with the outside world were often weak, causing seclusion if not for all, then at least for most inhabitants of the area. Up through the end of World War II, the presence of mountains was a defining element for the economy and society, though with the not insignificant difference that the Székelyland was a series of smaller basins where arable land, even if it was of mediocre quality, was accessible. This contrasts with the Țară Moților, where narrow river valleys provided a small quantity of ground for raising cereals. Thus, forestry and husbandry on the mountain pastures was the almost excusive form of agriculture in Țară Moților, while in Székelyland they were only dominant. In both cases, craftwork made from wood, which was sold outside the region, figured among their most important products.

Furthermore, Țară Moților was also a region with important deposits of gold and other metals, which were mined by individuals and the crown.

The existence of some form of commons within the villages was also important, and a feature that either survived the abolishment of serfdom (Székelyland) or afterwards generated conflicts with the owners (Țară Moților). In the Székely villages and districts, common ownership of pasture and forest dominated and defined the method of exploitation. Instead of a profit-oriented production of lumber and timber, it was a matter of providing necessities (lumber, firewood, forest fruits and mushrooms, pasture for cattle, etc.) to the households, but the start of land consolidation at the end of the 19th century entailed the consolidated use of forests and enabled local farmers to own more than 100 acres. This reduced the use of land for their own lives and made it possible for them to make a profit (see Egyed 2004: 27). The ownership rights of the Țară Moților mountains, however, rested with the crown, though Maria Theresa granted free pasture rights and wood usage to the locals, who not only took advantage of the latter for household use, but for commercial purposes as well. Moti craftsmen roamed the country, sold their products and bought the food of the lowlands.

Nevertheless, both areas were among the least developed in dualist Hungary (see Demeter/Szulyovszky 2018: 15–84), and against this backdrop of traditional economy with minimal productivity and a weak capacity for food production, population growth caused serious issues. Forests were a potential source of additional revenue, but in the Székelyland, lack of capital and knowledge constrained the emergence of new methods of exploitation in the common forests (see Péter 1906, Oroszi 1989: 37–38). In the Țară Moților, the state forestry implemented new forest management methods, or leased the forest out to entrepreneurs. This gradually rescinded existing customary rights and imposed restrictions on the use of state-owned forest (holdings that previously belonged to the crown), which severely reduced access to pastures and forest. The result was the loss of resources that locals used in their household, for cattle raising and for craftsmanship. The combination of natural conditions, the limited income of families, and population growth led to steady migration that was often permanent. Székelys were roaming the streets of Bucharest and hailed as good craftsmen and reliable housemaids. They were also known to be victims of human trafficking. Moți visited the lowlands as seasonal workers and traders of their own products (see Erdélyi 1926: 5–6, Makkai 2018, Makkai 2019, Csiki székelyek nyomora 1900, Gunda 1944: 472, Etédi 1929: 249).

Thus, the living conditions in both regions were bad and poverty was widespread. However, in this regard, the Țară Moților was much worse off, with diseases spreading more broadly, and malnourishment more frequent, not least

because of the most significant difference-maker in socio-economic indicators and social characteristics: education.

Although literacy rates in the Székelyland were somewhat lower than the average in the comparison of Hungarian counties, they were significantly higher than the ones in Țară Moților – as Table 1 shows:

Tab. 1: Literacy Rates and Mother Tongue in Székelyföld and Țară Moților at the Beginning of the 20th century (in percentages)[3]

Region/County	Hungarian Mother Tongue			Romanian Mother Tongue			Overall
	1880	1890	1900	1880	1890	1900	1900
Țară Moților							
Alsó-Fehér (Alba de Jos)	38.5	45.5	56.6	5.6	9.7	18.6	26.4
Kolozs (Cluj)	22.8	34	43.8	4	8.8	11.8	21.5
Hunyad (Hunedoara)	50	55.9	65.1	9	8.3	13.8	21.4
Torda-Aranyos (Turda – Arieș)	37.3	43.4	51.7	5	9.3	12.8	23.1
Székelyföld							
Csík (Ciuc)	21	32	41	3.1	6.2	12.9	37.5
Háromszék (Trei Scaune)	32.8	43.7	52.7	12.6	19.4	25.6	48.9
Maros-Torda (Mureș–Turda)	29.8	37	44.7	8.8	12.4	17.8	34.8
Udvarhely (Odorhei)	29.5	41.5	51.4	12.8	16.2	25.1	50.8

Elementary education was traditionally more efficient among Székelys, and certain historical developments, especially the separate existence of Transylvania during the Ottoman conquest of Hungary (1541–1699) and religious diversity after the reformation, led to the emergence of important educational centres (Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc, Kézdivásárhely/Târgu Secuiesc, Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș, Székelykeresztúr/Cristuru Secuiesc, Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe, Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc) at the secondary level. These were highly respected schools that attracted pupils from afar. Given that Székelys were a privileged group enjoying collective nobility until 1848, pursuing an education was a feasible career path that was not restricted by the limitations that serfdom imposed on personal liberties. Before 1848, more than half of Székelys enjoyed

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3 Source: Népszámlálás 1900 (1909: 162–163.)

feudal rights or counted as free peasants (see Csetri/Imreh 1990: 385. Table 9). It was true, however, that the Moți also held some form of special status, as without much arable land, the system of serfdom was impossible to implement there, and individual miners (around 15% of the population) often had a privileged status (see Csetri/Imreh 1990: 398–399). Thus, special status and special forms of ownership, or access rights, were entangled and contributed to the sense of specificity associated with these groups.

