



## Transylvanian Saxon culture as heritage: Insights from Viscri, Romania



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### ABSTRACT

The case of the multi-ethnic village of Viscri, Romania, is analyzed through a qualitative research method. The study highlights that the image of the village, promoted by foreign experts and some influential Transylvanian Saxons, is based on the heritage of the few Saxons inhabitants left, considered as the most worthy of preservation, while the legacy of the rest of the population, consisting of Romanians and Roma, is overshadowed.

Study results indicate that the community does not necessarily perceive heritage the same way the experts do. The village residents have mixed feelings towards the Transylvanian Saxon heritage and the restoration and development actions related to it, with some residents accepting to be the custodians of Saxons' heritage and others showing disappointment because of the persisting economic hardships.

It is suggested that the core of heritagisation processes ought to rely on inclusion, because marginal as well as strong groups need to have real chances and tools to enable them to effectively reflect on their identities and their aspirations.

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### 1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that heritage is socially constructed, an empty box to fill with material and immaterial objects according to an attribution of meanings and values (Ashworth, 2000; Graham, 2002; Smith, 2006). The past itself is neutral. Without intercession it is neither exciting, nor boring, nor meritorious (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). The contents, interpretations and representations of heritage resources are selected according to the demands of the present and, in turn, are bequeathed to an imagined future (Ashworth et al., 2007). Thus, heritage is the contemporary use of the past according to current political, social and economic realities (Ashworth, 2000). Heritage is constructed at multiple scales in order, for example, to build social identity, to legitimize political power, or to exploit heritage for tourism development.

Heritage production, or heritagisation, as Ashworth (2000) calls it, is essentially a political process that implies choices among possibilities, the fundamental issues are related to who has the responsibility and power to make this selection, which underpins who gains and who loses. In theory, the whole of humanity, or the entire community, should be involved in the selection but, in practice, the dominant political, social, religious or ethnic group usually determines the “authorized” heritage through a cultural “discourse” that validates the choice made (Smith, 2006).

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Smith (2004, 2006) and Timothy and Boyd (2003) argue that most heritage tends to exclude the past of powerless groups and minorities, favoring artifacts, places and events of the elite. In this sense, heritagisation is not an equalizing measure but, rather, is a way to impose power and cultural hegemony (Lloyd, 2007; Harvey, 2007).

Confrontation of issues associated with heritage inclusion and exclusion, and societal or intentional amnesia (deliberately suppressing certain parts of history or heritage potential belonging to certain groups and communities) have become crucial in present societies that are characterized by more and more complex forms of cultural diversity. Questions about community participation, social inclusion and the recognition of diversity are called into the heritage arena.

Using the concepts of “authorized heritage discourse” and “heritagisation”, this paper contributes to the discussion on the production of heritage made by experts for imprinting a particular identity on a site and use it mainly for tourism purposes. It also offers insights on the risk of cultural disinheritance that may occur when the discourse held by heritage selectors displays in a multi-ethnic context, privileging and validating the heritage of one ethnic group to the detriment of others. The case of Viscri, Romania, will be examined. This site is pertinent to the discussion since it is a multi-ethnic village, historically inhabited by Transylvanian Saxons, Romanians and Roma people, with a rigid ethnic hierarchy with Saxons at the top. Cultural and rural tourism development has been promoted in the village mainly by foreign experts who selected Saxons' culture as heritage, since it was

considered as the most authentic, worthy of preservation and attractive for tourists. Then, although Saxons are numerically scarce nowadays, their culture still shapes the tourist image of the village, and that *de facto* overshadows the heritage belonging to Romanians and Roma.

Actors, discourses and reasons behind Transylvanian Saxons' culture heritagisation will be highlighted and the reactions, perceptions and benefits obtained by the various ethnic groups will be portrayed. Thus, this paper contributes to discussions about the creation of heritage, in particular for tourism purposes. It also underpins the intrinsic risk of the heritagisation process to exclude a part of the community and the need to challenge the dominant discourse about heritage for diversity and multiculturalism to have a place to display themselves.

The concepts of heritage, authorized heritage discourse and heritagisation are discussed first. Then, the study location and the methods by which the data were collected and analyzed are presented. Next, the case data are used to illustrate how local residents perceive the heritagisation of Saxons' culture and the benefits derived from it. Finally, there is a reflection on the discourse behind the heritagisation of the Saxons' legacy and how the case study contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of the heritagisation processes in multi-ethnic sites.

