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## SOME REMARKS ON THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF BUNJEVCI IN VOJVODINA

**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents some remarks on the cultural identity of the Bunje people or Bunjevci, a national group that has historically undergone a long and difficult journey in preserving their identity. Their struggle – challenging their very existence and fighting for a “rebirth”, including their re-recognition and the restoration of the rights they have held since their arrival in these regions in the 17th century – warrants a place in academic discourse. Although the Bunjevci have been recognized both as a nation and as significant contributors to numerous social and political events since their settlement in these areas, their existence was completely erased by a political decision in Serbia in the mid-20th century. This paper briefly outlines the key elements of the cultural identity of Bunjevci, which sustained them during a period of figurative exile. These include their origin, language, education, and customs, with particular emphasis on their role in some crucial historical events for Serbia. Each of these aspects deserves greater attention, and through this work, we express the need for deeper exploration of these elements, in order to support the Bunjevci in maintaining their permanent status as a national minority.

**Keywords:** *language, education, culture, origin, Bunjevci.*

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## 1. Introduction

A person tends to live and develop within a community with which he/she identifies on the basis of some common characteristics. The need to belong to a group is natural, since a group means safety, support and protection from outside influences and attacks. Thus, each individual creates his/her own collective identity, incorporating into it all the social interactions and historical practice he/she goes through, enriching the community with his/her personal mark.

Everyone is equally important and valuable member of the society. But if there is urge of some members to be taken as more important and valuable than others, it creates a social dynamic with longer or shorter periods of conflict and reconciliation occurring alternately, which again affect the further development of relations between individuals, members of the same society. Therefore, belonging to a community is not a one-way street. It is a social interaction between an individual and a collectivity that pervade, develop and improve each other intellectually, content-wise and practically. The mentioned phenomena take place in a similar dynamic that we described a little while ago- conflicts and reconciliations, ups and downs, thriving and stagnation – as two sides of the same coin, are constantly changing. The consequences of those changes affect everyone's lives and decisions, and often create new phenomena and relationships, change or abolish already existing phonemes and relationships.

One of the directions in which these types of changes operate affects, among others, is the cultural identity of a nation. Developing and preserving cultural patterns within a nation is one of the basic ways of preserving not only cultural but also national identity (Nikolić, 2019, pp. 69–81). One does not exist without the other; they are organically connected, with continuous mutual influences. Cultural identity derives “from cultural rights that appear with the existence of a social group that has a common identity based on religion, ethnicity, language or nationality and includes the right to express and preserve the traditions and practices of the said group”(Mitrović, 2017, p. 12). Those cultural rights appear exclusively within the concept of multiculturalism and they are exclusively related to the preservation of the national identity of minority national groups “and they represent one of the basic human rights that recognizes the fundamental sense of cultural identity, group membership and common values for human well-being and progress” (Ćuković, 2019). Thus, cultural identity includes numerous identity determinants that, through their development, have a reciprocal effect on cultural identity as well.

When it comes to the people of Bunjevci, which are in the focus of our research, and their relationship to their own cultural and national identity, A. Raič states that:

*“perceiving the clear boundaries of one’s own culture according to the cultures and nation-building projects of the people in whose environment they exist and fight for the preservation of their ethnic identity is an important assumption achieving equality and gaining a feeling of acceptance as a minority community”* (Raič & Kujundžić-Ostojić, 2013).

In this sense, the concept of multiculturalism helped the re-constitution of minority rights and minority communities, among others, of community of Bunjevci.

Further in this paper, we will try to shed some light on some aspects of the cultural identity of the Bunjevci, such as language, origin, customs, etc., and on why is that important not only for Bunjevci but for the Serbia itself, and also briefly point out the challenges Bunjevci faced after moving to Vojvodina. Those short insights should be enough to raise specific interest in the readers, to get more information about the challenges that Bunjevci faced and the ways of overcoming them.

