

SOME REFLECTIONS OVER INTER-DISCIPLINARY COOPERATION IN THE STUDY OF AN INTER-STATE REGION: THE AUSTRO-ITALIAN-SLOVENE BORDERLAND

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ABSTRACT

Author of presented here article joined, as the only social anthropologist, an inter-disciplinary research team, formed in 1996, and dominated by historians, but also including an economist, a geographer, a literary scholar and a political scientist. The team members were recruited from research institutions located in Austria, Italy and Slovenia – all were personally familiar with the region, and their objective was to investigate the “causes and consequences of the division of a region by nation-states.” The work of this group emphasized documentation of the past. The contemporary situation – it accounted for lives lived in the region today also was examined. Three leading questions guided our work: How have the institutions of modern bureaucratic states manifested themselves in the life-worlds of people who came to populate a state frontier. How has the presence of the modern bureaucratic state in this borderland transformed local communities? How has the ideology of nationalism intervened in local lives as social facts? Investigation strategy used in such inter-state research project may serve as a positive example of inter-disciplinary collaboration model.

KEY WORDS: socio-cultural anthropology, inter-state region, Austrian borderland, Italian borderland, Slovenian borderland, Alpine region, cultures in space, maps, borders, boundaries.

ANOTACIJA

Straipsnyje pateikiama medžiaga apie 1996 metais sudarytą tarpdalykinę tyrimo grupę, tyrusią regiono priklausomybės atskiroms nacionalinėms valstybėms priežastis ir pasekmes. Toks projektas buvo neįsivaizduojamas be analitinės tiriamojo Austrijos – Italijos – Slovėnijos paribio regiono konceptualizacijos. Suderinus istorikų, geografų, ekonomistų ir sociokultūrinės antropologijos atstovų požiūrius, vadinamasis „trijų sienų regionas“ buvo apžvelgtas kaip antropologų vadinamos „Alpių regiono kultūrinės erdvės“ dalis. Ypatingas dėmesys buvo skiriamas ilgalaikėms socialinėms regiono transformacijoms, o konkrečiose vietovėse esančios visuomeninės ir kultūrinės institucijos buvo tiriamos atsižvelgiant į gamtines jų lokalizacijos sąlygas, palengvinančias vietinės medžiagos taikomųjų tyrimų galimybes. Pastebimas viso regiono ir atskirų valstybių teritorinių institucijų suartėjimas šiuo metu akcentuotas kaip unikali vietinė socio-kultūrinė sistema. Tyrimo strategija, taikyta šiame tarpdalykiniame kaimyninių valstybių regiono tyrimo projekte, gali būti rekomenduotina ir plačiai taikytina kaip sėkmingas tarptautinio mokslinio bendradarbiavimo modelis.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sociokultūrinė antropologija, tarpvalstybinis regionas, Austrijos pasienio regionas, Italijos pasienio regionas, Slovėnijos pasienio regionas, Alpių regionas, kultūrinės erdvės, žemėlapiai, kultūrinės ribos, kultūrinės sąsajos.

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It is easy to imagine the Baltic area as a kind of natural opposite to the area of my own research interest – the south-eastern Alps. Indeed, if we divide Europe into the *culture areas* proposed by Conrad Arensberg (1963) in his famous attempt to place the “Old World Peoples” in world ethnography, much of the Baltic littoral falls within the so-called “Atlantic Fringe” while my research field belongs to the “Alpine Climax.” These culture areas are clearly different in terms of what Arensberg calls “subsistence bases.” As a zone of cultural climax the Alpine area represents the full diversity of the so-called “Old World subsistence base” that emphasizes an intensive, land-enriching self-completing cycle of agricultural pursuits founded upon the inter-play of plow-based

agriculture and the herding of hoofed animals. The Atlantic Fringe, in contrast, emphasizes just one subsistence pattern within the Old World subsistence base where dispersed small self-contained homesteads based upon kitchen gardens and family based herding prevail.