## 2. Creating heritage: authorized heritage discourse and heritagisation

When dealing with heritage, it is common to adopt a constructionist perspective which refers to the ways in which past material artifacts, natural landscapes, mythologies, memories and traditions are selected and turned into cultural, political and economic resources for the present (Graham and Howard, 2008). Heritage refers to things, both tangible and intangible, in the present that are selected from the past and which we wish to take forward into the future (Wall, 2009). The key word here is 'selected'. This selection, according to Smith (2006, 2011), is a social process that occurs through what she calls *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (AHD). It is a discourse sustained by experts (the "authorizers", such as archeologists, historians, architects and national and international bodies) that establishes what counts as heritage, what the official heritage is, what its value is, where resource should go, and what cultural identities matter in the context of a particular time and place; "heritage is a culturally directed process of intense emotional power [that is] both personal and social act of making sense of, and understanding, the past and the present" (Smith, 2006, p. 304). It follows that heritage is less about tangible material artifacts or other intangible forms of the past than about the meanings placed upon them and the representations which are created from them (Graham, 2002; Graham et al., 2000; Smith, 2004).

Similarly to Smith (2006), Ashworth (2000) argues that heritage is the result of an attribution of meaning to things selected from the past, a process that he calls "heritagisation". Values are placed upon artifacts or activities by people who interpret heritage through a complex series of lenses, the most obvious of which are: nationality, religion, ethnicity, class, wealth, age, gender, education and personal history (Ashworth et al., 2007).

Multiple reasons and aims stand behind heritagisation. One of the main goals is to establish solidarity among the members of a group (national, religious, social, etc.) by highlighting the differences between them and the others so that this differentiation will legitimize a certain social order (Poria and Ashworth, 2009). Heritage may also be created, misinterpreted or deliberately abused in order to provide (or inculcate) political legitimation for certain governments, or to revive local economies through the re-assess-

ment, re-orientation and re-use of existing places (or the invention of new ones) as a means to regenerate images. The multiethnic and multicultural character of a destination's heritage is sometimes willfully used as an asset in the tourist market (e.g. Pennsylvania Dutch Country) but controversial processes of selection and heritagisation still occur when the image of a region becomes associated with stereotyped expectations from tourists (Kraybill, 2001).

The fact that heritage is the result of a selection process carried on by authorized people in order to build consensus (political, social, economic) means that some may disagree with the choices that have been made or with the images and stories that may be associated with it and told about it. If something is authorized, backlash is nearly inevitable and contested heritages or dissonant discourses are likely to arise as a response to the authorized heritage. While the AHD tells what legitimate heritage is, or not, it both includes and excludes (Smith, 2006, 2011). It "includes" in its attempt to provide a cultural and historical narrative that explains a sense of place that is promoted to obtain a wider audience, which tends to maintain class and ethnic social hierarchies (Smith, 2009). It "excludes" since the narratives offered by the AHD simply do not speak to the whole range of cultural and social diversity that characterizes present societies (Smith, 2006, 2009).

It follows that heritage can be a controversial topic and the selections that are made and the meanings that are ascribed to them may be contentious and dissonant at different levels and in different times (e.g. the Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan, Islamic monuments in India and Hindu temples in Pakistan, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim heritage in Israel and the West Bank, etc.).

Poria and Ashworth (2009) argued that heritage is a political resource and, as such, aims at legitimizing a specific social reality which divides people into "we" and "they". Heritagisation often aims at highlighting and entrenching differences and social boundaries, and contrasts among groups can be exacerbated as a consequence of heritage selection, protection or celebration. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) argued that dissonance arises because of the zero-sum characteristics of heritage, all of which belongs to someone and not to someone else. The creation of any heritage asset actively or potentially disinherits or excludes those who are not, or do not feel emotionally linked with the meaning attributed to that heritage.

The definition, management and promotion of heritage is essentially an act of power that reflects the vision of the dominant group(s) which, time after time, decide(s) what is to be preserved and brought into the future. Heritage is inescapably related to a choice about which history should be discredited, which heritage forgotten and which people disinherited. Unless the basic tenets of heritage creation are challenged, there will always be exclusion and disinheritance and the re-affirmation of a certain social order. As Smith (2009) asserts, the core of heritage debate needs to be centered on how the heritage that we save and promote actually represents the diversity of historical and contemporary social and cultural experiences.

The case study that will be described below demonstrates how the creation of an "authorized heritage" by mainly foreign experts in a multiethnic context, where unbalanced power distribution exists among ethnic groups, has excluded part of the community from the celebration of its heritage and has re-affirmed a hierarchal social and ethnic order. Only one specific ethnic-related aspect of heritage has been selected and promoted through a hierarchisation process, mainly for the tourism consumption, while the real multifaceted culture of the whole community has been overshadowed. Community reaction and benefits, as well as possible risks and challenges, will be discussed later.

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