But the most important factor behind the idea that Székelys and Moți were special within their emerging nations was neither the legal peculiarity nor the specificities that emerged from the natural environment itself. For both groups, a historical narrative was constructed that claimed a different form of authenticity and was posited as a pure expression of the nation's origins and dreams. Given the conflict between Hungarians and Romanians – one that also entailed legal and social differences, as in most cases Hungarian noblemen were the overlords of Romanian serfs – it is hardly surprising that part of these historical constructs was rooted in past conflicts (see Hegedüs 2010).

Nevertheless, the key element of the Székelys alleged difference from Hungarians, and of their purity, was the tradition and legend of their direct descent from the Huns – more specifically, from King Attila's son, Csaba (see Hermann/Orbán 2018: 22 –359). Since the 18th century, a carefully crafted mythology appeared and spread among Székelys. It became more and more popular, as it seemed to reinforce their privileged status in feudal Transylvania. According to this line of argument, their privileges were the result of their Hun origins, which were acknowledged by the Hungarian kings when they began to settle in Eastern Transylvania in the 12th century.

The Moți had no special feudal privileges to retroactively "prove" their mythical origins, as was the case with the Székelys. But seclusion and the practice of endogamy, easily interpreted as purity, also enabled the invocation of legendary descent, this time from the first ancestors of Romanians. Thus, some authors claimed that the Moți were the remnants of the Dacians, or the Roman legionaries who withdrew to the mountains after Roman Dacia was abandoned by Emperor Aurelian in A.D. 271. Some authors even pointed to ethnographic similarities to prove that the Moți were connected to Illyrians (see Philippide 1923: 175).

Historical myths facilitated the assertion of privileges, but for modern nation-building, more recent armed conflicts lent both Székelys and Moți an additional significance. The Țară Moților was the core area of two Romanian uprisings. One, between 1783 and 1784, was against Hungarian landlords (led by Horea, Cloșca and Crișan); the other, between 1848 and 1849, against the unification of Transylvania with Hungary (led by Avram Iancu). Horea failed and was executed

together with Cloșca and Crișan, while Iancu fought on the winning side in an alliance of Imperial and Russian troops against Hungarian revolutionaries. However, the rights provided by the neo-absolutist centralisation after 1849 fell short of the Romanian demands for political autonomy, and Iancu died in a mental asylum. On both occasions, violence was committed on a large scale and sometimes brutally, which meant that they continued to linger in social memory even in the first decades of the 20th century. Thus, the term Moți (Hungarian for *móc*) was easy to use as shorthand for unrestrained and primitive savagery. As examples of how the Moți and their world were imagined, the *Budapesti Hírlap* wrote that the "Moți are the most dangerous of Romanians" (A románok kultúrája 1897, my translation), while the *Pestmegyei Hírlap* asserted that someone who was "raised in the lap of wild Moți" also "breathed the air of hell" (21 krajcár és Kossuth Ferenc 1894, my translation).

The uprising and civil war in Hungary from 1848 to 1849, during which the Moți mountains were only one theatre, also figured prominently in the reshaping of Székely imagery. The Székelys, with their high number of free or privileged people, and with many experienced soldiers from the imperial border regiments that had been established on this territory in 1762, used their secluded countryside to set up armed defences against a numerically and technically superior imperialist enemy. While never the scene of large battles, the area was an important recruitment base and the location of some essential arms factories up until the Hungarians were defeated. The events of these 15 months thus nicely demonstrated the alleged legendary martial capabilities of the Székelys, and even more importantly, situated the group as the core supporters of Hungarian nation-building. Their enthusiastic participation in this founding event of Hungarian nationhood, the revolution and war of liberation of 1848-1849, again proved their exceptional national characteristics and reinforced their claims for special treatment after the loss of their feudal status (see Egyed 1978; Egyed 1998). These claims were based on the myth of their Hun origins (see Egyed 1978; Egyed 1998).

But the rage of the Székelys did not spare Romanians and German-speaking Saxons, as they pillaged a series of villages, and small towns saw images of their savagery first-hand. Thus, around 1900 two regional groups lived in Transylvania whose image and meaning for the rival nation states of Hungary and Romania was surprisingly similar. The area they lived in was situated in the middle of the imagined national territory of the respective rival, which literally blocked any connections between co-nationals. The stereotypical images of the groups mirrored each other, as they were considered both the most authentic within their nations as well as the most feared among the other nation. Both were marginal in socio-economic and geographic terms, and as such, situated at the extreme

opposite ends of the respective spectrums for Hungarianness and Romanianness. Being Székely or Moți was the ultimate Hungarian-Romanian antagonism: each represented the ethnically purest and most enthusiastic supporter of violent nationalism within their own kin, and as such, was the most distanced from the other.

