



**Citation:** Hulubaş A. (2022) *Self-perception through customs among Romanian immigrants*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», Sup. 11, n. 22: 51-61. doi: 10.36253/cambio-14094

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Monographic Section

## Self-perception through customs among Romanian immigrants

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**Abstract.** The article discusses concepts specific to sociology and social psychology to reveal the role played by cultural heritage in the life of Romanian immigrants. The complementarity between these fields in relation to traditional knowledge allows a better understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of migration. Self-perception theory is applicable to cultural reactions in host countries since subjects often perform ritual or magic gestures without even being aware they were familiar with them. Only then did they conclude that a certain attachment to cultural heritage is manifest. The role of community is underlined in the article from two perspectives: on a cultural level, it transmits and preserves practices, while on a psychological level the group proves essential in the construct of social identity. In this regard, interviews with migrants from Italy, Spain, and Greece are presented in three sections focused on definitions of the self as part of the community, characteristics of the specific environment that maintains home country practices, and the perspective on the host society.

**Keywords:** migration, identity, self-perception, tradition, customs.

The migration phenomenon spans over various levels of life, producing changes on almost every segment. Whether it is economic, political, demographic, social or it has an impact on health resources, population flows force us to think again on the limits of self and community. A project started in 2018 under the title *Migration and identity in the Romanian cultural milieu* and hosted by The Romanian Academy, Iaşi Branch, became the perfect opportunity to explore Romanian immigrant communities from Western Europe, and to discover how they create themselves a specific environment in order to cope with the host societies.

The data has been collected from 2014 to 2019. The 53 interviewed subjects originate from different settlements in Romania and The Republic of Moldova. Their immigration destinations are Italy (45 informants), Spain (7) and Greece (1). Seventeen persons returned home after they spent seven to twenty years abroad. I spoke with eleven men, while the rest of the subjects are women. The age varies from 23 to 69, with only two infor-

mants in their twenties. A 60-inquiries questionnaire is used as a starting point for the discussion, while semi-directive interviews unfolded captivating life stories. In addition to these face-to-face interviews a brief indirect fieldwork was conducted with eight citizens from The Republic of Moldova in 2014. They answered a short version of the questionnaire on migration. The fact that we centered our conversation on cultural heritage helped immigrants to easily relax and to open up. Inner struggle was revealed in the attempt to understand personal identity in a changed world, and customs gained the function of a psychological crutch.

## LITERATURE

It has long been a discussion for cultural anthropology, sociology, and social psychology to decide the role of community dynamics in self-defining one's identity, to grasp the interaction between personal image and group values. As early as 1893, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim indicated a "collective conscience", defined as the "totality of social likenesses" (1960: 81). This doctoral research was to be refined almost two decades later when *The Elementary forms of religious life* was published. Here religious reactions are analysed, and rites become a focal point in the life of the community, since they sustain 'collective consciousness' and "through it, the group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity; at the same time individuals are strengthened in their social natures" (Durkheim [1912] 1915: 444). The semantic leap from the term initially used in translation (conscience – consciousness) suggests a better awareness on norms and values, individuals do not only suffer from inherited moral codes, but they fully acknowledge them as the only possible laws of conduct. 'Collective representations' (Durkheim 1915: 16) are to guide the social behavior, their efficiency being tested through successive generations whose authoritative knowledge cannot be doubted.

Maurice Halbwachs restated the importance of the time trial in shaping reactions in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, originally published in *Les Travaux de L'Année Sociologique*, in 1925 in Paris, and then in 1950, when he suggested that "social thinking is essentially memory" (1994: 296). Such bonds were revealed as strategic in 1943, as social psychologist Kurt Lewin investigated social conflicts. He states that "the individual accepts the new system of values and beliefs by accepting belongingness to a group" (1948: 67). This principle became salient in the research conducted as part of *Migration and identity in the Romanian cultural milieu* project. Romanian immigrants from Italy, Spain and Greece confessed that they often broke the law in their host countries in order to obey superstitions such as taking the trash out only in day light, for the sake of preserving good luck and thus, the wealth of their family (see Hulubaş 2019: 134-135). Traditional interpretations of gestures prevail in immigrant communities, because "a feeling of complete freedom and heightened group identification are frequently more important at a particular stage of re-education than learning not to break specific rules" (Lewin 1948: 68).

