

## STUDY REGARDING THE LOCAL IDENTITY OF ALMĂJ VALLEY FROM CARAȘ SEVERIN COUNTY

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**Abstract:** *In a global world, it arises stringently the need to discover ones identity and the national values. In Romania, in a preserved patriarchal atmosphere of the traditional village the communities have conserved the spiritual manifestations and identity by speech, clothing, architecture, traditions and customs. In this respect, the Almăj Valley from Caraș-Severin County is representative, due to its natural, cultural and geographical uniqueness which represent an increased potential for the rural tourism. The present study was focused to reveal and analyze the three major axes in forming the local identity of the region: demographic, geographical-natural and cultural identity, highlighting the peculiarities of the Almăj Valley community. This study is a helpful tool for the future branding strategies in this region, in order to promote this promising area for the tourism purposes.*

**Key words:** *Almăj Valley, identity, population, customs, tourism*

### INTRODUCTION

Social identity is defined as an individual's consciousness of belonging to a social group, with an emotional significance and one conferred by the value of membership of the group. [2] In this context, one can speak of collective identity, as a form of recognition of a community as a group, with some elements of homogeneity (local, professional, ethnic identity). [10]

The interest in such a study is due to the continuous loss of the local identity of human settlements, particularly rural communities, as a result of globalization, migration phenomena of the younger generation and depopulation of rural areas. However, globally, there is a pressing need of people to know their origin and especially the culture inherited from ancestors. With these characteristics, peoples of the world are contributing to enriching the cultural horizon and beyond.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The local identity of a community emerges depending on the demographic, natural, geographical, historical and cultural features of a population located in a certain area. Therefore, we took into consideration materials about the most representative aspects of Almăj Valley, which is unique in the Romanian rural area and upon which can be formed a basis of a branding strategy to promote the area: its natural-geographical, demographic and cultural identities. There were consulted monographies, new statistics over population, dictionaries for words of other origin than Romanian and for their explanations and field records made by the authors. The research methodology used for this study was qualitative, and consisted in the use of all updated statistics and known literature resources, data collection, observation, analysis and evaluation about the subject.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Demographical identity

Almăj Lowland is composed of 17 villages, where the people from Almăj live closely linked to each other as a result of family ties closer or more distant to them. The oldest attestation of the localities dates from 1718, when there was a census of households, under the rule of the Habsburgs period: at Dalboșeț there were registered 15 houses, at Putna 30 houses, Șopot 35 houses, Prigor 40 houses, Bozovici 82 houses and Bănia 56 houses. [4] (As seen in figure 1. Map of the villages in Almăj Valley, there are seventeen villages in the valley).



Figure 1. The map of Almăj Lowland (<https://oanapir.wordpress.com/page/3/>)

Between 1774-1791, the population of Almăj has increased due to sanitation measures imposed. Abortions were banned and the area was ruled by the Habsburg commanders, but then, since 1820, a depopulation of the intermountain lowlands was observed as a result of various diseases, hunger and wars. In 1900, in the region, an upward trend was observed, the largest population being recorded 1914, followed by the area's depopulation, as a result of World War I, with a high mortality and low birth rate. In the interwar period, there was ascertained an increase of birth rates, 1936 being the year with the most births registered in Bănia (55 births). [3]

After the Second World War, the number of inhabitants declined, because from 1940 the population has migrated to the industrial centres from regions like Reșița and Anina, and since then the decrease was accentuated, as a result of a low natural growth and as a consequence of the migration from rural to urban areas.

In figure 2, is presented the evolution of the population from the Almăj Valley between 1900 and 2013. [6]

