



Rural tourism and national identity building in contemporary Europe: Evidence from Portugal



Luís Silva*, João Leal

Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA-FCSH/NOVA), Lisbon, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between rural tourism and national identity, with reference to a southern European country. Particular attention is devoted to the meaning making work that the state, national visitors and residents do at two of the most popular Historic Villages of Portugal. Drawing on ethnographic materials, the article sheds light on the links between historic conservation and “heritagization”, as defined by Poria and Ashworth, and demonstrates the force of the nation’s medieval origins in the dominant discourses on Portuguese national identity. In addition, it shows that “felt history” has been target by the state to increase levels of consumption through rural tourism, but also triggers a sense of national pride among Portuguese visitors. The residents of Castelo Rodrigo and of Sortelha contest, but they also recycle the officially sanctioned interpretation of the sites as medieval to convey the fascinating distinctiveness of the local identity.

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1. Introduction

Though there is no standard definition of rural tourism, it is, nowadays, widely accepted in the scholarly literature that it embraces a range of tourism activities which take place in the countryside, such as agritourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism and adventure tourism (e.g. Lane, 1994; R. Sharpley and J. Sharpley, 1997). Rural tourism is a growing tourism industry in many parts of the world, but mainly in developed countries, and has substantially expanded since the 1970s, both in terms of demand and of supply (e.g. Lane, 2009; Long and Lane, 2000).

The growth of rural tourism mirrors both a general expansion of all types of tourism and a diversification of tourist experiences (Woods, 2005, p. 173), closely associated both with the rise of a lifestyle-led and leisure-oriented society, and with the widespread mobilization of tourism as a strategy for rural development and regeneration (Walmsley, 2003). On the supply side, underpinning this general support for rural tourism is the assumption that it provides a number of potential benefits to rural areas (see Hall et al., 2003; Roberts and Hall, 2001; for a summary). Yet, research has shown that, in spite of the positive effects that it may have in

some cases, tourism is not a remedy to the problems facing rural areas, that not all rural spaces are suitable for the development of tourism and, similarly, that tourism development often fails to stimulate the anticipated socioeconomic revitalisation (e.g. Iorio and Corsale, 2010; OECD, 1994; Silva, 2015; Walmsley, 2003).

National identity is commonly described in the scholarly literature as an individual identification and as a specific form of collective identity, in the construction of which the existence of a common past plays a critical role (e.g. Friedman, 1992; Löfgren, 1991; Schlesinger, 1987). In fact, history is an important element in both the “ethno-genealogical” and the “civic-territorial” models of the nation, as defined by Anthony Smith (1991). Although the ethnic history is arguably a history of the nation before the nation, the civic and territorial history is a history of the nation after the “Age of history”. In any case, the nation is constituted as an “imagined community” not only through simultaneity, as Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]) emphasizes in his theorisation of the nation, but also through historical continuity; it is constituted as a kind of “imagined community” uniting the living and the dead. Nairn’s (1977) description of nationalism as a “modern Janus”, which looks backwards and forwards, illustrates the point.

Research inside and outside Europe has shown that there are a number of tools used in imagining and representing the nation as a collective moving throughout time, including archives, history books and archaeology (e.g. Díaz-Andreu and Champion, 1996;

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: luis.silva98@gmail.com (L. Silva), joao.leal@fcs.unl.pt (J. Leal).

Kohl, 1998; Meskell, 2002), or cultural heritage and heritage displays, such as museums (e.g. B. Anderson, 1991 [1983]; Boswell and Evans, 1999; Smith, 2006). Such meaning making forms and practices are part of a wide range of “aesthetic” resources through which governments and groups perform and materialize the nation to evoke and regulate a sense of identity and feelings of belonging (Mookherjee, 2011).

This is particularly the case of historic monuments and sites turned into tourist attractions (e.g. Bruner, 1994; Edensor, 2002; Handler and Gable, 1997; Johnson, 1995). Viewed as material testimonies of important events and/or achievements in the national past, they are converted into places for the patriotic pilgrimage and education of nationals, as well as for the curious wanderings and admiration of foreigners. They are, therefore, subject to interventions intended to render them legible in the present. Historically, these interventions have involved a range of changing ideologies and practices of preservation, restoration and commodification through tourism, the objectives of which were to locate those physical resources more firmly in a past that is always constructed from the viewpoint of the present. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, pp. 149–150) rightly points out, heritage is “a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past [...] [and] gives buildings, precincts, and ways of life [...] a second life as exhibits of themselves”.

A considerable body of research has already been amassed in Europe and other parts of the world on the practices and ideologies aiming to endow historic monuments with a second life as heritage, from erasure of the present to sanitised or simplified reconstructions of the past (Hewison, 1987), and contemporary forms of romantic preservation of ruins (e.g. Choay, 2001; Falser et al., 2010; Finley, 2004; Klekot, 2012; Sutton and Fahmi, 2002; Winter, 2007). However, in spite of some recent contributions (e.g. Hodges, 2009; Prista, 2013; Watson, 2013), there is a paucity of research on the links between historic conservation and rural tourism.