## **2. Origin of Bunjevci: discovering where they came from**

The first mentions of Bunjevci on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were recorded as early as in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the vicinity of Sombor, where the first Bunjevac parish was recorded as early as in 1632 (Gavrilović, 2017, p. 21; Petrović, 2019, pp. 21–26). Some authors found even earlier mentioning of this parish- in 1622, in letters of don Šimun Matković, a franciscan priest who was addressing to Congregation in Rome in order to gain parish named Bunjevci in Kaloč diocese (Stepanović, 2022, p. 5). Don Matković “wanted to take care of his spiritual children, whose spiritual needs no one took care of before him” (Stepanović, 2022, p. 5). The parish of Bunjevci, which was assigned to Don Matković by the decision of Pope Gregory XV on July 1, 1622, included several settlements on the territory of Somborska and Bajška nahija.<sup>1</sup> The name “Bunjevci” was therefore “alive

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<sup>1</sup> Nahija-specific term for the municipality.

and accepted among those who called themselves and represented themselves by it”, living there for a long time (Stepanović, 2022, p. 5).<sup>2</sup>

Some historical sources inform us that when they moved to Bačka, Bunjevci were not that unorganized and intimidated refugees, but had “militia under their command”, and that they were “familiar with logistics and the art of warfare” (Nimčević, 2017, p. 287).<sup>3</sup> Their bravery brought them noble titles and other benefits, such as properties specially assigned to them, and guarantees that they can enjoy their benefits without restrictions.

The turning point in awakening national consciousness of Bunjevci was the period after the adoption of Law Article XXXVIII in 1868. in Hungary, where Bunjevci were predominantly populated at that time. Regulating the rights of national minorities for the first time, this act gave the possibility of using the mother tongue of Bunjevci in school’s administration and court, which are the main point of preservation of one’s identity (Raič & Kujundžić Ostojić, 2013). In this period, must be mentioned the work of the Bishop Ivan Antunović, who took pioneering steps in consolidating Bunjevci national and cultural identity, by establishing newspapers and cultural centers. It further led to the articulation of certain political attitudes aimed at the struggle for respecting their national and cultural rights (Raič & Kujundžić Ostojić, 2013).

The national wanderings of the vojvodinian Bunjevci often kept them at the crossroads between two more numerous peoples, Serbian and Croatian, with whom they had some common features (Mandić, 2020). They shared with the Serbian people the passion for preserving their inner feeling, traditions and customs and national identity, of course each within the framework of their own people. At the same time, sharing the same Roman Catholic faith with Croatian people and similar language (Raduški, 2023, pp. 45–69) didn’t necessarily make them closer to the Croats. Even so, Bunjevci often had to defend their own identity, as much from external dangers as from internal ones – from themselves, who began to doubt their individuality and uniqueness.

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<sup>2</sup> So, we can presume that Bunjevci came here and founded those settlements some time ago before Don Matković discovered them- which could be period from few years to few decades before.

<sup>3</sup> Their mobility and bravely facing various military challenges, while they strived to settle in one area, where they can safely establish their community, is somewhat reminiscent of the fate of the Danube regiment under the leadership of Vuk Isaković, described by Miloš Crnjanski in his novel “Migration”(„Seobe“). The need to be just their own, not considered as a part of this or that other nation, led them further until they settled in the area of today’s Vojvodina, apparently convinced that they could peacefully establish their community here, and that their military skills can guarantee them peaceful existence.

Administrative repression and then systematic acculturation, followed by forced assimilation of the Bunjevci during the 19th and 20th centuries<sup>4</sup> seriously shook their national and cultural identity and increased their insecurity about who they are and to whom they belong (Černelić, 2018). That is why the act of their own assimilation in 1945. when, by the decision of the highest legislative body in the territory of the liberated Vojvodina, they were erased and sort of “rewritten” in the numerous state of the Croatian nation, was met with confusion, a little relief (we believe that they were tired of fighting to prove who they are and what they are and that they are different from the rest) and with the lack of a plan how to proceed further<sup>5</sup>. New political and social circumstances and a true democratic arrangement of the state and system led to the correction of a great historical and cultural injustice 70 years later (Orlović, 2023, pp. 41–56); the injustice is greater precisely because the support of Bunjevci to the Serbian people in one of the most significant events in Serbian history – the joining of Vojvodina to Serbia in 1918 was enormous.