By definition the Atlantic Fringe is marginal to the great centres along Europe's coasts but nevertheless it represents a bountiful resource base for dispersed human habitation; its historical viability has been facilitated by easy access to the sea. Settlement and exploitation of Europe's alpine/mountainous zones has depended upon careful manipulation of challenging climatic and ecological conditions; household viability has required participation in regional economies and locally organized regulation of a highly restricted resource base. In sum, Arensberg divided Europe into ecologically distinct zones reflecting contrasting forms of adaptation, contrasting ways of life.¹ His regionalization of Europe was not in terms of bounded units, but rather in terms of imagined interdependent zones of human settlement and habitation distinguished by contrasting regimes of material production and socio-cultural reproduction as well as distinct patterns of articulation with what he called "institutional superstructures." (Cf, Arensberg 1963)

More dominant and popular understandings of Europe's subdivision emphasize other distinctions – distinctions that commonly forsake reference to an agrarian past that yet marks society. Modern images of the Continent's social and cultural division are based upon the making of *territorial* states over the past century and a half and their subsequent pre-eminence as the guarantors of a European social order. And this process has been facilitated by popular recognition of Europe's inhabitants as constituting ethnic groups. I would suggest that the quest of *peoples* for nationhood has marked the recent history of the south-eastern Alps and Baltic region in similar ways.

Both regions have hosted throughout documented history a diversity of language communities that only recently came to signify ethnic distinctions legitimating modern nation-states. During Europe's transformation from an agrarian to an urban-industrial social order locally reproduced dialects came to be identified with language families that in turn came to identify individuals with peoples and nations. And over the past century both regions have been subjected to geo-political partition, following wars and the machinations of greater powers, that has inevitably located the members of locally acknowledged nations and *peoples* outside the confines of their supposed Mother country or subjugated them within a modern imperial state (Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union).

In sum, ethnic categorization came to dominate European understandings of cultural differentiation and the nation-state came to be seen as the motor of a modern social order. Household based production systems and regional patterns of economic integration, central to Arensberg's considerations, have been absorbed within the complex division of labour and bureaucratic control ordered by the nation-state, and more recently, by its apparent successors such as the European Union and global corporations.

In the remainder of this paper I refer to these similarities in the modernization of the Baltic area and south-eastern Alps as well as Arensberg's perspective on European socio-cultural diversity.² Noting the many disciplines represented at this conference I have chosen to reflect over inter-

¹ This is of course a gross simplification of the correlational analysis Arensberg used to isolate cultural areas whereby he emphasized juxtapositioning the "subsistence base" with what he called "institutional superstructures;" the latter alluded to factors such as universal monotheistic religions, historical ecclesiastical, commercial and political centers and historical patterns of settlement, migration and conquest.

² Arensberg explicitly rejected attempts to regionalize Europe with reference to single criteria such as "nationality" and "historical ethnicities" (1963, pp. 80-81).

disciplinary cooperation in the study of an “inter-state region” – a region that is quite removed geographically from its Baltic counter-part but nevertheless a region shaped in recent history by very similar processes.

The following is formed as a review of an inter-disciplinary research project in the south-eastern Alps. I seek to demonstrate how individual contributions to our work – due for publication later this year (Bahovec & Domej in press)³ – evoke socio-cultural anthropological perspectives that emphasize the importance of investigating locally anchored life-worlds as an empirical basis for considering the ways that regions are integrated and articulate with greater society. Our chosen field of investigation necessarily calls for reference to recent scholarship on borderlands, a secondary theme below.

Research objectives and methods

In 1996 I joined, as the only social anthropologist, an inter-disciplinary research team dominated by historians, but also including an economist, a geographer, a literary scholar and a political scientist. With exception of myself as the group’s “outsider” other team members were recruited from research institutions located in Austria, Italy and Slovenia – all were personally familiar with the region. Our objective was to investigate the “*causes and consequences of the division of a region by nation-states.*” While our work emphasized documentation of the past it also examined the contemporary situation – it accounted for lives lived in the region today. Three leading questions guided our work: How have the institutions of modern bureaucratic states *manifested* themselves in the life-worlds of people who came to populate a state frontier. How has the presence of the modern bureaucratic state in this borderland *transformed* local communities? How has the ideology of nationalism intervened in local lives as social facts?