This collective acceptance of magic repercussions is also found in the Victor Turner's concept of 'spontaneous *communitas*', developed in his 1969 book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Customs and superstitions maintain the connection with families that immigrants left in their countries of origin, and this represents a "central aspect of spontaneous *communitas*" (Higgins and Hamilton 2020: 6). Rites of passage coagulate such groups that describe an experience of togetherness that will be discussed in the following sections.

A direct continuation of Durkheim's ideas can be traced in Geertz' work, who stated that "a ritual is not just a pattern of meaning; it is also a form of social interaction" (1957: 52). The cultural consequence of these moments is often unsuspected, and it takes a life crisis such as migrating or having a new child to gain awareness: "even though these rituals break with the ordinary world too, they frequently remain thoroughly humdrum. They trigger automatic responses that appear to be completely mindless" (McCauley and Lawson, 2002: 1). Dynamics of transmission have also been investigated in epidemiological terms, since cultural heritage became more of a question of contagion than of education, due to the fact that information consists in 'self-replicating representations', producing "public behaviors that cause others to hold them [as mental representations] too" (Sperber 1996: 100).

The analysis shifts unknowingly towards more psychological than social interpretations, and similitudes are clear between the results of interpretation. Goldstein and Cialdini, for example, consider that some attitudes or

self-characteristics are inferred from “observing the freely chosen actions of others with whom they feel a sense of merged identity – almost as if they had observed themselves performing the acts” (2007: 402). This represents an extension of the actual self-perception theory developed by Daryl Bem in 1972, implying an emotional follow up of actions. Reaction takes place first, leaving us with nothing but conclusions on what we already did, guessing that we must have had some opinions/convictions considering that our actions came so easily.

Individuals come to ‘know’ their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/ or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs. Thus, to the extent that internal cues are weak, ambiguous, or uninterpretable, the individual is functionally in the same position as an outside observer, an observer who must necessarily rely upon those same external cues to infer the individual’s inner states. (Bem 1972: 2)

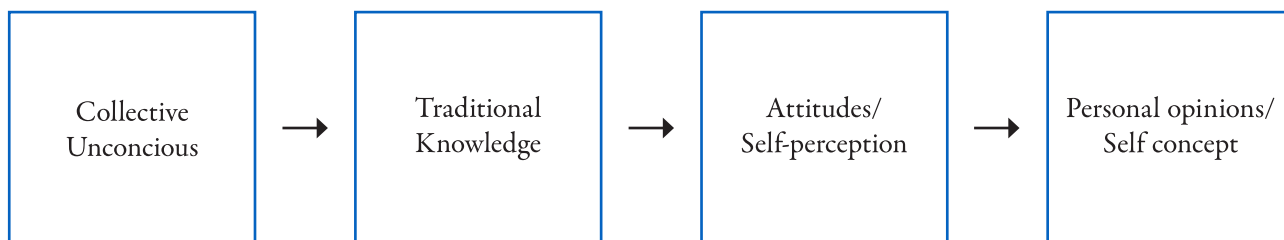
The ‘procedural memory’ (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 49) activates based on what one has previously witnessed, a ritual performed by the group acknowledged as one’s own. Should the circumstance arrive, the same gestures are performed, inferring attachment to tradition. Several subjects admitted that they do not understand the purpose of traditional practices, but they performed them since all Romanians do.