In the *Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci and other Slavs in Banat, Bačka and Baranja*, held on November 25, in 1918, have participated 578 Serbs, 84 Bunjevci, 62 Slovaks, 21 Ruthenians, 3 Shokci, 2 Croats, 6 Germans and 1 Hungarian, in order to establish the fateful decision to join Serbia within the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Marković, 2017, p. 102). Appreciation of the importance of Bunjevci in the entire state-making process was also confirmed by the election of one of their prominent politicians “*to achieve responsible communication with the Government of the Kingdom of Serbia as one of the representatives of the people gathered at the Great Assembly*” (Marković, 2017, p. 103). Especially Serbs and Bunjevci, regardless of how they are baptized, but they certainly believe in God, had a strong faith that by joining the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, they would be able to progress and protect themselves. One of the significant demands from the Great National Assembly was a guarantee “to all

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<sup>4</sup> The authors, such as Orlović S, Marković S, in many of their works state that acculturation as the process of diminishing one's culture and subjugation under another culture until the first is totally disappeared, was present in case of the Bunjevci community longer than from 1945.- nearly from their moving to Bačka and Vojvodina. Acculturation is directly connected with administrative act , who sometimes legalized activities that threatened cultural, linguistic and national identity of Bunjevci. Some of works, depicting acculturation processes, are used when writing this paper, but in a limited extent, because of the need to remain focused on the key points of the cultural identity of the Bunjevci globally.

<sup>5</sup> Note: historical and social circumstances that fully led to this decision are specific and numerous; since they go beyond the scope of the short review that we intended with this work, they deserve special attention and special paper that we are preparing.

Serbs, Bunjevci and Shokci who remain in other countries to live, outside the borders of the state created by this act of unification, that they will have the right to protect all their minority rights, the right to survival and development according to the principle of reciprocity" (Marković, 2017, p. 16)

According to the number of participants at the Great Assembly, Bunjevci, with its 84 members, were second in order. Of the 7 women who had the right to vote at this assembly, even 5 came from Subotica, and 3 were Bunjevci: Mara Malagurski, Katica Rajčić i Manda Sudarević (Kujundžić-Ostojić, 2022, p. 44). Mara Malagurski, for example, was prominent in her educational work and was involved in the preservation of the heritage of the people of Subotica Bunjevci. She was the president of the first cultural association of Bunjevci in Subotica (Marjanov, 2019, pp. 137–143; Kujundžić-Ostojić, 2022, pp. 58–62). The two other women were also significant for the Bunjevci culture, preserving their language, customs and keeping the flame of their nationality rather live between children, young people and families (Kujundžić-Ostojić, 2022, pp. 8–62).

Preparations for the strongest attack on their existence were continuously between the two world wars. It started with increasingly loud claims that the Serbs do not allow the Bunjevci to be what they are, that is, the Croats; a political game ensued with the results of the population census by classifying Bunjevci into the category of persons of the same nationality as Croats, or other Slavs of non-Serbian nationality; in the end, it was claimed that what is called the Bunjevac language is actually just a dialect and that they have no grammar (Marković, 2017, p. 39).

The last act against the Bunjevac national and cultural identity was the statement of Marshal Tito at the founding congress of the Communist Party of Serbia, held on May 8, 1945, where he stated that "Serbian chauvinists in Vojvodina will not recognize a Croat as a Croat, but call him a Bunjevac"<sup>6</sup> (Orlović, 2023, p. 254; Marković, 2021, p. 37). This statement was led by the Decision of the Main People's Liberation Committee of Vojvodina, in which the existence of two national communities – Bunjevci and Shokci – were

<sup>6</sup> Orlović here refers to the article of Branković Slobodan, named „Struktuiranje federacije“, published in *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* in 1985 (number 3, pp. 11-40) and points out this particular speech and this particular part of Tito's speech as "beginning of the violent assimilation of Bunjevci" (2023, p. 254). The same source is cited by numerous authors, such as Marković, mentioned also in previous citation bracket. As we didn't manage to get the cited Branković's paper, we decided to give credence to the truth of the quote that we ourselves cite in the text, because it is mentioned in numerous sources in the identical form. This quote does not represent our position on this topic, but was just used in the context of one of the crucial and maybe the last cause in chain of causes that led to the act of assimilation of Bunjevci and Shokci in 1945.

erased. This act of forced assimilation is even more difficult due to the fact that it was done at a time when the end of the Second World War was officially announced in Europe, but not in the world -in a still unstable and deceptive historical moment, and towards the national communities with which the Serbian nation has always had friendly and respectful relations.

