



The curious case of Marco Polo from Korčula: An example of invented tradition

Olga Orlić *

Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb, Croatia

Received 12 December 2012; accepted 20 May 2013

Available online 9 July 2013

KEYWORDS

Korčula Island;
Marco Polo;
Invented tradition;
Place marketing

Abstract In this paper the author deals with the claiming of Korčulan identity for Marco Polo as an invented tradition. According to some, the combination of Korčulan archive data, Korčulan family names and some historical facts give the island's inhabitants the opportunity to question Marco Polo's "Venetian origin" and attempt to claim that he or his family originated on the island. The author analyzes the attitudes and opinions of local residents concerning the issue and discusses it in the framework of the concept of invented tradition. The contemporary use of Marco Polo name as a symbol for Korčula Island reveals its great potential for tourism.

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Introduction

Beginning on 22 April, 2011, most of the media outlets in Croatia began reporting the response of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* to the news that the former Croatian president, Stjepan Mesić, had publicly proclaimed the Dalmatian (and therefore Croatian) origin of the "world's first tourist" during the opening ceremonies of the Marco Polo Museum in Yangzou, China. Stella (2011) entitled his article, 'Ecco Marko Polo, esploratore croato' (Here is Marko Polo, the Croatian explorer) and appended the following subheading:

* Address: Institute for Anthropological Research, Ljudevita Gaja 32, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. Tel.: +385 1 5535 114.

E-mail address: Olga.Orlic@inantro.hr.

URL: <http://www.inantro.hr/?lang=eng&id0=1&id1=9&id2=69&id3=196>

Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



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'Se Zagabria ci scippa l'eroe del Milione. L'ex presidente va in Cina e celebra "il viaggiatore di Curzola" che ha avvicinato i due mondi' ('Is Zagreb kidnapping the hero of Il Milione' (Travels of Marco Polo) Ex president had travelled to China and praised "the traveller from Curzola" (Italian name for Korčula Island) who had connected two worlds). Most of the media simply informed the public of the condemning tone of the Italian article and did not enter the debate. Croatian journalist Bešker (2011) commented that the Croatian claims to Marco Polo's origin were nonsense and lacked historical validation, introducing a tone of mockery. However, he also criticised other statements and ideas expressed in the article. For example, he attacked the assertion that Korčula Island was completely Venetian because the Venetians had ruled the island for several centuries. Scotti (2011), a journalist for *La Voce del Popolo*, the daily newspaper of the Italians in Istria and Rijeka (Primorje), in an article entitled, 'E dopo le amebe vennero i Croati' ('And after the amoebae the Croats came'), classified the Croatian claims to Marco Polo's origin as a "theft of heritage" and even lambasted it as "the usual Croatian practice of stealing the Italian heritage".

The aim of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of interlocutors from Korčula Island regarding the practice of using the name Marco Polo as a symbol of identity and as a brand name to promote tourism on the island. Marco Polo's name was and still is used in connection with Korčula Island because of historical data connecting him or, according to some interpretations, his family name with the island (this will be discussed in detail below). I will not engage in the debate over Marco Polo's "true" place of origin because it is not crucial to the purpose of this paper. Rather, I will focus on analysing islanders' attitudes toward the usage of this famous name for promotional purposes, a phenomenon I will analyse as a type of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Therefore, I will not advocate any of the viewpoints in the birthplace controversy, especially because there are a dizzying number of claims over the origin of the Polo family, if not of Marco Polo himself. Furthermore, Croatian claims themselves are not homogeneous, as one might expect. Besides Korčula town (Ljubić, 1856: 255–256), Šibenik (Kukuljević Sakcinski, in 1845, according to Ledić, 1996: 69–70) and Blato (on the island of Korčula) (Protić, 1998) have also been suggested as possible places of Marco Polo's origin. In this paper, I will focus on analysing the attitudes that the inhabitants of Korčula Island, and particularly the inhabitants of the town of Korčula (the island and the town share the same name), have toward Korčulan (island and town) claims to Marco Polo's heritage. I argue that Marco Polo's alleged origins in Korčula town can be analysed as a type of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) whose truthfulness is not overtly questioned because its tourist potential is considered useful. Hobsbawm and Ranger complicated the concept of tradition(s) by demonstrating that traditions perceived as authentic, genuine and as having passed unchanged from generation to generation are actually often invented and/or constructed in a particular time and place and reshaped to fit the particular needs of the community to which they "belong", the most famous example being the Scottish kilt.

