



Heritage as an alternative driver for sustainable development and economic recovery in South East Europe

Local Heritage Interpretation by Private “Cultural Agents” from Maramureş

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the affirmation of local identity is achieved in the context of cultural projects deployed in rural tourism by guesthouse owners from Maramureş, asking if their initiatives of collecting “heritage” and displaying it in private family museums and exhibit-rooms contribute to raising awareness about their sense of belonging. More precisely, this paper explores the role these private “cultural agents” assign to their local “heritage” in the encounter with tourists. The interrogations concerning their choice to display “peasant goods” in exhibit-rooms and private family museums allow us to assume that the guesthouse owners’ recourse to these practices entails a reflexive process on the transformations of their rural domestic universe. The progress and changes they are forced to admit under the incidence of globalization determine them to choose their own identity reference system. Assuming the changes deliberately implies the claim of their “peasant past” and its display in exhibit-rooms and private family museums. In addition, it reinforces the local action of “heritage-making” as a means of negotiating social and cultural values on a regional scale. Using a reflexive approach, this study proposes to investigate the backstage underlying local “heritage-making”, to explore “heritage knowledge” produced by non-specialized “cultural agents”, to examine various interfaces of local “heritage” interpretations by guesthouse owners, and to question the meaning tourists are compelled to search beyond the exhibits. In sum, the purpose of this study is to examine the biography of “heritagised goods” through the narratives they enclose, as a lens to reveal the cultural and social “work” that private “cultural agents” from Maramureş carry out in their rural communities in addition to the aim of their economic regeneration.

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1. Introduction

Maramureş has preserved a local specificity which distinguishes this county from other Romanian regions. Its specificity is associated with a particular technique of construction and conception of dwellings, mirrored by little wooden peasant houses built in a “swallow-tail” shape. This type of houses enclosed by big wooden gates carved with traditional ornamental motifs forged the image of an archaic rural Maramureş. In addition, the reputation of this county as a rural world living outside of historical time is emphasized by local traditions which is said to have been preserved to a greater extent than elsewhere in Romania. This idyllic image which has dominated the discourse of 20th-century Romanian ethnologists and folklorists captured the imagination of tourists who came for the first time in this historic county. Notwithstanding, Maramureş has not remained untouched by the transformations occurred under the incidence of globalization. In the post-revolutionary context of December 1989, tourism and migration have brought more or less visible major changes in the villages of this region. Housing has gone through a lot of transformations, the wooden houses being currently replaced by brightly painted and decorated two-storey houses made of concrete or bricks. Besides, the villagers from Maramureş have changed their lifestyle along with their consumption practices. Being aware of such changes, some of the inhabitants of Maramureş, especially those concerned with creating a tourist offer, started to ponder on their specificity, by comparing their lifestyle with that of their predecessors. Moreover, inspired by an ethnographic image of their rural world whose villagers still preserve a “traditional” way of being, reflected in a specific manner of decorating their houses, of dressing up, of producing specific regional food or of behaving in a certain manner at the local religious celebrations, the guesthouse owners from Maramureş have packed all these elements as tourist offer. Special attention was given to “traditional” housing and practices. Thus, ancient items of the material culture of the peasants from Maramureş, once kept in the “pride room” [Ro. “camera bună”], have been displayed in exhibition-rooms (arranged in rural guesthouses) or in private family museums (fully restored old one or two-room houses). Besides, “traditional” practices, nowadays almost extinct, have been “staged” in front of tourists.

These preliminary observations incite us to explore the manner in which guesthouse owners from Maramureş interpret their specificity in front of tourists looking for satisfying their inquisitive minds. Our aim is to unravel the significance of their actions of collecting local cultural “emblems”, be they “traditional” goods or practices. Thus, we seek to scrutinize “the social function of the elective reference to the past” (Lavabre, 2000) in the context of cultural consumption entailed by the presence of tourists in the rural region of Maramureş. To grasp the significance of the identity selection undertaken by guesthouse owners, our endeavour is to understand “the how” [Fr. “le comment”] and “the why” [Fr. “le pourquoi”] of collecting “local memory” and constructing “cultural heritage”. More precisely, our aim is to understand “the backstage” [Fr. “les coulisses”] that lies behind the mechanisms of setting up local identity in personal interpretations of “the present of the past”. The analysis of the logic that governs the personal collection of the still existing “traces” belonging to the past allow us to formulate several questions meant to guide our research: Which are the approaches used by guesthouse owners from Maramureş to select amongst local goods and practices those which deserve to be chosen as “identity emblems” and thus “put into heritage”? “Would certain categories of living be more easily valued” than others as cultural heritage (Bérard and Marchéney, 1989)? Which factors contribute to changing the status of ordinary goods and practices? What referential function is expressed and recovered through their selection on a temporal axis, or, in other words, what “historical regime” [Fr. “régime d’historicité”] (Hartog, 2003) designates the class of objects and practices retained? What knowledge is associated to them? What does the selection mean for guesthouse owners and tourists? Are guesthouse owners exposed to “aggression” because of their “exhibition” [Fr. “la mise en exposition”] and their “staging” [Fr. “la mise en scène”] in front of the other? Is “collective memory” altered, compromised or transformed by its “incorporation into tourism” [Fr. “la mise en tourisme”]?

The use of Derrida’s concept of “difference” [Fr. “différance”] (Derrida, 1967), which means both “differentiation” [Fr. “différentiation”] and “being different/perceiving themselves differently” [Fr. “différement”] (Serres, 2002), that is, to temporize and distinguish oneself, enables us to analyse the logic hidden behind the selection of “memory-traces” [Fr. “traces-mémoire”] undertaken by guesthouse owners from Maramureş. Additionally, the “for whom” [Fr. “le pour qui”] gains significance for our study, since “heritage” as an “expression of our being in the world” (Ricoeur, 2000) is built in relationship with the other. Such an approach to identity construction undertaken by guesthouse owners from Maramureş entails a twofold relationship: (1) *from oneself to oneself*, because questions like: “To what extent are we the same as yesterday?” or “Have we changed?” (Micoud, 2005) prompt guesthouse owners to invent their own “historical regime”, and (2) *from oneself to another*,

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