2 State-led development efforts

The Székelyland and Țară Moților were just two of Hungary's mountainous and underdeveloped regions, and the state-led development efforts did not start with them either. The first so-called *Akció* (action plan) was introduced in the northeastern counties, where Ruthenians lived in the Carpathians. This plan fused nationalism, antisemitism and conservative modernisation ideas, as the main social ill detected by its leader, Ede Egan, was the dominance of Jewish middlemen and money-lenders (for Egan, they were simply usurers) in the region's rural communities. Egan's main goal was to improve the situation of the Ruthenian speakers – often indifferent to nationalist politics – by making them willing to assimilate and become loyal subjects (see Gyurgyák 2001: 350–359; Oroszi 1989).

But alongside its nationalist aims, the action plan disseminated knowledge in the form of brochures and lectures, and, in addition to promoting cooperatives, provided the means for better agricultural techniques and easier access to cheap credit. At its core was a reform plan for the mountain economy which was supposed to introduce new species for husbandry, advocate for a more methodical use of mountain pastures and promote household industry (see Oroszi 1989; Balaton 2017b; Balaton 2019). It also entailed investment in roads, communication, schools, dispensaries and public health services. Never fully implemented and failing to transform local communities – despite the attempted knowledge transfer – the Ruthenian Action Plan did not achieve its sweeping goals. Nonetheless, it was still the largest coordinated effort to invest in the region.

This action-plans model that was subsequently introduced to almost all of the Kingdom of Hungary's mountain regions (except the Țară Moților, see Balaton 2019) involved measures that were usually implemented elsewhere. But the intention of these actions was always ambiguous. A complete transformation towards social modernity in these more traditional communities, which would involve the upending of traditional social relations, was treated as dubious. Instead, the plans focused on promoting economic development in a more practical sense, which would preserve as much of traditional society as possible. However, the plan to modernise the state was not always just a top-down activity. The

Székely Akció (action plan) was the first to grow out of a social movement that spread all over the country, and had the aim of mobilising support and putting pressure on the government. Local elites used the symbolic weight of the Székely for the Hungarian national imagery, which was to advance their argument and frame the *Akció* as a necessary and urgent effort to save the Székelys from catastrophe, and the Hungarian nation as a whole from the loss of its easternmost bastion (see Balaton 2010; Balaton 2017a).

The so-called *Székely Kongresszus* (Székely Congress) held in 1902 at the small spa resort of Tusnád (Băile Tuşnad), demonstrated that there was a mobilisation of people and mass support for the government intervention. It was a multi-day event where delegations from several villages presented their problems and made speeches demanding immediate action. They pointed out that the best of Hungarians were in danger of disappearing, and those present were able to enjoy a series of cultural activities that was supposed to demonstrate the authentic character of all Székelys (see Balaton 2017a).

Thus, contrary to the Ruthenian case, the usual toolkit of developmental intervention aimed at preserving the alleged national authenticity of the region. It was also about the restoration of a way of life and form of community ownership that had been violated by the intrusive capitalism represented by capitalist forestry enterprises (see Oroszi 1989: 38–39; Nagy 2013). On the other hand, however, it viewed industrialisation as the only way of stopping the emigration of people who were either leaving for Hungarian cities or – a more threating action in the eyes of the Action's nationalist initiators – for Romania, where tens or even hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were living. Their feared assimilation into Romanian society was a dual threat in that not only was there net loss of Hungarians, but a net gain of the "enemy" as well (see Nagy 2017: 65–92; Nagy 2011).

The Székely Akció fostered a rare consensus among Hungary's deeply divided political factions, where that of István Tisza fought bitter battles with his opposition. However, this consensus did not yield immediate social and economic results, not to mention self-sufficient solutions. The preservation of what contemporaries saw as the first positive signs was only possible through continuous financing of the effort. Therefore, a government delegation – a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture – was established in the region, which oversaw ongoing projects and regularly reported on their progress. The action plan itself was extended year after year with significant budget subsidies (see Balaton 2019).

It was during one of the parliamentary debates on the allocated budget that the first entanglement between Ţară Moţilor and Székelyföld emerged, at least with regard to development efforts. The Romanian nationalist MP Ştefan Cicio-Pop (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 305–314) delivered a speech in which he

demanded that the *Székely Akció* be extended to the Țară Moților. Given that parliament was dominated by Hungarian nationalists, one could view the Romanian politician's decision not to attack the legitimacy of advancing nationalist goals among the Székelys as nothing more than a clever tactic. This was not the case, however, as he also recognised the necessity of their effort and the legitimacy of its goals, and praised the patriotism of the Székely MPs who had managed to increase the portion of the budget allocated to the action plan (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 306). At the same time, in a speech dedicated to presenting a sociographic description of the problems facing the Țară Moților, he pointed out the striking similarities in the social and economic conditions for both regions, including the detrimental effects of new forest exploitation methods (he likened them to bribery, swindle and graft) in the Székelyland. He argued that the Moți, who also dealt with these same problems, were also entitled to state support and the implementation of the same practical measures. The issue of Moți migration provided a strong analogy, though the fact that it was to the Hungarian lowlands went unmentioned. Nevertheless, it was an obvious counterpart to Székely emigration to Romania (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 306–314).