We approached these questions through investigation of local historical records, public statistics and census material, chronicles, newspaper and popular journal archives, personal journals and oral sources. While my contribution builds upon long-term participant observation throughout the region (initiated in 1981), other members of the team repeatedly visited local sites in their quest for data. Using this diverse set of sources as well as survey material we were able to trace and compare the institutional transformation of local settlements and towns and glimpse the evolving life-worlds of people living in these places, before and during the region’s territorial partition. For the sake of intra-regional comparison we selected a set of villages and towns representing each state segment of the region for in-depth investigation. Common to all of these settlements was the presence of Slovene speakers.

Contextualization of research contributions

Our research was not primarily a study of state making or nationalism. Rather, we utilized existing theory on these phenomena to elucidate the situation in a specific setting – the so-called Three Border Region (hereafter: TBR). As the historical interface of the Germanic, Romance and Slavic language families that have come to identify distinct peoples and nations, the TBR provides a context, similar to that of the Baltic region, for investigating the outcome of modern state making and ethnic nationalism. During the last half of the 20th century these themes attracted massive attention

³ Individual contributions to our research publication are cited below by the chapter number. The project publication is presented separately in the reference list with a list of all chapters and their authors.

among historians and social scientists who framed their investigations primarily in terms of pervasive large-scale institutions *constituted* by states and nations. Thereby the nation-state and nationalism have dominated scholarly understanding of the European social order, a hegemonic form of representation that we sought to challenge in our work.

It has been less common to investigate the modern state and nationalism as manifestations of the lives and communities of a borderland. Nevertheless, our quest to elucidate these matters through examination of the periphery of modern states was not novel. For example, innovative research on state-formation and nation building initiated nearly four decades ago by Stein Rokkan (1975) and fellow political scientists (1982) problematized the relationship between state centres and peripheries. And in our work the articulation of peripheral communities with institutions organized by centralized states was also at issue. But in contrast to Rokkan's objective to identify and compare diverse forms of state making and nation building within greater Europe, our attention was more narrowly focused, emphasizing the manifestation of these phenomena in a given region.

More recent scholarship on European borderlands comes closer to our research approach. For example, in his 1989 account of "the making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees" a social historian, Peter Sahlins, stressed the interplay of histories of these two states with the "historical ethnography of Catalan village communities, rural nobles, and peasants" (p. xv) in the borderland of Cerdanya. His objective was to elucidate state-making in a frontier zone with reference to both local and external political and social structures. This provided our political scientist, Günther Guggenberger (Ch 2), a methodology for presenting the transformation of TBR political institutions (e.g., elected councils, commons associations, political factions, public administration) preceding and following its partition by Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia after World War I; he employed what Sahlins calls macro and micro perspectives of historical investigation.

Another text, *Border Identities* (Wilson & Donnan 1998), outlines an "anthropology of borders" that emphasizes investigation of nation-states, and their territorial borders, *in terms of* the everyday life and practices of borderland residents. Significantly, this approach emphasizes "historical ethnography" of borderland localities and stresses investigation of identity formation, both emphases of our research.

The epoch of state making, at the heart of our research, reflects only a moment in the history of TBR settlement. In order to place the TBR's inter-state partition in its proper perspective several of my colleagues investigated and compared local social and cultural institutions both before and following emplacement of international territorial borders. To achieve this, we adopted analytical perspectives that resonate with those of human geography and anthropological scholarship on the evolution of human societies.