C.T. has been spending the last 16 years in Rome and told me that she tied a red thread around her new-born’s wrist. When asked why, she replied: “I do it because this is how it’s done, this is what tradition wants, and that’s what we do”. In a different circumstance (I asked her about the meaning of feathers in the ritual bath after baptism) she said: “I don’t know what to say. I know it’s good [it brings good luck] to have them placed in the water, but to tell you precisely... [what it means, I can’t]”. Immigrant communities represent an efficient scene where such rituals ‘replicate’ themselves. Whether the subject has seen them in childhood, before emigrating, or he/ she sees them abroad, once the opportunity arrives, the setting is recreated as a bond confirmation for the community.

Customs build oneness with the group, and an ‘extended identity fusion’ fosters cultural transmission:

people may project the relational ties normally associated with local fusion onto large groups despite having little or no direct contact or shared experiences with individual members. Due to the lack of personal contact with all other group members, the ‘relational ties’ that people develop with other group members are metaphorical rather than literal. Members of a given ethnicity, for example, may fuse with ethnically similar members of nation states (e.g., Spain, China) based on common ancestry, despite having few or no shared experiences with all of them. (Swann *et alii* 2012: 443)

Faced with the risk of self-dissolution in the societal amalgam, the individual turns to his own kind to learn more on himself and to strengthen his self-image. “Social categorization, group evaluation, and the value of group memberships for the self-concept constitute an individual’s social identity. A positive social identity is rewarded with positive self-esteem” (Trepte and Loy 2017: 1), hence an effort is made to create a mental hierarchy of the environment. We shall see in the last section of the paper how opposition with host countries always places the Romanian community in advantage. This process is fueled by cultural heritage:



The concept of collective unconscious needs no further discussion, having been intensively used in numerous areas that benefitted from Jung's contribution. Assmann and Czaplicka's concept is just one more example in this respect, revealing how traditional demeanor is brought to light without delay. Cultural memory consists in "all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (1995: 126). Actually, believing in traditional knowledge becomes irrelevant in the context of cultural pressure as A.D. (spent twenty years in Rome, Italy) confessed:

I don't even know if I believe too much or not in this thing with being overlooked... I did it [performed an enchantment to his baby boy] because this is what is done ever since our fathers and forefathers. Look, the child is overlooked, look, this comforts him, you say it, too... especially if you yawn when you do it, they say, look, it's real, he is overlooked!

The next three sections will present the levels of perception that derive from a contrastive look on life: 'us' versus 'them'. Firstly, personal identity becomes a firm assertion in relation with the group. Creation of a specific environment follows awareness on distinctiveness, hence a discussion on this mental world comes next. The last section deals with images of the others in a parallel mirror, technique where Italians' opinions on Romanian customs are fought back by the subjects.

Social categorization implies that people are defined and understood not only as individuals but also as belonging to certain social categories such as age categories (e.g., child or adult), economic categories (e.g., high or low economic status), or cultural categories (e.g., Asian or Caucasian). (Trepte and Loy, 2017: 3)

All these social psychological and social cognitive concepts, together with cultural anthropology theories reveal the complexity of self-acknowledging in the context of migration. The mix of cultural heritage, psychological struggle and emotional implications of the economically motivated change in life becomes clearer under these lenses. N. B. emigrated to Rome thirteen years ago and her words perfectly describe the cultural pressure with affective receptors. When asked if she gave alms following a Romanian tradition in Italy she confirmed and then added: "Those alms put our consciousness at ease". In this inversed perspective, customs seem oriented inwards just as much as outwards, to personal needs and social bonding at the same time.

#### 'I AM WHAT I AM BECAUSE OF WHO WE ALL ARE'

The African proverb quoted above instead of a subtitle is well known and represents Ubuntu philosophy: '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – A person is a person through other persons' (Forster 2007: 253). The following examples from recorded interviews point exactly to this interdependence between the group one reckons to belong to, and personal attributes.

V.G.V. originates from Străşeni, The Republic of Moldova, and she has been living in Rome for the last fifteen years. She declared that she dyes red eggs for Easter there (even though Western tradition implies other vivid colors for this practice), because her mother always did this, and her grandmother also. Every year she would have red Easter eggs. *I am what my family is, I do what my grandfather did in these circumstances therefore I am attached to tradition*, could be a retelling of the attitude in self-perception theory terms.