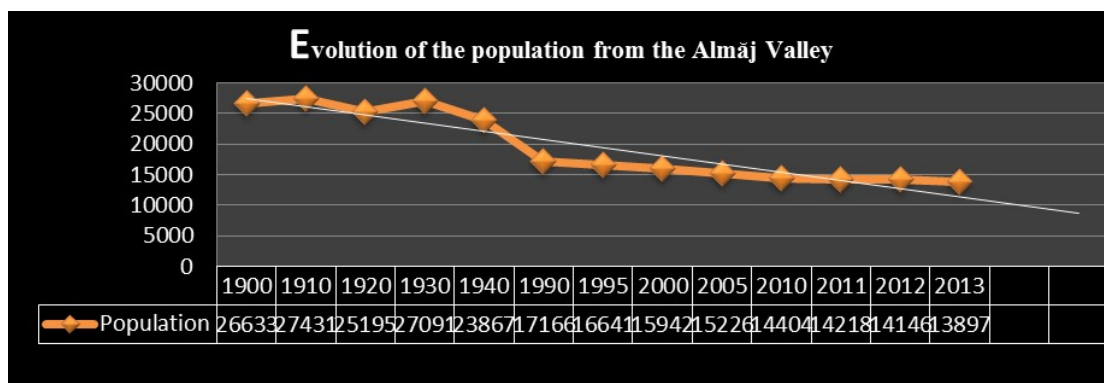


Figure 2. The evolution of population from the Almāj Valley between 1900 and 2013 (After: Goşa, 2014). Since 1990, the population has dropped as a result of an increase in mortality and decrease in birth rate, leading to a population of 13,897 in 2013, the lowest recorded population of the area, which gives reasons to care regarding the demographic future of the area. In figure 3 the evolution of the main demographic indicators: natural increase/ mortality rate/ birth rate is presented. [6]

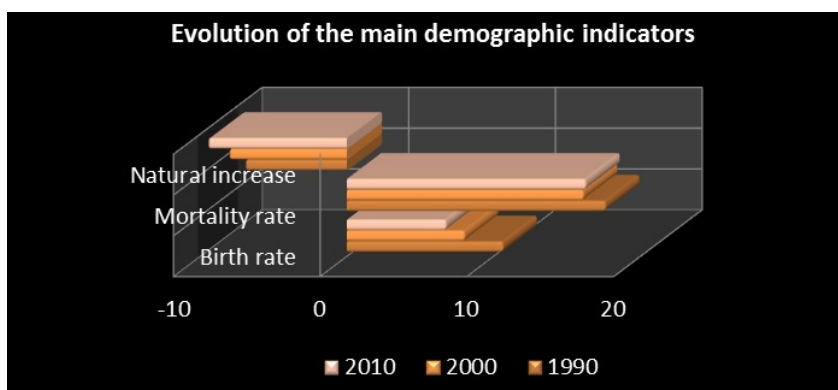


Figure 3. Evolution of the main demographic indicators: natural increase/mortality rate/birth rate(after Goşa 2014) The analysis of the fatalities sources has highlighted the reasons for this phenomenon, such as: older age or particular diseases of the region (cancer, infective rheumatism, renal, cardiovascular). Rheumatic diseases are caused by moisture from the lowlands, and the cardiovascular and renal sickness arise from unhealthy diets based on excessive and unhealthy consumption of meat, fried foods, salty cheese. [4] Analysing the demographic identity, it was observed that, at present, there is a demographic regression mainly due to migratory and natural movement components. In this context, the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of Almāj has shaped their identity and mentality, being strongly correlated to the geographical identity of the area. The natural residents are strongly attached to their home, proving a high civic sense.

### Natural geographical identity

In order to establish the natural geographical identity of the Almāj Valley, the authors of this paper analysed the following indicators: geographical location, relief, climate, hydrography, vegetation, wildlife and soils' composition.

Geographically, the Almăj Valley overlaps with Banat Mountains. It is an intra-mountain, country type region, adjacent to the North, with Semenic heights and Gărâna Lowlands; in the East, with the micro region Craina and Timiș-Cerna; in the South with Danube Gorge and in the West with Oravița and Anina Lowlands. [8] The relief structure consists, in part, of the Western Carpathians units, from the Banat Mountains, comprising south - southeast Loevei Mountains and Cărbunari Plateau. In the Nordic region, we identify the Almăj Mountains, along with Piedmont Bozovici and Bozovici Lowlands, but also Țărovei Hills. In this area, the altitude is between 200 m and 1437 m in the Semenic Mountains. [7]

Given the location of the Almăj Valley, in southwest of the country, the climate is characterized by a Mediterranean influence, which is distinguished by hot, dry summers and rainy winters. The area is rich in surface water sources, superimposing over the Nera Basin that springs from the Semenic Mountains, alongside can be mentioned a number of affluent (Minis), rivers, streams and other lower hydric such as basins, ravines and torrents. [12] The vegetation is composed of beech forests (*Fagus sylvatica*) and deciduous forests mixed with coniferous: fir, spruce. Vegetation, wildlife and soils are three elements which are interdependent. For this type of vegetation are suitable the following animals: wolf (*canis lupus*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), deer (*Cervus elaphus*), partridge (*Perdix, perdix*). The area is dominated by the mollisols alternated class, as in soft soil. In this protective natural setting, the Almăj population could retain their cultural identity, which makes it distinct from the other regions and villages of Romania.