This article aims to contribute to bridge this knowledge gap, while studying the case of the Historic Villages of Portugal (hereafter HVP). For this purpose, it analyses the HVP programme and a selection of the promotional materials of that rural tourism product. In addition, it examines the identity work that both residents and Portuguese visitors do at two of the most popular HVP, namely, Castelo Rodrigo and Sortelha. By doing so, the article also contributes to contemporary discussions on the dissonant quality of heritage (e.g. Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

This contribution will be developed as follows. After presenting the study methods, the article sheds light on the importance of the nation's medieval origins in discourses on Portuguese national identity and on its reflects in the design and implementation of the HVP programme at the two sites under analyses. Then, it stresses the relevance of “felt history” (Connor, 1994) in the visitors' experiences of the sites as well as the relevance of the countryside in their emotional involvement with the nation's past. The subsequent examination of the residents' responses to the HVP programme shows that resistance to the negative impact of “heritagization” (Poria and Ashworth, 2009) on their everyday lives coexists with some local recycling of the officially sanctioned medieval narrative. The main conclusions and theoretical implications of the research are put forward in the concluding section.

2. Study methods

This article is part of a wider investigation on rural tourism developed by the corresponding author in Portugal, now briefly introduced. First, the research focused on the most popular tourist accommodation sector in the Portuguese countryside, namely, *Turismo em Espaço Rural* (TER – Tourism in Rural Areas) (e.g. Silva,

2009, 2013).¹ Second, it tackled the HVP at two levels of observation. At the state level, there was an analysis of the HVP project and the promotional materials of this tourism product, complemented by six (recorded) semi-structured interviews with the coordinator of, and the architects associated with, the HVP programme.

At the local level, there was ethnographic fieldwork in Castelo Rodrigo (four months in 2009) and in Sortelha (two months in 2009 and one week in 2013, plus five months in 2003), during which the corresponding author worked and stayed in the villages, gradually expanding the network of acquaintances and respondents. The main methods of data collection were participant observation, semi-structured interviews with residents and Portuguese visitors,² and detailed field notes. We had numerous other informal discussions with both villagers and visitors, and participated in family and village events. This was complemented by a content analysis of the statements written, from 2003 to 2009, in the guestbook available at the tourist office of Castelo Rodrigo and of the statements written, from 1997 to 2003, in the guestbook of a tourist accommodation unit located in Sortelha.

The two villages were chosen for different reasons. Sortelha was chosen in order to complement the material on the HVP theme collected during the fieldwork previously carried out in that village, as part of the abovementioned study on TER. In turn, Castelo Rodrigo was chosen due to its specific location at the border between Portugal and Spain and the fact that, unlike all but one HVP (Castelo Mendo), the great majority of its population lives inside the citadel. Besides, the villages have similar socioeconomic features. The resident populations are aged (33 percent of people in Castelo Rodrigo and 51 percent of people in Sortelha are over 64 years old), relatively poor, and have low levels of formal education and training (the illiteracy rate is 5 percent in Castelo Rodrigo and 18 percent in Sortelha). The main sources of income for local families are a small-scale agriculture for family consumption, services in public/municipal administration, small-scale commerce, money transfers from pension and retirement payments, and tourism.

Notwithstanding the seasonality characteristic of many other destinations worldwide (e.g. Butler, 2001), despite the existence of exceptions (Jimura, 2011), tourism plays an important role in local economies and employment – 14 percent of residents in Castelo Rodrigo and 15 percent of residents in Sortelha work in TER units (2 in Castelo Rodrigo and 5 in Sortelha), restaurants (1 in Castelo Rodrigo and 2 in Sortelha), cafés/snack-bars (2 in Castelo Rodrigo and 3 in Sortelha), local shops (2 in Castelo Rodrigo and 1 in Sortelha), the tourist offices (1 in each village), and handicrafts or home-made food products. In both cases, there are a significant number of vacation houses – 8 in Castelo Rodrigo and 12 in Sortelha –, most of which are owned by outsiders of predominantly urban origin who use them infrequently. However, whereas the great majority of the permanent residents of Castelo Rodrigo live inside the historic site (57 of the 62), only a residual number of the permanent residents of Sortelha live in the citadel (3 of the 234).

3. The perspective of the state

Located in the Western side of the Iberian Peninsula, Portugal is a country with one of the most ancient and stable territorial

¹ This is a type of small-scale and familial tourist accommodation that includes agritourism.

² Over time, we have conducted 85 interviews with residents (25 in Castelo Rodrigo and 60 in Sortelha: 40 in 2003, 15 in 2009 and 5 in 2013) and 57 interviews with visitors (17 in Castelo Rodrigo and 40 in Sortelha: 20 in 2003, 5 in 2009 and 15 in 2013). About a quarter of the interviews with residents and a third of the interviews with visitors were recorded, and notes were taken on the remainder. The recorded interviews were transcribed and subject to a content analysis.

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