The individual uses group preferences to recommend himself/ herself and family provides a 'local fusion' (Swann *et alii* 2012: 443) of cultural identity. The same situation was previously reported in migration studies for the Bulgarian community in Munich, the migrant's explanations relying exclusively on the idea of distinctiveness: "we are Bulgarians, our Easter is not on that day and our eggs are red" (Krăsteva-Blagoeva 2009: 261). We will return to this discourse in the context of ethnic comparisons, where the reversed perspective is presented in a study on the Romanian minority, entitled *We Are Italians!': The Hybrid Ethnobotany of a Venetian Diaspora in Eastern Romania* (Pieroni *et alii* 2012).

V.G.V also uses to say an enchantment to her children whenever they are restless, and her motivation for this magic remedy is that she ‘grew up with it’. S.V. is a teacher of Romanian language in Rome where she has been staying for the last two decades, and she advocates the importance of a childhood enriched by cultural values:

Tradition is something that is part of us and we must not neglect it because it completes you. Even though you live in a culture and in a society that taught you a lot and you are doing fine now, this Romanian part shouldn't be forgotten, because we are incomplete. I say it to the parents who avoid enlisting their children to Romanian language classes. It's ok, you can live without it, but think about the fact that these children will grow up without roots and it is very difficult to grow without an identity.

The transmission of culture that practically takes hold of people was also indicated by M.G., another Romanian immigrant in Rome, where she arrived in 2001. She teaches her nephew traditional customs all the time. When I asked her why, she replied firmly: “Because he's Romanian!”

Such a motivation indicates that we are ‘historically constructed human minds’ (Bloch 2004: 71), always deferring to the people who lived before us, as we saw above in the case of the immigrant from The Republic of Moldova. The parents did specific gestures because their parents performed them and ‘so on without the process having specific boundaries’ (Bloch 2004: 71). Such self-replicating (Sperber 1996: 100) activities led to the universal response on the meaning of a certain ritual. Fieldwork often confronts the ethnographer to a wall in conversation on significance: ‘Why do you wash yourself with water containing a red egg and a silver coin on Easter?’ “This is how it's done/ this is what one does” (Rom. *aşa se face*).

The impersonal form of the verb refers precisely to the endless line of ancestors having done the rite, and since they all were Romanians, it implies that the present individual should do nothing less. C.T. detailed the self-identification process:

I believe that in fact, each of us is still a Romanian in the end, wherever we are on this earth, no matter how well adapted we are to another culture, in another country. This is something you cannot change! And if you give up your tradition, then what do you have left?! Because you will neither have yours, nor theirs, and then you are something really... nothing? No.

Being a Romanian is expressed clearly and exclusively by cultural heritage, no other part of the life built in host countries is so precisely delimited. More testimonies imply that what one does is what his kin and friends did, therefore *I am what we are*: ‘this is who we are, it is our identity’ (V.C.); ‘it helps you maintain your identity’ (L.M.N.) etc.

It is safe to say that a discursive marker of the authoritative culture consists in stressing what *it is done* in particular circumstances. Next to this reflexive voice, traceable, for example, in the words of V.A. (who has been living for 12 years now in Rome) – ‘we cook all one does for Christmas’ (Rom. *tot ce se face*) – we may add here adverbs that define cultural impingement: *obligatory, absolutely, perforce, never* [do we miss to dye red eggs on Easter etc.]. The enforcement of traditional behavior will be even clearer in the statements that describe the effort to duplicate home environment.

## A WORLD OF OUR OWN

More linguistic markers of the inner necessity to preserve a traditional setting in the house can be heard in the manner immigrants speak about their holiday meals or family events such as weddings and Christenings. In fact, the mere existence of calendar dates is pending upon the realization of ritual menus and gestures (like egg tapping with the dialogue ‘Christ has risen! Indeed, He has!’). T.I. emigrated to Italy in 1997 and lives with the hope that his first retirement day will take place back in Romania. I asked him if his family has red eggs for Easter:

we dye them because unless you knock eggs at Easter it's not even the Easter, or if you don't eat a piece of lamb steak... you may not like it, but you could at least taste it in order to say it is Easter.