### Cultural Identity

The region's name comes from the old Slavic and signifies country hills. In the area were found traces of prehistoric settlements, where were found remains of burnt clay pots, bronze tools in villages of Prigor, Bănia and between Gârbovăț and Dălboșeț. However, at Rudăria, Bănia, Prilipeț and Dalboșeț were found coins from the Roman Empire and at Bozovici sarcophaguses. Those artifacts are now preserved in museums in Vienna, Budapest, Timișoara and Lugoj. Residents of Almăj Valley have preserved the old local traditions, through customs, port, speech, finding slight differences in the ways of conducting these cultural elements and the frequency with which they occur.

With all the cultural homogeneity of the 17 rural communities of Almăj land, in the villages of Ravenska and Sumita, there is a Czech population, colonized in the nineteenth century, and which has preserved its identity up to this day. The other villages are: Bănia, New and Old Borlovenii, Bozovici, Dalboșeț, Gârbovăț, Lăpușnicul-Mare, Moceri, Pața, Prigor, Prilipeț, Putna, Rudăria, New and Old Șopotul. Thus, the demo-cultural plurality of Almăj Valley is limited to two ethnic groups: Romanian (mostly) and Czech (small) and differentiates itself through the culture present in the language, architecture, port, customs, gastronomy and way of understanding life and living.

The Almăj population has expressed its feelings of joy and sorrow through songs, sayings, proverbs, legends, carols, chants, which has led in time to a collection of timeless traditions specific to the region. Besides these, the speech, the traditional dances and costumes, the customs, form the cultural identity of the inhabitants of Almăj. Some examples of the almăjean sub dialect of the Banat's dialect: *o profăcut* (made again), *să dogată apa* (all water has ended) [5]

The oldest mention of Almăj was found in the documents of Hungary's regions that recognize the rights of Romanian principalities in the Banat Mountain (Almăjan, 2003).

Next, we will present several linguistic peculiarities of the inhabitants of the Almăj Valley. One of the peculiarities is the derivation with suffixes *-oni*, *-oanie*: *mășcioanie* (stepmother), *mătușoni* (uncle) [9]

In the area, the phonetic archaisms and regionalisms have been well kept, due to its geographical position, surrounded by mountains which did not provide, in the past, an easy access inside the valley, aspect that helped to protect the local identity of Almăj Valley.

Among these, are to be given few examples of regionalisms, (*ai* = garlic, *a se imăli* = to get muddy), but we find also words of foreign origin, as a result of the colonization of the German and Hungarian craftsmen and their proximity to Serbia.

Some examples in this regard are provided by Purdela-Sitaru M. & Vasiliuță L.: [11]

- *Serbian origin* words *ches* (pocket), *coțcă* (petty crime), *clupe* (bench),
- *German origin*: *fruștuc* (breakfast), *a fărui* (to paint), *gumel* (rubber), *cișlăr* (carpenter),
- *Hungarian origin*: *biciiag* (sick), *kociye* (carriage), *uyagă* (bottle).

In addition to these words, are found those of:

- *Latin origin*: a cure (to run), *chimeșă* (shirt), *muiere* (woman), *oară* (animals) and
- *Slavic words*, like *băl*, *ocnă*, *crou*, *vodă*, *pripor*. [5]

Besides all these, neologisms were adapted to the phonetic system as: *tilifon* (phone), *motor* (car). [9]

Other signs of Almăj culture have been preserved through folk art (decorative fabrics, costumes, edifices), folk architecture of the mountain peasant's household, crafts and technical folk facilities. All these can be tourist sights of anthropogenic origins.

The most representative *traditional technical installations* are the traditional water mills, which were used for grinding grains, by harnessing energy, that tradition is transmitted from father to son, and being used by the whole community. Currently, 22 of them are still working and can be seen in the Rudăria Reservation, which is also the only one of this kind of reservations in the country, and it is an objective with national value, that entered in the List of Historical Monuments from Romania. In addition to these mills, there are other traditional technical facilities, among which we can mention: oil press, stretcher for drying plums, brandy boilers, the oven for fruits, *gater* (saw driven by water).

*The loom* was a popular technology for the processing of plant textile fabrics (from carpets to clothing) by Almăjului Valley women and *ștezele* were hydraulic installations which helped at the natural washing and teasel (*scărmănatul*) of clothes. Materials used for fabrics consisted of processed wool and hemp grown and processed in their household.

*Interior fabrics* consisted of *măsaie de ornament* (ornamental doilies), *procovița* put on the bed and the walls (from wool), *poneava* (sheet with embroidery on the edges), embroidered cushion covers, *șipca* (ornament for furniture and for mirror), all labored at the loom and decorated by the women from Almăj Valley.