The term "invented tradition" is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1).

Anthropologists who use this concept in their scientific approach are aware that it can become an "occupational hazard" (Jackson, 1989: 129), causing not only disappointment but also eliciting negative responses from the members of the community whose traditions are being deconstructed (Briggs, 1996: 436–438). In the field of Croatian ethnology and cultural anthropology, this is an even more delicate issue because of the *basic insideness* (Povzanović Frykman, 2004: 87–90) of most Croatian and Eastern European ethnologists and cultural anthropologists, who are unable to focus their research on exotic and distant Others (Jakubowska, 1993 according to Capo Žmegac et al., 2006: 11). Calling tradition "invented" is often (mis)understood to mean falsified, which further complicates anthropological endeavours (Linnekin, 1991). Because one of the premises of invented traditions is that "where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1), it is reasonable that the

usual praxis is to provide relevant historical data supporting the thesis. In the case of Korčulan claims to Marco Polo's origin, it should be noted that historians have only verified one fact connecting Marco Polo to Korčula island, namely, that he was captured near the island during a naval battle between Venetian and Genoese naval forces (Foretić, 1940: 70) and was imprisoned on the island for several days before being transferred to the Genoese prison where he dictated the book that made him famous (Gjivoje, 1969: 47–48). However, associating Marco Polo with Korčula Island became more popular after 1922, when Korčula became interested in tourist development. Gjivoje has mentioned that a reckless tourist guide began representing a house registered, at the time of his writings, to a branch of Depolo family as Marco Polo's house (Gjivoje, 1969: 48). The "archival" argument, usually used by islanders supporting the Korčulan origin thesis, posits that the Depolo family name had existed in various forms, including Polo, Paulovich (Pavlovich), De Polo, Di Polo, and finally Depolo, on island records since the 13th century (Depolo, 1996: 95).

Many authors have discussed the Korčulan (or Dalmatian) origin of Marco Polo (Herceg, 1954; Šparac, 1971; Foretić, 1954). One author even counted all of the journals and newspapers accessible to him that mentioned a connection between Korčula and Marco Polo (Filippi, 2000). In 1996, the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences dedicated a scientific conference to "Marco Polo and the Eastern Adriatic in the XIII Century" (Padovan, 1996). At that conference, James A. Gilmore reported on the 1993 Europe-Youth Inaugural Conference held in Wales. On that occasion, Korčulan Mate Depolo, the Croatian representative at the event, opened the conference by staging the meeting of "his famous ancestor" (i.e., Marco Polo) (Gilmore, 1996: 117) with Kublai Khan (played by the representative from Mongolia). Gilmore stressed the necessity of opening an international Marco Polo centre in Korčula, a goal that was realised in 1997 (<http://www.korcula.net/mpolo/mpolocentre.htm>). Gilmore also emphasised the need to connect the already well-known name of Marco Polo with Korčula and Croatia to increase the number of tourists. Although he doubted the truthfulness of Korčula's claim, Gilmore made its truth-value irrelevant by comparing it with pilgrimage sites made holy by sometimes unproven traditions, emphasising that "all travellers need a destination, whether it be true or legendary" (Gilmore, 1996: 130–132).

The Korčulan theory has also inspired several literary works, Marilyn Sharp's book, *Masterstroke*, being one of them (Filippi, 1995). 'On the trail of Marco Polo' is the title of a chapter in *Marco Polo's Isle*, in which the author describes the island through his own experience as a residential tourist. In this chapter, he describes locals' attempts to provide evidence supporting the Korčulan origin thesis (Donley, 2005).

The websites dedicated to Korčula Island usually mention Marco Polo and his connection with the island. However, they always mention the conflicting accounts of his origin.

Significantly, Polo is reputed to have been born in Korčula itself, although evidence to support this thesis is at best sketchy. Notwithstanding, Korčula town still boasts Marco Polo's alleged house of birth. Despite its rather featureless interior, the houses' tower (loggia) allows for a panoramic vista of Korčula, stretching from east to west. The house is under the protection of the Korčula Town Hall and it will soon be turned into a Museum of Marco Polo. If Marco's

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