Romanian deputies continued to pursue the issue from this point on, and not only Cicio-Pop, but also the leader of the Romanian National Party himself, Iuliu Maniu, participated in debates regarding the extension of the *Székely Akció* to the Moți (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. XXI 1906: 475; Képviselőházi Napló vol. VII 1910: 223 – 224, 229). Maniu became the head of Transylvania's Romanian governing body after a mass assembly declared the territory's unification with Romania on 1 December 1918. Thus, the establishment of a Government Commissariat for the Țară Moților (*Comisariat Guvernamental pentru Țară Moților*, later *Comisariat Guvernamental pentru Munți Apuseni*, *Munți Apuseni* meaning "Western Mountains" in English) as one of its first acts should not surprise anyone. The task of its leader, Laurențiu Pop, was to present a survey of the area's socio-economic conditions and propose solutions (see ANIC CD Admin. Gen. doar 10/1919 f. 102-104).

However, the action plan was not implemented, as the Ruling Council was dissolved in April 1920. But the Moți's problems did not disappear, and subsequent governments, irrespective of their political colours, regularly returned to the idea of a Moți action. Governments led by the Bucharest-based National Liberal Party (Ciupercă 1992) were initially less inclined to start development efforts, but they had to admit that the situation was hardly tolerable and needed intervention. Thus, they organised a Moți congress in 1924, where deputations from various villages presented their misfortunes and demands to government representatives who subsequently discussed possible measures with a range of local

and national experts (see Rusu Abrudeanu 1928: 503–506). A Government Commissariat was re-established in 1927, then in 1929 and 1933. It survived the next change in government at the end of the latter year and throughout the 1930s operated as part of the Cluj County prefecture (see Zainea 2007). Somewhat surprisingly, the congress format had a popular appeal too. The State Security Police (*Siguranța*), among others, reported in 1928 that a delegation from various Moți villages had urged Amos Frâncu, a senator, paternal figure and long-time defender of the Moți, to convoke another congress (see ANIC DGP 17/1928 f. 16–17).

The continuous return to these kinds of institutional structures not only proves their viability, but also how little the actions achieved in the region (see *Guvernul face totul și nimic pentru Moți* 1927). In the meantime, the Székelyföld suffered not only from the discontinuation of the Hungarian *Székely Akció*, but also from a series of nationalising measures that had little to do with development (see Livezeanu 2000: 140–142, Bottoni 2013). These measures included the nationalisation of large parts of the community properties, the so-called *Csíki Magánjavak*, a public foundation that had been created from crown property dedicated to the former border guard communes on *Székelyföld* territory was used to support the Székelyföld elementary schools. Thus, the Székelys faced a new problem, one that was identical to one experienced by the Moți: the state forestry regulations caused them to lose their access to the mountains.

Because of ongoing underdevelopment and the fact that local Hungarian MPs were no longer able to influence government decisions, the roles of the dualist era were reversed. Unsurprisingly, from this point on Hungarian politicians referred to the Moți Action as a model, and requested state intervention based on the reasoning that the Székelyland suffered from the same problems and should receive similar treatment (see Szoboszlay 1928). One of the ideas that continued to resurface was the creation of a separate Moți county (the region was divided among four counties), and the Hungarian press often referenced this when discussing the creation of a separate Székely county (as this region was also shared between four counties) (see Mócmegye, székely ispánság, szász grófság 1929). However, the latter would have also potentially been the realisation of the dream of an autonomous Hungarian territorial unit, and as such would have been hard to imagine as being part of efforts to nationalise Greater Romania.

The *Székely Akció* thread was picked up again in September 1940, when the region was reunified with Hungary, leaving most of Țară Moților to Romania. The Hungarian government convened a special commission for the region's economic development (see Oláh 2008: 20–35; Ablonczy 2011: 189–194; Szavári 2011) and once again made this issue a core focus. With Țară Moților finally politically detached from Székelyföld, the political and economic entanglement between both

regions loosened. Even in this peculiar moment, however, it formed part of the basis for the argument regarding possible measures in Székelyföld. These included the Romanian government's granting of transport tariff reductions to trains coming from Țară Moților (see Csak az exportálhasson tűzifát 1937; Hamarosan rendeződik 1941; Az Erdélyi Gazdasági Tanács 1941).