### 3. The Language of Bunjevci

*“...enlighten the minds of your sons and daughters to see that life is not virile or civil, if it is not in its nationality; that a person does not know how to create a thought, that he does not know how to conceive a noble feeling; if he is not inspired by the wonderful voice of his mother tongue...”* (Sedlak, 2017, p. 409).

The Bunjevac language was first introduced as “*Bunjevac speech with elements of national culture*” in 2007 as an optional subject in elementary schools on the territory of the City of Subotica. The number of more than 10,000 children<sup>7</sup> who attended this course since its establishing inspired the initiation of the process of research and determination of Bunjevac language standards.

Research conducted in 2018 (Iršević, 2020) on a sample of 85 children out of a total of 224 who during the 2017/2018 school year attended the “*Bunjevac language with elements of national culture*” course, indicated that the children are quite open to learning the language and improving it. Namely, 57.1% of the respondents considered that they speak this language “mediocre”, while they expressed the opinion that they know better Serbian language, as the official language, because they are evaluated for learning and using it.<sup>8</sup> The number of children who stated that the Serbian language is their favorite language, compared to the number of children who declared for the Bunjevac language, is almost equal, 41.8% versus 38.8%. The research results point to the need for greater promotion of the Bunjevci language as the language of a named minority. For decades, after their own national erasure, Bunjevci were exposed to either the official Serbian language or

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<sup>7</sup> The main problem that the Bunjevci community (and many other small minority communities) faces here is gathering the minimum of 15 students for whom classes in this language can be organized, that is, attending this optional subject. It is sometimes very difficult to achieve that number of children in one school, on the same level of knowledge of the language. So, in practice, it is possible to organize a group of students within several schools and give them access to the native, Bunjevac language.

<sup>8</sup> While for learning Bunjevac language there are no grades.

other languages of the areas in which they live (Hungarian, Croatian), which caused the initial forgetting of the basics of this language, even difficulties in learning by the younger members of this nation. They spoke their native language hidden from the eyes and ears of the wider community, within their families, which, as the native speakers aged, inherited the modern version of the Bunjevac language, loaded with terms from the languages spoken in their environment. This changed the basic fund of original Bunjevac words, their pronunciation, accentuation; old words were replaced by new ones taken from other languages or corrupted pronunciation of existing Bunjevac sayings; the language itself was used less.

The results of the research also indicated the need to tighten the approach to learning the Bunjevac language – due to the fact that there is no reward system, i.e. knowledge evaluation, the process of learning the Bunjevac language takes place during those classes and does not necessarily continue after the classes- it lacks the motivation to make this learning as ongoing process.

The year 2018. was significant for the establishment and *standardization of the Bunjevac language*. A decision was made to establish the Bunjevac language standard, which ended “*long-term field work, listening to native speakers and consulting experts*” (Iršević, 2019, p. 13). The process of standardization led to the *obligation to apply standards* in textbooks and classes of the Bunjevac language/speech in schools, in the Bunjevac media, and in official communication when necessary. The folk language was taken as the basis (Iršević, 2018; Raič, 2020; Peić & Baćlija, 1990) because it is known to the most common people, and it won’t be a problem to continue to develop it at its own pace.

Thus, the struggle for the uniqueness of the Bunjevac speech and language entered its most mature phase of development, which includes the *digital protection of the Bunjevac speech* – by setting up a multimedia database with audio and video recordings, photos and transcripts of all recordings, in order to preserve the authenticity of the speech (Sikimić & Vuković, 2017, pp. 473–489). Otherwise, it can be expected, as sociolinguistic experts of the OUN predict, that Bunjevac language, along with dozens of other languages in the world, will completely disappear by the end of the 21st century.