The sensorial proof that time has come for people to celebrate is characteristic to many displaced ethnic groups. David E. Sutton analyzed the Greek diaspora and came to the conclusion that “food does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and recreation” (2001: 84). By being a group belonging behavior, such mandatory activities validate the self and build a home-like world, distinct from what immigrants notice in host societies.

Orthodox Easter is not only on a different date (most of the times) than the Roman Catholic one, but it is founded on specific elements starting from the level of religiosity (and we shall see in the next section how puzzling it is for the Italians to hear that Romanians spend a whole night in church to celebrate the Resurrection), the preparation for the event, the food and the rites associated with this calendar event. *There is no Easter without...* refers to an affective perception of time, that needs to follow traditional rules. In the end, the opposition is created between profane time (when Romanians eat pasta and salad to save time and go to work) and sacred moments, when they return to archetypes. It is precisely the adversity noticed by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick-Schiller between just being and belonging:

Ways of being refers to the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions. Social fields contain institutions, organizations, and experiences, within their various levels, that generate categories of identity that are ascribed to or chosen by individuals or groups. Individuals can be embedded in a social field but not identify with any label or cultural politics associated with that field. (...) In contrast, ways of belonging refers to practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group. These actions are not symbolic but concrete, visible actions that mark belonging such as wearing a Christian cross or Jewish star, flying a flag, or choosing a particular cuisine. Ways of belonging combine action and an awareness of the kind of identity that action signifies. (2004: 1010)

For N.B. (spent the last 13 years in Rome) the impersonal statement that ‘you cannot have Easter without red eggs’ implies the same laws of cultural appurtenance. Even more so, for D.T. and his wife, setting the scene for Romanian traditions was part of the coping strategy: ‘in the first years it was sad, really sad, then we started to organize them [holidays] the same as in our country’. In their nineteen years since they migrated, they came to be known by friends for the fact that they always make *caltaboşi* [traditional sausages] for Christmas. For Easter, D.T. declared, it is impossible not to have red eggs, lamb steak and *drob* (a sort of lamb haggis).

Smell is another sensorial pattern for developing a separate world, cropped from the one outside. It is then not surprising that several subjects referred to certain scents when they spoke about home country or their specific menu for holidays. ‘Smells evoke what surrounds them in memory, what has been metonymically associated with the smell in question’ (Sutton 2001: 89); consequently, a feeling of security follows for migrants that grew up with this olfactory sign of family feasts. C.T. makes a definition of hospitality out of this perceptive element, since she believes that one has to cook *boeuf* salad and sweet bread (Rom. *cozonac*) ‘to smell like holidays. Even if you don’t stay at home!’ This way, the moment you come back home from partying in a modern manner the first thing that you sense transports you on a different land, built out of memories and cultural patterns.

Moreover, the home country itself is metonymically represented by a recollection of the past in V.B.’s confession: ‘[in Italy] the world smells differently (...). I remember the smell of my grandmother’s hands when she kneaded flat bread (Rom. *turte*) and this is how my country looks like, I think, wrinkles on her face’. V.B. has been living in Rome for the last twenty years, but he spent his childhood in Bereşti village from Galaţi county. The image he provided also refers to taste, the two senses being interrelated (Sutton 2001: 88) and assuring comfort on a psychological level. They are the first to be achieved after birth and contain the image of the breastfeeding mother, whose arms are the most secure place in the world. Hence, the constructed space includes both the idea of family and of a specific identity that allows social coherence in a rather chaotic mixt community.