Human geography investigates, with regard to the natural environment, "habitat, economy and society" as interrelated domains of human activity that articulate with one another in creating viable forms of subsistence. (cf. Forde 1934) The late historian and geographer, Andreas Moritsch, who led our research group introduces our collective volume (Ch. 1) from the above perspective by outlining how the natural environment (physical geography, ecological conditions and resource base) of the TBR *functions* as a habitat for settlement and material adaptations, *promotes* social stratification, and *facilitates* the TBR's function as a historical transit zone connecting surrounding regions.

Through *consideration* of human adaptation over the long term and *discovery* of socio-cultural institutions unique to local habitats (cf. Steward 1977), it is possible to delineate continuities that

supersede the temporal intervention of externally imposed institutions and ideologies – the central topic of our research. We adopted a historiography that emphasized the long-term transformation of a locally founded social order. This approach parallels evolutionary anthropology's problematization of the diverse forms of society manifest in human history (cf. Johnson & Earle 1987). Indeed, our group's economist, Aleš Lokar (Ch. 9), explicitly adopted this perspective of evolving societal formations in order to profile the transformation of the economies of TBR communities with reference to the economic consequences of institutions introduced during the nationalist era, marked by the region's subjugation by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. And Andreas Moritsch (Ch. 3) implicitly outlined evolving forms of TBR society in his historical introduction to our work thereby providing context essential to other chapters of lesser historical depth.

The long-term perspective also emphasized the transformation of the TBR from a zone of contact and cooperation and to one of separation within an evolving social order. In this way our work draws attention to the multifarious qualities of borderlands, to the phenomenology of borders in Europe – the underlying topic of a recent publication relating culture to cross-border cooperation in Europe (Andersen, O'Dowd & Wilson 2003). Here a framework for comparing cross-border cooperation is proposed that reflects our social geographer's (Anton Gosar, Ch. 10) procedure for determining ways in which contemporary TBR borders affect labour migration, demographic change and tourism.

However, by examining the function and significance of borders *over the long term* we were forced to recognize a more radical transformation of the TBR, from a historical setting of inter-regional economic interdependence (from the time of settlement to the nationalist era) to a 20th century site of demarcation and separation that resulted in the region's demographic and economic decline as it was relegated to the periphery of centralized nation-states. This transformation of the TBR from a zone of contact to one of separation applies not only to the material side of human adaptation; it reflects cultural adaptations as well.

In his discussion of "ethnic structure and language behaviour in the TBR," another of our group's historians with a socio-linguistic orientation, Theodor Domej (Ch. 4), demonstrates how a historical setting of language contact (preceding the 20th century nationalist era) promoted multilingualism and borrowing between local vernaculars. The subsequent politicization of ethnic difference (emphasizing language identity) reversed this historical process of linguistic accommodation and amalgamation to one of language ranking and separation inhibiting multilingualism.⁴ Domej's work illustrates implicitly, through its focus upon communication practices and the institutionalization of standardized literary codes (primarily through a burgeoning public school system), the transformation of knowledge and attitudes embodied by residents of the TBR. His careful documentation of the changing social significance of local verbal codes provides insight into the transformation of locally anchored self-perceptions and categorizations of important "others" – a theme central to the contemporary anthropology of borders.

The foregoing examples of change over the long term are based upon intimate knowledge of local institutions and practices. This historical and empirical perspective contrasts sharply with histories written to substantiate the trajectory of state formations or the ethnogenesis of nations. As such our collective work has promoted a historiography well suited to an "anthropology of borders" emphasizing the transformation of borderland life-worlds.

⁴ In his work Domej implicitly touches upon the growing field of inquiry known as Contact Linguistics that contributes significantly to the comparative study of borderlands. (Cf. Stern & Voss in press)

The Three Border Region attains its greatest legitimacy as a frontier – a zone of separation – in terms of the interests of states and nations. In the eyes of local inhabitants these borders are commonly seen as something imposed from the outside; they represent yet one more contingency over which locals have relatively little control and with which they have to cope, like the whims of world markets and devastating floods and earthquakes endemic to the region. The region's tripartite partition is especially alien to TBR inhabitants who trace their local origins to a time before partition and who share a mother tongue with regional compatriots on the other side of local state borders (Minnich, Ch. 8).