It is important to mention that the Bunjevac language was declared *an official language in the territory of the City of Subotica* (Stantić, 2021, pp. 4–6), and that *the first court interpreter for the Bunjevac language was elected/*

appointed for the territory of the High Court in Subotica.<sup>9</sup> The symbolism of the introduction of the Bunjevac language as the fourth language in official use in Subotica is multiple: in this city, the first city statute adopted in the 18th century was written in the Bunjevac language, in the period from 1918-1941, out of 12 mayors, as many as 9 were Bunjevci (Mačković, 2005), Further, the largest number of members of this national minority live in the area of Subotica and its surroundings, and the subject of Bunjevac speech with elements of national culture was first introduced in schools in this city. Also, the seat of the National Council of Bunjevci national minority is in Subotica.

#### **4. Education: Bunjevac language in schools**

Language is not just means of communication, but a feature of the life of the community in which it is used. Since it is as alive as the people who use it while expressing their thoughts, emotions and describing the world around them, language goes through the same developmental challenges as society itself. According to data from the *Ethnologue* base of languages, the current database contains data on 7,168 languages, where the existence of almost half (3,045) is threatened to disappear due to various reasons – assimilation, reduction of the number of speakers, insufficient effort of the community to maintain the language, etc. (Lewis & Simmons, 2016). So, one of the main ways of maintaining a language is *learning it and using it in everyday communication as much as possible*.

The Bunjevac language has come a long way in its development (Vuković, 2019). The increase in the number of magazines published in the Bunjevac language, as well as other contents in the form of radio and television shows, contributed to the preservation of the language and the improvement of the linguistic structure, and lead to an increase in the number of speakers (Kolar, 2017, pp. 385–398).

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<sup>9</sup> We find important to mention that this court interpreter is Suzana Kujundžić Ostojić, who got her second term as president of the national council of Bunjevci; her Ph.D thesis (Antropološka funkcija i značenje groktalica kod bačkih Bunjevaca) is directly connected with the history and customs of the Bunjevci in Bačka. For her vigorous work in promoting Bunjevci community , she was awarded with highest provincial award “Ljudevit Mičatek” for enhancing human rights. Mrs Kujundžić Ostojić is an example of prominent individual, who is one of the most recognizable leaders within her national community and who with her life and work can inspire other individuals to learn more about their culture, language and history. The power of influence of individuals should not be neglected, and at least in the Bunjevci community in Vojvodina there were plenty of them, but perhaps in some periods their importance was not nurtured and recognized enough.

The first schools using the Bunjevac language were recorded in the first half of the 18th century in Sombor, Bač, Gara and Bođani (Savanov, 2017, p. 527). Even the original modest conditions for holding classes did not prevent the Bunjevci community from preserving their language during the 18th century in these regions. During the Vojvodina of Srpska, Bunjevci had their own elementary schools; each educational cycle lasted four years and the number of students was limited to one hundred students. *The Law on Nationalities from 1868 recognized the right of national minorities to be educated in their mother tongue*, which was unfortunately not respected in practice, so the number of pupils was less than expected.

Since 2007, the optional subject *Bunjevac speech with elements of national culture* has been introduced in seven primary schools in the lower grades (grades 1-4), and since the 2011/2012 school year, it has also been introduced in the upper grades of the primary school, also as an optional subject. During the 2014/2015 school year, the *first textbooks for this optional subject were published*. In the meantime, the subject changed its name, so that it is now called the *Bunjevac language with elements of national culture*, which followed the establishment of standards for the Bunjevac language and also introduction of this subject in high schools in Subotica (Iršević, 2020). A curiosity is establishing of the course named *Introduction of the Ethno-Cultural History of Bunjevac at the Faculty of Education in Sombor*.

Tremendous efforts been done lately on the *professionalization of teaching staff on faculties*, which represents a bridge between the need to preserve language and culture and its immediate users (Savanov, 2017, p. 527). Yet, for some real effects still have to wait.

## 5. Customs of Bunjevci and preservation of their tradition

Modern societies must necessarily base their future on the past – whether as lessons from which they should learn not to make certain mistakes again, or as an inspiration to continue with already established strategies of work and life, which have proven successful over time. A special magical power is often attributed to customs and rituals established on the occasion of events that are marked as turning points in someone's life (for example, wedding customs or regarding funerals) or are related to the actual or symbolic beginning of a new chapter in life (Christmas, New Year and other similar customs). Also, customs related to important events such as sowing, picking corn and making objects from straw ennobled the narrow-minded and cramped community of Bunjevci in many different ways (Černelić, 2016, pp. 59–78). Numerous

customs include rituals in everyday life (maintaining relations with neighbors, dressing, division of household and other chores, etc.), as well as oral history about the private life of the Bunjevci told in their authentic speech, words and language, are the best keepers of memories and reminders for the future.