3 Entangled peripheries? The discursive representation of Székelyföld and Țară Moților

In their respective discourses, the Székely and Moți actions were a constant point of reference as models and arguments against the dual form centres. First of all, the idea of authenticity legitimised unconditional support for the periphery. The danger threatening the most authentic element of the nation was to a very large degree a common cause and the potential loss would have been irreplaceable. Secondly, the rival national movement's model was not only presented as a threat (its success would undermine their own nation) – it was also as an example to follow, a best practice of conscious, goal-oriented nation-building that helped remedy the problems arising from a modernisation that allegedly endangered the national way of life. Therefore, it was not only to be followed as an allegedly proven development model that was practical and efficient, but also as the logical form of both national struggle and survival.

Therefore, the developmental elements of the discourse happening around that time were entangled in multiple ways. Furthermore, their entanglement sometimes became almost physically palpable, especially when discursive acts happened within the same space: in the rooms of their respective parliaments or in the pages of monthly reviews and daily newspapers. The arguments, which usually only served to promote the case of one group and not both, could shift from 1) using the example of the other as a threat to urge the leaders of their own nation to act on 2) legitimising ideas to promote their own nation through accepting, even upholding the nationalist justification of their rivals as an example for their respective development project.

The speech that the Romanian Cicio-Pop gave in the Hungarian parliament in 1906 is a prime example of the second type of argument, and his fellow Romanian National Party MPs followed suit in subsequent years. He began by praising the minister as being highly competent over the course of many years, someone whose stewardship will benefit every inhabitant of the country. This was followed by a reference to the serious ongoing issues with regard to the forests, and again

acknowledged how the ministry increased the *Székely Akció*'s budget at the behest of the Székely MPs:

> I pay tribute to those of my fellow Székelys, [fellow MPs, my translation] who moved everything for the interest of the Székely race, who keep this question on the agenda with unmatched zeal because it will make the country pay attention not only to the Székely question, but to extend this interest to other poor areas of the country. (Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 306)

The decision to recognise the initiative's merits on its own nationalist terms instead of attacking the tenets of Hungarian nationalism was still not enough to result in a favourable solution to Cicio-Pop's request. However, it was still a way to link Székely and Moți with powerful images of poverty that were quite similar to the ones used to describe Székelyföld. Cicio-Pop went into detail regarding how locals were denied access to the forests and had to bribe the rangers (usually with physical labour, as they did not have money) in order to obtain this access. He also discussed how the industrialised enterprises provided wood of poor quality to the Moți craftsmen, who consequently lost their consumers, and how the Moți suffered from the heavy-handed application of the forestry regulations, which resulted in serious punishments for minor offences (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 308–310). Descriptions of the Székelyland given before the Székely Congress took place abounded in similar themes (see Székely Kongresszus 1901: 79, 81), together with pictures of poverty, alcoholism and hunger. All of these were tropes that Cicio-Pop had mentioned (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 310).

The imagery of human suffering remained constant throughout the reports of the interwar period, both from Székelyföld and Țară Moților alike (see Rusu Abrudeanu 1928; Erdélyi 1926; Bánffy 1934, 1935, 1940). Captivating as it was, even popular magazines ran reports centred around the poverty of the Moți and its effects on them. Sandru Vornea's multipart report titled "Caravanele foamei" (Caravans of hunger) was published in the magazine *Realitate Ilustrată* and described a trip featuring Moți who roamed Romania and the Balkans to earn some money. Vornea's scenes illustrate many forms of Moți misery, including one report featuring the suicide of a mother who could not bear to hear her children's cries for food (see Vornea 1931a, Vornea 1931b). Individuals who read literary representations of Székely could find counterparts of those scenes in almost all of literary works on them (see Tamási 1932), and in a less emotional form, the misery of the common people in Székelyföld was the main thread of all policy proposals (see Szoboszlay 1928; Székelyfőzés 1933; Ötszáz székely lány 1938).

Though external factors were among the main causes of Székely and Moți poverty (and continued to be throughout the interwar period, see Tamási 1932; Rusu Abrudeanu 1928), the backwardness of both groups was never disputed. Solutions were always discussed in public, at parliamentary sessions and in newspapers and journals. These were mindful of broader social developments and included obtaining better access to mountain resources in a way that would not impact the local economy. The close resemblance of these proposals was the result of similar natural and social conditions, and of their continuous referencing of one other.

The Székely Congress and *Akció* invoked by Cicio-Pop in 1906 was also invoked in 1926 by Secretary of the Commissariat, Emil Dandea. He tried to have his institution replicate their activities (see Dandea 1926).

The initial ideas, listed by Cicio-Pop in 1906 with regard to the Țară Moților, were scaled down in comparison, but still included the restoration of access to forests, the provision of cheap wood for Moti craftsmen, lower pasture fees, lower taxes and a new forestry school in the heart of the region, Câmpeni/Topánfalva (see Képviselőházi Napló vol. IV 1906: 313; Képvselőházi Napló vol. VII 1910: 224). The programs that were later created after Romanian sovereignty was established were more extensive, and involved a wholescale regional development effort with new roads, a new railway, improved Alpine pastures, the introduction of new cattle and sheep species, alimentation through cooperatives, cheaper combustibles and mining concessions, new dispensaries, hospitals and general practitioner posts, and a spree of new secondary and vocational schools (see ANIC CD Adm. Gen. 10/1919 f. 102–104; Rusu Abrudeanu 1928, 509–512; ANIC PCM 19/1933 f. 10–34; Florescu 1938).