Our research was based in local communities, often related through inter-marriage, where dialects of Slovene are spoken. By emphasizing locally founded processes of socio-cultural reproduction and integration our investigations emphasized the *artificiality* of ethnically inspired state borders and divisions in local society. Yet, we were forced to acknowledge and document how the politicization of ethnic difference has traumatically affected local lives, especially among those who have found themselves living on the “wrong” side of an ethnic frontier.

This discontinuity between a local socio-cultural order and the external intervention of centralized state authority is central to the contributions of two of our historians, Janez Cvirn (Ch. 5) and Tina Bahovec (Ch. 6). The first compares ways in which nationalist differentiation, prefacing the region's geopolitical division following World War I, diversely transformed local traditions of self-determination (i.e., political institutions) and impacted local collective self-understandings through the introduction of ethnic distinction. Nationalist differentiation facilitated the devastating epoch of “*Integral Nationalism*” (Bahovec, Ch. 6) promoting absolute segregation and separation of the region's constituent “peoples” especially under Italian fascism and occupation by the Third Reich. Without question this period represents the nadir of the TBR's history as a site of human commensality.

In this manner the TBR attained pervasive recognition as a “border” region. Borders became embodied in borderland lives. National partition informed the imagination of everyone, from people of the soil to literati. Our group's specialist in regional literature, Johann Strutz (Ch. 7) correlated the production and content of nationalist era literature known in the TBR with the multifarious institutions shaping this tragic epoch, emphasizing biographical representations of lives lived in the TBR. As I have argued elsewhere (Minnich 1996), individual representations of borderland life, whether autobiographical or of another literary genre, are essential sources of insight into the phenomenology of borderlands.

Anthropological reflections over a borderland and region

All the members of our group were acutely aware during project planning of how the foregoing processes of national differentiation had generated a hegemonic popular understanding of the TBR as intrinsically divided by ethnic and national difference. The dismantling of local border crossings during the course of our research, as Austria and Slovenia joined the EU (in 1996 and 2004 respectively), has facilitated numerous local initiatives for intra-regional cooperation in tourism, language education, disaster relief and other sectors of local life. And in my own contribution to our project (CH. 8) I register how middle age and younger residents of the TBR construct collective self-images in which ethnic and national differentiation are losing ground to other forms of commitment and belonging which emphasize, for example, identification with “Heimat” without associating this idea with a distinct people or nation.

But back in 1996 each of us in the research team was strongly motivated to rectify in his or her way the tired and superficial representation of the TBR outlined above. Below I share my understanding of our collective effort to portray the TBR as both a borderland and region.⁵

I initially encountered the TBR in 1981 as a doctoral fellow. My interest was to write an ethnography comparing the traditional agro-pastoral way of life practiced by Slovene dialect speaking autochthonous residents of two agrarian settlements on the north and south slopes of the Carnian Alps, that is, in Austria from Italy. Schooled in cultural ecology I perceived these villages as part of the Alpine culture area proposed by Arensberg (1963), Robert K. Burns (1963) and others. This was my frame of reference for understanding the region as a whole. And it remains central to my understanding of this supposedly divided region.

The alpine way of life outlined in the beginning of this paper has been fundamentally organized by a household based system of production emphasizing mixed agriculture and animal husbandry. But the agrarian based household economy of the Alps has seldom been self-sufficient; it has depended upon other forms of economic activity in order to attain household viability. As we have documented (Chs. 1, 3, 8), the historical presence of commercial and industrial centres in the Alps, where all three classic estates have been present, has facilitated the economic viability of the largely agrarian population prevailing in the TBR previous to the nationalist era.