Preserving tradition by maintaining ethnic houses in an authentic antique form, with complete furniture and display of customs as they were before is one of the living ways of preserving tradition that cannot be adequately transmitted orally, but it is important to experience it, see it and feel it. Also useful sources and collections of folk costumes, used at various Bunjevci festivities, are cataloged in museums and available to the general public (Marjanović, 2017, p. 495).

Of all Bunjevci customs, *Dužijanca – a custom held after the harvest* – is considered the most beautiful and long-lasting and is celebrated continuously (Vojnić-Hajduk, 2024). In 2023, Dužijanca was held for the first time in three cities – Subotica, Novi Sad and Belgrade, where all the beauty of this custom was shown, as well as the folklore accompaniment with rich costumes and specific dances and songs of the participants. Significant roles in these customs is given to women, as they represent household and are in the center of keeping the family together. Also, Bunjevci women were famous of their charity work, focused on maintaining other families and taking care of children (Iršević, 2020). All customs were place of gathering of Bunjevci during challenging times they went through, and also important for preserving their national spirit, memories, and hopes for building better future ahead.

## 6. Some concluding remarks

Bunjevci often faced the challenges of preserving their community, in every sense (Šumonja & Vučković, 2022, pp. 213–228; Horvat, 2022, pp. 553–570). In some periods, this was attributed to the lack of social life, which caused the community itself to decline and lose its main features. The self-sufficient life of families, who were cocooned in the security of their closest relationships, was difficult to break through and spread further. So, they eventually managed to preserve the very core of their nation and culture, for all those decades of denying, suppressing and rethinking their own origin, identity and future.

Once established, cultural identity is not an immutable category; just as it grows and develops as well as its key determinants (language, knowledge of origins, preservation of rituals, education, etc.), it can also be extinguished. If one of the components develops more slowly, it can simultaneously affect the

development of all other parts, as well as the whole, i.e. the cultural identity itself. The physical disappearance of one man is already a loss for humanity, but the complete disappearance of his memory and his existence is an even greater loss. Or, in words of Ivan Antunović (1882):

*“So if you want to silence a nation, hide it, hide its past, then you put Chinese ramparts in front of its future.”*

We hope that those short remarks will engage readers to get more involved with other national and cultural minorities, who are threatened by exactly what happened to Bunjevci once and to do everything in their power to prevent the disappearance of any other people and their cultural heritage.

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# NEKE NAPOMENE O KULTURNOM IDENTITETU BUNJEVACA U VOJVODINI

**APSTRAKT:** U ovom radu iznosimo neke napomene o kulturnom identitetu jedne nacionalne grupe – Bunje naroda ili Bunjevaca, koji su, istorijski gledano, prošli dug i trnovit put očuvanja sopstvenog nacionalnog identiteta. Njihova borba, osporavanje sopstvenog postojanja i borba za novo „rađanje“ – njihovo ponovno priznavanje i vraćanje svih onih prava koja su im od dolaska na ove prostore u 17. veku, zavređuje prikaz u naučnom radu. Iako prepoznati i kao narod i kao značajni činioци brojnih društvenih i političkih dešavanja tokom vekova od doseljavanja na ove prostore, postojanje Bunjevaca je u Srbiji jednom političkom odlukom potpuno izbrisano sredinom 20. veka.

Ukratko predstavljamo osnovne odrednice kulturnog identiteta Bunjevaca, koji ih je održao tokom svojevrsnog izgnanstva u kome su se neko vreme nalazili, poreklu, jeziku, obrazovanju, običajima, sa posebnim osvrtom na njihovu ulogu u nekim ključnim istorijskim događajima za Srbiju. Svaka od njih zaslužuje veću pažnju, te svojim radom izražavamo dalju potrebu za njihovim dubljim proučavanjem, a sve u cilju podrške Bunjevcima da trajno zadrže svoj status nacionalne manjine.

**Ključne reči:** jezik, obrazovanje, kultura, poreklo, Bunjevci.

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