Beyond the proposed measures, the institutional framework was also modelled on the others' solutions, starting with Cicio-Pop's and Maniu's insistence on extending the *Székely Akció*, followed by the Government Commissariat for the Moți. The most telling was the imitation of those forms that intended to demonstrate the inclusion of the people in the planning process. The Congress format was adopted by the Romanian National Liberal Brătianu government in 1923, as was the practice of consulting experts by the People's Party's Avarescu government in 1927 (see Rusu Abrudeanu 1928, 503–506). All subsequent programs, up to the Hungarian ones established for Székelyföld in 1940, were prepared using these methods that involved some form of interaction (see Szavári 2011). The significance of these solutions was that they tacitly recognised the uniqueness of the administratively divided areas. The specific development plans legitimised the idea of regional unity and also led to speculations about the need for administrative reorganisation. The frequent connections between Moți and Székely

administrative reorganisation, sometimes strengthening the relationship of these two areas, again suggested something identical in their character (see Móc-megye, székely ispánság 1929).

4 Historical and ethnographic discourse

The cross-referencing of development policies and their modelling on that of the other was only one form of entanglement in Székely and Moți discourses. It was relatively straightforward with respect to Székely and Moți, and a reliance on and competition for the resources provided from the centre brought the issue of the relationship between Bucharest and Budapest to the fore, and highlighted how this relationship was the determining factor for development policy. In terms of arguments and discourse, the justification for access to those resources was at stake, and poverty and underdevelopment, accompanied by the threat posed to the nation (through the degeneration or emigration of co-ethnics) was certainly a powerful reason. But it also left Székely and Moți at the mercy of the capitals and turned the help they received into a gesture that exposed their marginality.

Other aspects of the two groups' discursive representation – one of which I will subsequently analyse in this section – aimed to counterbalance this one-sidedness and shift the relationship more in the favour of the marginal group. The threat to the nation was once again its basis, but this time Székelys and Moți were detached from the national group and positioned in relation to it. Ethnographic and historical arguments were used to point out their authenticity and their quality of being the best representatives of their nations. For these reasons, they deserved to have their lives improved unconditionally. This was in striking contrast with their actual socio-economic situation, and for the nationalists in each country, the loss of their respective group would have been significant.

Entanglement in this regard was, however, more complex, as such characterisations were not one-sided in the contested province. Discourse on Moți and Székely was not just a matter of representation within and concerning the respective national group – it was also continuously present as a discourse of alterity. Neither Székely nor Moți were secluded enough to not be noticed by intellectuals or politicians from the other group, as was exemplified by the cross-referencing of their respective development plans. Furthermore, Țară Moților and Székelyland were not simply on the margins of the national territory – they were also at the centre of the other's imagined national space (see Biharvármegyei osztály 1894; Iorga 1925; Oprișan 1925; Sándor 1894: 128; Három főtulajdonságnak 1942; Țurlea 2011). From an ethnographic, and not simply a socio-economic point of

view, their existence was an aberration, as they dispelled the notion of a consolidated "Hungary" or "Romania", and made its realisation impossible. Their elimination was therefore an important goal for those striving to achieve an ethnically homogenous nation state.

Shifting ethnographic and historic discourses emerged from these complex entanglements, which bundled together both internal and external perspectives in a way that was often astonishing and that not infrequently looked for connections between Székely and Moți. But the foremost issue for situating Moți and Székely was actually more of a matter of separating them from their nations by attesting to their peculiar origins.

In a general sense, the origins of the Hungarians and Romanians were "settled" by the turn of the 20th century. Hungarians were supposed to have come from the East at the end of the 9th century as a semi-nomadic people, one that spoke a Finno-Ugric language. The origin of the Romanians went back further in time. Because they used a Romance language, they were considered descendants of the Romans, who, under the reign of the Emperor Trajan, conquered Dacia with their legions. Later scholarship, however, insisted on a direct connection with the Dacians due to the genealogical convergence of Romans and natives, and the continuous presence of Romanians in Transylvania (roughly Roman Dacia) since the Roman conquest (see Boia 2001). It was actually an issue that separated Hungarians and Romanians, as it was thought that the people who had first arrived at the contested province were the ones who had established ownership rights.

Since one of the theories that tried to explain the lack of sources regarding the Romanian presence between the evacuation of Roman Dacia in A.D. 271 and the mid-12th century claimed that the local Romanians withdrew into the mountains to emerge centuries later, the Moți had an easy way to assert their authenticity: they lived in the area where the Dacians dwelled starting in the late 3rd century. Székelys, on the other hand, settled in their region in the 12th century, as attested to by a large number of written sources. But the peculiarity of the Moți and Székely gave rise to alternative ideas concerning their origins and other ideas that occasionally brought these groups together. One author hinted at the Moți possibly having Illyrian origins based on the custom of maiden fair, which had allegedly been brought over from Dalmatia and the Dinarides (see Philippide 1923; Ajtay 1943). Another highly esteemed author, Ovidiu Densușianu, ventured to claim that they had Iranian (Alan) origins (see Revista Periodicelor 1921: 880; Rusu Abrudeanu 1928: 116–120).