Postulations about the Alpine culture area were not restricted, however, to considerations of the material basis of a social order. Both Arensberg (1963) and Burns (1963) identified in the Alpine region a high degree of cultural diversity that they attributed, among other things, to a complex history of settlement by diverse ethnic groups, to the role of the Alps as the location of religious heresy and to the regular (seasonal) participation of Alpine residents in the economies of surrounding regions in pursuit of their livelihoods. Indeed, most of these qualities distinguishing the Alpine Region are identified in our accounts of the TBR.

As our investigations confirm for the TBR, the subsistence base of the Alpine region has produced a standard pattern of social organization at the level of local society emphasizing the agrarian household estate and its incorporation by “closed corporate communities” (Burns 1963:144). Thus, already at the level of small agrarian settlements local self-determination through representative village and town councils was institutionalized well in advance of the introduction of the modern bureaucratic state (Ch. 2). And this was paralleled by similar developments in Alpine towns and market centres (Burns 1963). The logical consequence of this form of locally generated social and political organization in a modern state order is the cantonal confederation represented by Switzerland. As our research convincingly documents, the partition of the TBR by highly centralized states, adverse to the autonomy and sovereignty of their constituent communities, inhibited such a development. The established political culture of local communities was challenged.

Nevertheless, our research has in many ways substantiated the above conceptualization of an alpine culture area. The agrarian and pastoral base distinguishing the TBR’s original settlement created a household based system of production that historically depended upon participation in other economic activities for the maintenance of household viability. Forest exploitation, mining, metallurgical industry, freight services and seasonal employment as labourers and traders outside the region became part of the overall economy of the region’s agrarian households. Through the early institutionalization of village commons and servitude rights local traditions of self-governance

⁵ This understanding of the TBR is more fully developed in Minnich 2002.

were developed. In its quest to regulate and control the local political economy the modern state encountered in the TBR an existing set of political institutions based on the principle of self-determination upheld by modern states as the principle for their organization. In sum, the introduction of the modern state and the ideology of ethnically inspired nationalism encountered a series of locally founded institutions and collective self-understandings that challenged its supremacy. The autochthonous population of the TBR has consistently evaluated and reacted to centrally imposed institutions in terms of local interests.⁶

Conclusion

The above inter-disciplinary research project can be seen as a model for organizing the investigation of borderland regions. In this endeavour it is important to contextualize the creation of geopolitical frontiers in terms of a locally founded social and cultural order which is accessible through long-term historical investigation influenced by the perspectives of human geography and cultural ecology. Knowledge of locally founded social and cultural institutions and their place in the life-worlds of local inhabitants is essential to the interpretation of how modern and contemporary interventions have shaped local life.

Assumptions commonly made about social and cultural differentiation in terms of ethnic difference and institutions of the modern nation-state should be subjected to a more open-ended inquiry into the creation of collective categories and locally articulated collective self-identifications and into the fundamental constitution of political and economic processes as they evolve in the smallest units of society. Such a research program is designed as a corrective to hegemonic models of cultural difference and social order that seek to generalize about European regions at the expense of acknowledging locally rooted sources of social and cultural differentiation and continuity.

This research program can easily accommodate a diversity of disciplinary perspectives; it opens for contributions from history, human/social geography, socio-linguistics, social and cultural anthropology, microeconomics, as well as anthropologically informed research in folklore and ethnography. Essential pre-conditions for such a team project are a clearly conceived framework for conceptualizing a region **and** commitment to the investigation and comparison of local settings, beginning with the household.

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⁶ This pattern of local institutional development and the articulation of borderland life-worlds with the state are comprehensively presented in Minnich 1998.