The taste from home motivates heavy parcels to travel from Romania to Italy, whether they contain cabbage ready to be pickled, half of slain pigs, kilograms of walnuts and barrels of wine. The explanation for such efforts is always the same: the taste is different and much better. L.M.N. even used the expression ‘umbilical cord’ to transmit in a clear way what packages from home mean to her. The recurrent preoccupation of the subjects to have a cauldron and a paddler in their houses from destination countries speaks about a specific ‘stage prop’ that sets

the scene for a second home. When speaking about cooking polenta (Rom. *mămăligă*), V.B. refers to the process of mixing the corn flour in the water as ‘casting a spell’, possibly one to recreate a familiar environment. Both the smell, the taste and the gesture represent a procedural form of the ‘conscious quotation’ (Bloch 2004: 68) of the elders, of the archetypal gestures that established the native world. According to Tajfel (1972) as cited by Hogg and Terry, the acknowledged identity is decided by “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (2000: 121).

Another statement behavior can be identified in the need to consecrate the house or the family car. A.P.C. came back to The Republic of Moldova from Italy, after having lived there for 10 years. While being abroad she confessed to have called the priest to bless her rented homes and the family vehicle three times (two benedictions of the houses), and she added: “maybe I made myself believe this, but I felt more peaceful afterwards”. The conviction in good auspices is yet another cultural effect of the high persuasion power that traditional knowledge presents.

The modal verb used by A.G. in the following telling about her Christmas days in Greece (where she has returned from, after living there for 6 years) indicates the same cultural predisposition to behave according to the group’s history from the home country. For Christmas Eve, her friends went around and disturbed the neighbors with the noise believed to ward off evil spirits. Police was called for this reason, but she considered it mandatory to express her heritage:

We just couldn’t stop from going caroling, we had friends, they dressed as bears and told the winter-solstice chants like we do at home; we disturbed the peace, indeed, the locals once called the police, whatever, we had to keep our tradition (Laughs).

With the self-image well contoured in the colors of the community and a specific framework created for relevant actions, comparison follows in the migrant minds to reinforce personal characteristics. An on-going dichotomy between the self and outgroup elements is often traceable in societal judgements.

## THE OTHERS

Migration studies have been denounced of limiting the analysis to labels that compromise the findings: ‘the ethnic lens used by these scholars shapes—and, in our opinion, obscures—the diversity of migrants’ relationships to their place of settlement and to other localities around the world’ (Glick Schiller *et alii* 2008: 613). Nevertheless, the human brain works with such instruments and interpersonal contact proves that ‘social categorization allows for better and faster social information processing while interacting with other people’ (Trepte and Loy 2017: 3), therefore it is not uncommon to find it in situations as the one described by F.D., who lived in Italy for sixteen years and recently decided to return to Romania. While speaking about the fact that Romanian immigrants dress up in costumes and wander on the streets singing and shouting at New Year’s Eve, she mentioned the Italians’ comments: “they must be Romanians, since they are keen on such things [traditional practices]”. Migrants mirror themselves in host societies and reinforce self-perceived characteristics in a slightly ironic manner, that will become transparent in the confessions noted below. “Their continuing reference to the place of origin is crucial to their redefinition of the self” (Culic and Anghel 2012: 4).

Social categorization is natural and accentuation principle can easily be noticed when Romanian immigrants discuss local reactions to their customs and religion, meaning that often they exaggerated differences or resemblances between members of the host society versus their own social group, a tendency that was indicated to be cognitive-perceptual (Tajfel and Wilkess 1963). People tend to compare and contrast social demeanor, and they do it in the attempt to secure a positive image of the self:

Groups are not islands; they become psychologically real only when defined in comparison to other groups. Striving for a positive social identity, group members are motivated to think and act in ways that achieve or maintain a positive distinctiveness between one’s own group and relevant outgroups. (Hornsey 2008: 207)

All the following commentaries reveal the need to underline personal and, implicitly, group socio-cultural superiority when confronted with Western life conceptions. Since it incorporates both the memory of smell and taste, basil could become a metaphor for the psychological refuse of outgroup elements.