The latter claim was all the more interesting due to the fact that a group of Alans (*Jász* in Hungarian) held a privileged position in Hungary before 1848 and the canonised myth of Székely origins (the one that ultimately won out) claimed

direct descent from the Huns (see Hermann/Orbán 2018). Thus, the Moți could be reidentified as an Asiatic people (instead of being of Roman origin), like the Hungarians or Székelys, while both legendary ethnogeneses made one thing clear: Székelys and Moți were the oldest and purest of their nations and probably even had a shared origin (see A románok kultúrája 1897). Purity was rarely contested publicly, and politicians accepted the idea uncritically. One example was Prime Minister Alexandru Vaida Voevod, who wrote in his internal correspondence regarding the reestablishment of the Moți Commissariat. In it he made an assertion that had not been forced out of him by pressure from the public: "[The Moți are] a group of the most authentic guardians of our race, who are as brave as important in economic terms" (ANIC PCM 19/1933, f. 3., f. 8. For similar claims concerning Székelys see: Egry 2008: 125–134).

In addition to the issue of origins, the historical role of Székely and Moți was the most important factor in defining these groups, especially where military exploits were concerned (which, depending on the group, were occasionally against Romanians or Hungarians). Their heroes, Avram Iancu, Horea, Cloșca, Crișan, and Áron Gábor, just to name a few, were included in the respective national pantheons as indispensable figures in their national history, another type of leverage for arguments about material help (see Bucur 2009; Ce vrem noi? 1933; Demeter/Váry 2014).

But military prowess was not the only character trait that was recognised. Hospitality; a love of freedom, humour and teasing; an idiosyncratic way of thinking; and industriousness were also viewed positively. With their traditional way of life and economy, some of their characteristics could be seen, depending on the individual bias of the observer, as either positive or negative, or as signs of authenticity or backwardness (see Vornea 1931a; 1931b Kőváry 1853: 253–255; Sándor 1894). Poverty, and the refusal to embrace modernisation – which would have meant giving up methods that were traditional in a rural economy – were just as easy to dismiss as the laziness and stupidity associated with social health problems (alcoholism or venereal diseases) as they were to be highlighted as signs of adherence to the nation's purity. These signs included stubbornness, independence, reticence towards outsiders, honesty and sincerity (see Robul 1921). This is where outside and inside perspectives intersected the most easily, as the laziness of the Moți was easy for Hungarian observers to interpret as temperance, a life aligned with nature, while for others, including Romanians, the focus was on consumption and the destruction of resources (see Kőváry 1853: 253–255; Rusu Abrudeanu 1928: 121–124). For Romanian observers, anti-Hungarian fervour was the sign of stubborn national loyalty, in the eyes of the Hungarians, it was madness and savagery.

With their discourse of authenticity, Moți and Székelys began to view one another as the very embodiment of a most dangerous enemy. In this way they mutually reinforced their perspective of the other, which meant that recognition from their most significant enemy was also proof of exceptionality within their own nation (see Elnémult harangok 1941). In Hungarian parlance, the word "móc" not only took on a derogatory meaning, it was also almost always used for reporting on the savagery of Romanians and the violence committed against Hungarians. Between 1919 and 1920, for example, when Eastern Hungary was under Romanian occupation, Hungarian newspapers most often referred to the Romanians as "mócok", while they had a strong tendency to publish stories of abuses committed against Hungarians (see Szabolcs fölszabadított földjén 1920, Az oláhok ki akarták rabolni a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeumot 1919). For Romanians, the threat from Székelys was much less direct – even though fear of a Székely revolt did occasionally surface (see Planuri de revoluție săcuiești descoperite 1920, Români care se magharizează în România Mare 1923) – but this didn't make it any less serious. The Székelyland, being at the geographic centre of the new Greater Romania, was considered its most alien region, and was mourned as the cemetery of hundreds of thousands of Magyarised Romanians. According to Nicolae Iorga, who became Greater Romania's preeminent historian "Székelyland was a totally different territory: different outlook of the soil, different outline of the villages, different type of houses and their different decorations, different type of the inhabitants themselves, who wore a Romanian costume and spoke Hungarian, without being either completely Hungarians nor Romanians" (Iorga 1925). Others, who calculated and listed their nation's losses, were much more belligerent in their complaints (see Oprişan 1925), even asserting that after 1920, Romanians in the region continued to suffer from oppression.