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The Three Border Region research publication by chapter/author: *Das österreichisch-italienisch-slovenische Dreiländereck. Ursachen und Folgen der nationalstaatlichen Dreiteilung einer Region*. (Bahovec & Domej in press)

- CH. 1 Andreas Moritsch. Das Dreiländereck – eine geographische Einleitung
- CH. 2 Günther Guggenberger. Prozesse von Integration und Desintegration im Spiegel der institutionellen Entwicklung
- CH. 3 Andreas Moritsch. Die Vorgeschichte (bis 1848)
- CH. 4 Theodor Domej. Ethnische Struktur und Sprachverhalten am Dreiländereck
- CH. 5 Janez Cvirn. Nationale Differenzierung und politische Verhältnisse im Dreiländereck (1848-1918)
- CH. 6 Tina Bahovec. Der integrale Nationalismus im Dreiländereck (1918-1945)
- CH. 7 Johann Strutz. Der Alpen-Adria-Raum, das Dreiländereck und die nationalstaatliche Dreiteilung im Spiegel der Literatur
- CH. 8 Robert Gary Minnich. Bürger eines Grenzlandes – individuelle Wege zur Selbstbestimmung
- CH. 9 Aleš Lokar. Wirtschaftliche Auswirkungen von Nationalismus auf das Dreiländereck Österreich, Italien und Slovenien
- CH. 10 Anton Gosar. Dreiländereck – Tre Confini – Tromeja: Soziale und wirtschaftliche Folgen von Grenzziehungen

KELIOS PASTABOS APIE TARPVALYKINĮ BENDRADARBIAVIMĄ TARPVALSTYBINIO REGIONO TYRIMUOSE: AUSTRIJOS, ITALIJOS IR SLOVĖNIJOS PASIENIO ZONA

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S a n t r a u k a

1996 metais buvo sudaryta tarpdalykinė tyrimo grupė, turėjusi tirti *regiono priklausomybės atskiroms nacionalinėms valstybėms priežastis ir pasekmes*. Toks tikslas reikalavo analitinės tiriamojo regiono konceptualizacijos. Suderinus istorikų, geografų, ekonomistų ir sociokultūrinės antropologijos atstovų požiūrius, vadinamasis „trijų sienų regionas“ buvo apžvelgtas kaip antropologų vadinamos „Alpių regiono kultūrinės erdvės“ dalis. Ypatingas dėmesys buvo skiriamas ilgalaikėms socialinėms regiono transformacijoms, o konkrečiose vietovėse esančios visuomeninės ir kultūrinės institucijos buvo tiriamos atsižvelgiant į gamtines jų lokalizacijos sąlygas, palengvinančias vietinės medžiagos taikomųjų tyrimų galimybes. Pastebimas viso regiono ir atskirų valstybių teritorinių institucijų suartėjimas šiuo metu akcentuotas kaip unikali vietinė sociokultūrinė sistema.

Projektas buvo vykdomas visame regione. Jį sudarė serija tyrimų konkrečių gyvenviečių kaimų ir miestų ribose. Taip buvo įmanoma geriausiai suvokti vietinių žmonių gyvenimo nedideliuose lokaliniuose pasaulėliuose ypatumus ir įvertinti *santykinių* geopolitinio ir etninio bei nacionalinio identiteto poveikį regionui, pasižyminčiam istoriniais skirtingų tautybių asmenų santuokų, ekonominės tarpusavio priklausomybės ir kultūrinio integralumo modeliais. Projekte buvo akcentuojama ne tik stereotipinė, bet ir individualizuota vietinių bendruomenių ir regiono samprata, jame panaudoti tiek autentiški biografiniai pasienio gyventojų pasakojimai, tiek anksčiau skelbta faktinė medžiaga apie regiono socialines bei kultūrinės realijas. Tokia tyrimų medžiaga buvo panaudota standartinės regiono charakteristikai koreguoti ir subjektyvaus, individualiai nusistatyto bei kolektyvinio identiteto formavimo aspektams apibūdinti, taip išryškinant santykinę etninio nacionalizmo svarbą vietinės kolektyvinės savimonės formavimosi procese.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad tyrimo strategija, taikyta šiame tarpdalykiniame kaimyninių valstybių regiono tyrimo projekte, gali būti rekomenduotina ir plačiai taikytina kaip sėkmingas tarptautinio mokslinio bendradarbiavimo modelis.

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