Andrea Pieroni and colleagues published an article on the Italian minority from Greci, a village from Romania. It is a relevant starting point for the discussion on the *us* versus *them* attitude, as a social vantage point in reflecting a mixt society. The reversed situation for Romanian immigrants in Italy will prove no different.

In this cultural hybrid context, it is very interesting to analyse the representation of basil (*Ocimum basilicum* L., *Lamiaceae*) and its presumed “double” identity. Italians in Greci believe, in fact, that there are two kinds of basil: one which grows in the pot and is to be used in the local cuisine (as Italians do); and another – which grows “wild” in the home garden/fields, without having been planted. (...) According to informants, Romanians only recently began using basil in their cuisine, initially as a seasoning for cooked beans and sausages. Italians, on the other hand, use basil grown in pots as a seasoning in many of their recipes. (Pieroni *et alii* 2012: 437)

The title for this subsection of the paper is ‘*Our Basil and their Basil*’: *The Dimorphic Cultural Perception of Basil*, and despite the fact that there are indeed two species of basil with separate uses, the pride in having enlarged local cuisine is accentuated due to ethnic differences. A similar situation was described in a Greek group from London. According to David Sutton, a recent migrant smelled the basil grown in a pot from the windowsill and exclaimed “It really smells like Greece!” (2001: 74). The British researcher opened his analysis on the importance of this aromatic plant with a quote from the beginning of the 20th century belonging to Ian Dragoumis, a Greek diplomat and philosopher: “A flower pot of basil can symbolize the soul of people better than a drama of Aeschylus”. The smell as a metonymy for the home country was noted above in the need to make the house the same on an olfactory level for Easter or Christmas holydays. Furthermore, growing a plant that provides both the smell and taste of the childhood days creates a replicate universe, populated with a flora that establishes a specific profile.

In October 2018, T.C. (she left Bălţi, The Republic of Moldova in 1999) welcomed me in her house from La Storta, Rome, and insisted to show me something in her backyard built on stairs. It was a pot of basil that she brought from her native town. Tall and full of flowers, the plant was a comfort image for my subject who always took close care of it. Although many nations consider basil to be their national spice, somehow this plant manages to be perceived as an ingroup experience and thus bears a personal value. Italians from Romania need to underline the difference between the two species of *Ocimum basilicum* and the opposition becomes a dissimulated expression of the phrase “We are Italians!”, while as our subject from Italy (or the Greeks from U.K.) use and grow their own seeds from home countries.

From this common situation stirred by a plant frequently perceived as holy, reactions come to differ in a larger extent, rejecting socio-cultural characteristics of the others overtly. Local people from the Italian towns are often intrigued by Romanian customs associated with religious belief and calendar customs. Whenever the subjects speak about these feed-backs a condescending tone is noticeable and conclusions denoting a positive self-image are raised.

F.D. confessed that she tried to explain Romanian customs to the Italians who witnessed her gestures, and she came to a strong conclusion: “they have their own religion and will never understand why we do these things”. She continued by invoking the Orthodox church service for the Resurrection. Local people asked her: ‘But what are you doing there the whole night? What can a priest possibly say all night long?!’. The same mental rejection made F.D. feel that there cannot be a cultural dialogue on Christian baptism. Her Italian acquaintances told her: “it is not right to baptize the child when he is so little, it’s not *giusto* [fair], not normal”. Immigrants feel contested on their most intimate levels in such situations and the gap between groups grows wider. V.G.V. stated that “this defines us as human beings and as persons, without religion and without going to church... [we cannot be]. Faith defines us Romanians, it’s like an identity of ours...”.

Apart from the fact that “private devotional activities may also be linked with positive self-regard via processes of religious role taking” (Ellison 1993: 1027), the subject presents herself through a collective image that she acknowledges to belong to. Once more, the individual infers personal attitudes based on a we-feeling, that is *I am*



*Romanian, I do what Romanians do.* The observation of the elders triggers a reaction before a mental reasoning on the matter, and instant behavior is analyzed and concluded upon as personal keenness on Romanian tradition and faith.