*The traditional costume* is also an artifact of the past, and consists in women *ceapsă* (put on your head), *opregul* with tassels, *șuba* for women, *poale* (skirt), *cotreanță* with models and the back with *targă*. In winter, they wore *cârpă* on the head, sheepskin waistcoat and *pieptar* (vest). Men wore hats (summer) and *clăbăț* (winter) *laibăr* over *chimieșă* (shirt) and *cioariși* (pants). Nowadays, the costumes are worn during the holidays, cultural events in the village, among which Almăj People Ball and Almăj Valley Festival [9] Figure 4 illustrates the custom of wearing traditional costumes at the Almăj Ball. Picture taken on 28 February 2014. [16]



Fig. 4. Almăj people in traditional costumes at the Almăj Ball, on 28 February 2014 (after <http://taraalmajului.ro/foto/category/26-balul-almajenilor-2014>)

*Folk architecture* is a typical traditional style of building houses of wooden beams with stone, burnt bricks and plain tiles. The peasant farms are designed in conjunction with the traditional occupations of the inhabitants, which are agriculture and animal livestock. The outer porch of the house was used for sleeping out in the summer and for drying fruits and grain products, while the farm gates were made of beech and fir, had two rooms, one for men and one for carts access. [4]

*Cultural institutions* in the area can be exploited in terms of tourism, among which: the Cultural House Eftimie Gherman from Lăpușnicul Mare, the House of Culture dr. Ion Sarbu from Eftimie Murgu, Almăj community centers, churches of the communities, Almaj-Putna monastery, the memorial house of Novacovici family from Gârbovăț, Bania Village Museum, the local museum from Eftimie Murgu, Ravenska Village Museum, Almăj Museum of Old Șopot.

Other *cultural and touristic attractions* are the National Park Nera-Beușnița, Bei trout, Grădiște Archaeological Reservation, Villa Rustica type settlement ruins from Dragomireana. As seen in figure 5, the best known Almăj touristic landmarks are the beauty of the wild nature with karst phenomena such as Bigăr waterfall, caves in the Almăj Mountain and Rudăria reservation. [14]



Fig. 5. Almăj attractions - karst phenomena ( Bigăr Waterfall, caves in Almăj Mountain) and Rudăria reservation (after [www.caon.ro](http://www.caon.ro), <http://www.iarmarok.ro/obiective/view?id=80>)

*The ancestral customs and traditions, which are correlated to human economic activities and cyclical seasons, include: Sânzâiene custom (crowns made of sânzâiene for prosperity), paparude (to invoke the forces of good for community support), Cornilor custom (before Easter feasting, young masked youngsters representing evil spirits, are driven out by the locals), strigătul de peste sat (nowadays the cry over the village is considered urezatul of young people who are on a hill away, with the cows grazing) and măsuratul oilor (which is the oldest Almăj tradition, when the sheep are milked and their milk is measured in front of the whole community, and the one that has the most milk is called shepherd and has the honor to supervise the work of the sheepfold throughout the summer. [9]*

## CONCLUSIONS

Demographics in Almăj Valley had known peaks in the interwar period, after which the evolution of the population decreased dramatically as a result of migration and population ageing. Natural increase is negative in Almăj Valley, as a result of the low birth rate and high mortality rate.

Demo-cultural plurality in the 17 villages belonging to the Almăj Valley is limited to two ethnic groups: Romanian (15 villages) and Czech (Ravenska and Sumita villages). The geographical location of Almăj Lowlands is characterized by a varied landscape with mountain peaks, piedmont hills, terraces and plains with a temperate continental climate, beneficial to the submediterranean flora and fauna, and with a specific agricultural economy, based on animal husbandry and farming.

The natural identity of Almăj Valley is built of terraces, limestone caves in the mountains, with beech and evergreen vegetation and flora composed of Turkish hazel, beech, wild lilac. Karst phenomena (springs, sinkholes, caves, waterfalls), bring extra charm to the area, and turn them into attractive tourist destinations. Among the area's attractions that bring most visitors there are the Rudăria Mills Reservation, Nera and Ravenska village.

The cultural identity of the Almăj Valley was preserved by its traditions, customs, songs, legends, dances and incantations, which are a rich source of heritage.

The linguistic particularities of the Almăj region provide a source of studying archaisms and regionalisms of the Banat region.

In addition to these cultural elements, we consider valuable in terms of tourism, the spiritual heritage which consists of the local architecture, the cultural buildings, the customs and traditions and the traditional costume.

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