Thus, the relationship between Romanians and Székelys was not simply one of extreme opposition. The appropriation of the latter group by the Romanians was also possible, and was actually a mainstream effort in interwar Romania. As Iorga's words may suggest, Romanians typically asserted that Székelys were originally of Romanian origin and had been Magyarised throughout the centuries (see Popa-Lisseanu 1932). Authors such as Iorga found proof for this claim in historical documents, family names in 16th and 17th century registers, and geographical names. Since the late 19th century, the Hungarians had also utilised this method to a certain extent. Given that there was a scarcity of historical documents relating to most of the early history of the Țara Moților, they based their arguments on ethnography, linguistics and legal history, which was more of a history of customs. It was all the more important for them to use these types of sources, as historical documents rarely revealed meaningful encounters between Székely

and Moți. Ethnography, or more precisely, the description of the rural world in these areas, including local dialects, enabled researchers on both sides to find a series of overlaps and identical elements. The appearance and structure of houses, folk costumes, popular character, legal customs of inheriting along the female line of succession, allegedly borrowed words, music and songs, and similar labour practices were among the "proofs" (see Székely 1894; Moldován 1894; Oprişan 1925; Iorga 1925; Gunda 1940; Sebestyén 1941; Ajtay 1943) that enabled them to postulate a different origin for the other, or at least a part of that group.

The most extreme variant of these claims was also the most modern in terms of the science of the period: blood group analyses conducted among the Székelys came to the conclusion that their genetic origins were Romanian (see Malán 1943: 621, 659; Turda 2007). Such results legitimised extreme nationalist policies, including the introduction of monolingual Romanian education in the region (see Livezeanu 2000: 140–142). This policy enhanced the latter's backwardness, especially through its debilitating effects on literacy. Paradoxically, integrating a group that represented the extreme opposite of the Romanian nation into the nation itself did not reduce this group's marginality – it increased it.

5 Politics of centrality and marginality

Appropriation attempts, regardless of the degree of scholarly conviction that underpinned them, obviously belonged to the realm of politics. Their manifest political implications, however, could not hide the fact that all elements of the parallel and entangled discourses regarding the Székely and Moți were easily politicised beyond nationalism's self-evident political aspects. As soon as the stakes were high enough, symbolic issues were transposed to material politics, and used to advance local and regional goals.

This form of argumentation, which brought the marginal groups closer to the centre of national efforts and to the heart of the symbolic nation, was the most palpable effort to discursively manage real marginality. It involved reducing distance between marginal and central parts of the nation by positing the former in the centre. In extreme cases, it even subverted the existing asymmetry, as, due to their lack of authenticity, the parts of the nation outside the marginal group became second-class members. If accepted, authenticity made it almost impossible for the government to refuse action, as salvaging the most valuable elements of the nation was imperative for nationalists (see Balaton 2002; Zainea 2007; Oláh 2008) and ensured priority over many other underdeveloped regions where the

inhabitants also desperately needed large-scale development programs, but were not capable of demonstrating their extraordinary value for the nation.

The complementary, more academic currents of the discourses easily served the same purpose, but their deployment created a complex web of entanglements. The simplest form of entanglement was the referencing of the Moți or Székely development programs and the borrowing of knowledge from those efforts. The mutual images of alterity could play a similar role, although within these efforts, Moți and Székely were rarely directly connected, and, without any hint of a relationship, they served as the most emblematic figures among the "others" who were significant in shaping their respective identities. Most intriguing of all – especially given that the identification of Székelys and Moți through an ethnographic approach was the most frequent argument in the above cases – was appropriation, attempts to demonstrate that the most authentic Romanians are those with Hungarian origins and vice versa.

The reason for the emergence of this intricate set of entanglements was the multiple centralities and marginalities at play in Transylvania. There was a geographic and a socio-economic entanglement that situated both mountain zones and both ethnic groups at the margins, irrespective of the political framework or whether the country in question was Hungary or Romania. As much as politics was significant in this regard, the question was which type of nationalism was dominating state politics at that time. This was because the state provided access to resources and the regional group that could claim authenticity within the dominant nation had a more realistic chance of receiving support. But it was the Hungarian and Romanian nations and not the states that had their own structures of centrality and marginality. They were not only symbolic, but existed in material terms too, overlapping, interfering with each other, reflecting each other, and creating interactions. One result of this was the cross-referencing of development efforts, another was appropriation. The latter was one way to resolve the discontinuity of the national space that had been caused by a large area in its centre, one that was inhabited by a group from another nation. With this "unification" one could erase one form of marginality – the ethnic other, which was usually discriminated against by the state while still living in a central geographical location – from the map. At the price of switching one's allegiance, the promise of emancipation was also inherent in this logic.

However, the least expected result of this discursive framework was the discursive loosening of boundaries for these groups, and with them, the nation. Appropriation efforts made explicit what was already implied in the frequent cross-referencing of the developmental discourse: a strange connection between or identification of the two groups, which were otherwise the extreme symbolic

opposites of Hungarianess and Romanianness. Their similar socio-economic conditions, along with the identical logic of state-driven development in both Hungary and Romania, which, in its interplay with ethnographic discourses, transformed realigned boundaries and brought them to the centre of both national imaginations. At the same time, the boundaries between the two were blurred.

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