G.I. has been living in Rome for the last fourteen years and fasts every day indicated by Orthodox law. Her Italian friends see her putting herself to this effort and they exclaim: "It makes no sense!". Such local reactions are quite frequent. M.B. lives in the same city since 1999 and she told me about the judgmental remark she hears whenever a commemorative meal is offered after a burial: "What do you mean, you have fun afterwards?" Obviously, the secularized Italian society lost the belief that offerings reach the Other World and eventually it is the deceased that eats and drinks.

Alms are periodically given away for the souls of the dead in Romanian tradition, and this is what F.D. did almost every Saturday while she was in Italy, with a strong feeling of personal satisfaction and inner peace. However, the local feed-back was a rather opposite one: "[If] I go and give alms to someone, Catholics say: «Your religion is more stupid! The dead don't eat! How could you do such a ...», and they laugh. I mean they really laugh". Another misunderstanding of this ritual gift of food was indicated by M.B.: Italians look suspiciously at her gesture, fearing that receiving it might create a debt from their part, to give food back in the future.

Funeral atmosphere is also invoked in the opposite situation, when Romanian immigrants evaluate Italian customs, more exactly the weddings. The contrast between a tragic situation and a happy union is ironic and highly expressive: "it is more beautiful at our wakes than at their weddings" (V.B.), "your [weddings] are most like our funerals" (M.B.). Spain also provided a disappointing nuptial image to M.D.C., who spent fifteen years away from home: "I never understood their weddings! The party is no big deal!" F.D. labels Italian wedding as 'strange' and continues with a better version of the rite:

we have everything you need (...), we have these customs from our fathers and forefathers. They have been verified, much has been done to find out the truth (...). That evening is food for your soul, it is exactly as at home, rite by rite.

This cultural hierarchy is ultimately aimed at building oneself a good impression, according to social identity theory, 'through positive intergroup distinctiveness which, in turn, is motivated by the need for positive self-esteem' (Hogg and Terry 2000: 124). Hence, looking in the social mirror, where images of the familiar world are shattered, does not influence self-perception; on the contrary, it feeds the ingroup validation of the self through customs. Migrants assume their different individuality, community and outlook on life as a consequence of the dual nature of earning a living abroad.

## CONCLUSIONS

The various concepts from sociology, social psychology, cultural anthropology and ethnology used in this paper proved useful in decoding cultural reaction in host countries. Migrants experience an identity fusion with their ethnic group through customs, and only later they perceive themselves as performers of traditional practices.

The three levels of reflection, *me, my world* and *the others* are closely delimited according to inherited cultural rules that maintain a bond with the home country. Moreover, periodic packages from Romania assure the sensorial need of familiarity provided by specific tastes and smells. Positive reflections on the self are obtained throughout this process, due to 'a visceral feeling of oneness with the group' (Swann *et alii* 2012: 441), both on a temporal axis represented by the elders of the family, and on spatial coordinates occupied by the migrant community.

The clash between a secularized society and a traditional one is doubled by the differences between Catholic and Orthodox belief. The various testimonies quoted above show a vivid awareness of the dissimilitude, and negative reactions of the locals from host societies do nothing more but reinforce personal convictions. The community is kept together by customs more than of other common preoccupations such as earning money or gaining social status. The children of the immigrants however do not respond in a similar manner to ritual gatherings, due to the

fact that they did not benefit of a traditional education in their native places, like their parents had, in Romania.

Universal reactions have also been noted, minorities tend to create ethnic symbols from elements that remind them of home. Basil cumulated such significance both from Italians, Greeks and Romanians, indicating that the sense of smell pertains to an emotional type of cognition. It even manages to divide the time between quotidian living and sacred days, when the house ‘smells like [Romanian] holidays’.

Migration is far from depleting its facets, and despite the fact that cultural heritage brought to host societies is the least investigated aspect of the phenomenon, customs play the most important role in the mental strategy of adaptation. Superior material condition of host societies is often fought against with an assumed superior traditional culture that provides a satisfactory self-perception.

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