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 Saxon 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.

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).

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 legitimate 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-assessment, re-orientation and re-use of existing places (or the invention of new ones) as a means to regenerate the 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 disinherit 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 disinherit. 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.
Viscri (German: Deutschweisskirch) is located within the rural municipality of Bunești, in the county of Brașov, Transylvania, Romania (Fig. 1). It is a typical village of medieval Saxon foundation with an imposing fortified church and a number of ancient farmhouses located along the main streets, as many other settlements in Transylvania.

The Transylvanian Saxons are an ethnic German population that settled in several parts of Transylvania mainly between the 12th and 13th centuries (Gündisch, 1998; Wagner et al., 1982).

Several waves of settlers founded a number of villages, towns and cities in vast areas of the region and were granted substantial administrative and religious autonomy since the 13th century (Riley and Dinescu, 2007; Rouček, 1971; Tiplic, 2006). At the end of the 19th century, when their ancient privileges began to be eroded, Saxons started leaving Transylvania. Their emigration occurred through several stages, particularly after the First and the Second World War. The last massive emigration wave of tens of thousands occurred in the last two decades of the 20th century, before and after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime (Rouček, 1971; Wagner et al., 1982; Steigerwald, 1985). The generally hostile attitude of the Romanian interwar and communist governments towards the ethnic minorities, the welcoming policies of the Federal Republic of Germany between the 1960s and the early 1990s and the poor living conditions in Romania, compared to Germany and North America, were the main reasons for leaving (Koranyi and Wittlinger, 2011). The Transylvanian Saxon population decreased from 237,000 people in 1930 to 18,000 in 2002, to approx. 300 belong to the Roma community, 100 are Romanian and 15 are Saxon (Table 1). The Saxon community is predominantly bilingual (German/Romanian), while the Romanian and the Roma community generally only speak the Romanian language, with a small minority of Roma families also speaking Hungarian. The Saxon community follows the Lutheran faith, while Romanians and Roma are predominantly Orthodox.

The village used to have distinct ethnic areas, with the Saxon population traditionally living in the upper part of the settlement, close to the Lutheran church, while the Romanian and Roma communities lived in two separate areas in the lower part. This separation used to reflect the dominant economic and political status of the Saxon community and the weaker position of the Romanian population. The Roma community had, and still retains, a lower status than the Romanians. Their area is situated at the periphery, almost outside the village, and is characterized by mostly poor and precarious houses and shelters, and weak or absent infrastructure (Figs. 2 and 3). The Roma community still forms the poorest part of the population. The prevalent economic activity for the Saxon and Romanian communities is a combination of agriculture, employment in construction and the tertiary sector, particularly commerce and administration, and tourism, while the Roma community largely relies on subsistence agriculture alone, with a few exceptions (Sandu, 1999).

This traditional ethnically-characterized social pyramid was challenged during the interwar years and during the communist time, when the Saxon community was deprived of much of its ancient power and privileges, while the settlement of Romanian and Roma people in the area was encouraged and organized but, in reality, the key year of 1989 still saw the village clearly reflecting the older medieval hierarchical model. Besides the Saxon group, the relations between the Romanian and the Roma community also show clear inequality (Denton, 2003).

In spite of the deep changes that have occurred during the past century, the long presence of the Saxon community is still evident in the village, which retains a valuable architectural heritage that includes an impressive Lutheran fortified church, mainly built in Romanesque and Gothic style, and a predominantly traditional rural settlement consisting of colourful farmhouses of medieval foundation and Baroque appearance (Akeroyd, 2006). The rapid decrease of the Saxon population documented above seriously threatened the built heritage during the late decades of the 20th century, since many houses remained empty and started falling

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Table 1 Proportion of the ethnic groups in the population of Viscri (1880–2011). Source: Sandu (1999) (for 2011, Municipality of Bunești and MET).

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<td>Germans</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Romanians</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Roma/Gypsies</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>251</td>
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<td>703</td>
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Source: authors, 2012.

Source: authors, 2011.

Fig. 1. Location and view of Viscri.

Fig. 2. The Roma quarter between Bunești and Viscri.
into decay. In spite of the deep changes in the social and ethnic composition of the village, the historical buildings linked with the ancient Saxon presence have been rescued and secured thanks to the commitment of some Saxon families who did not leave and to the aid of several international organizations which started and promoted the heritagisation of Transylvanian Saxon culture, particularly the Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET), which will be described below. In fact, since the 1990s and particularly after 1999, several projects have been realized specifically in order to preserve the traditional structure, architecture and landscape of the village, as will be documented later.

4. Methodology

The study is substantially based on a qualitative research method and incorporates the three sources of data recognized in qualitative research: observations, interviews and consultation of secondary sources (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The field study was made during summer 2012 over a period of 20 days. Observations included visits to the main cultural highlights and repeated walks in the village. Due to the way of life in Viscri, the streets are constantly busy with people collecting milk, walking to school, visiting the local stores for groceries and so on. Thus, it was easy to observe the social life of the village.

The authors undertook the interviews as informal conversations with key stakeholders and inhabitants somewhat representative of the local socio-ethnic and economic system. They were identified observing and joining the social life of village and were subsequently asked to hold a conversation. The village is small enough to easily categorize its key stakeholders and its basic economic structures. Nobody refused to be interviewed and twenty conversations were held, namely: the Municipal Counselor and local Director of the Mihai Eminescu Trust (a person who covers both roles), the Municipal Secretary, the Orthodox priest, three guesthouse owners, the milk processing facility owner, two owners of grocery stores, the owner of a tourist shop, a guesthouse maid, a housewife, a nurse, a blacksmith, a cart driver, a brick maker, two farmers and two shepherds (Table 2).

The main questions of the conversations were how the local community perceived the restoration works on the built Saxon heritage and which types of benefits they were obtaining from the heritagisation of Saxon culture, especially in terms of enhancing their livelihood. Conversations with residents and stakeholders were held at their home or office and varied in length from 30 to 60 min; they were conducted in Romanian and, in most cases, they were taped and subsequently transcribed. There was no language constraint, since the authors speak Romanian fluently.

Prior to entering the field, the authors undertook a review of literature on heritage, authorized heritage discourse and heritagisation, part of which has been reported above, to provide a broad academic context for the research. They also consulted a range of secondary sources, such as statistical data on the demography and the economy of the village and the region and materials that directly or indirectly deal with Saxons' cultural heritagisation. In particular, MET’s website and a number of studies about the importance of rescuing Transylvanian Saxon heritage were consulted. This allowed understanding who selected this heritage and how it was valued and represented, which permitted interpretation of the discourse behind its heritagisation.

5. The heritagisation of Transylvanian Saxon culture

Unlike most Transylvanian villages, where tourism is negligible, Viscri has been able to exploit its identity as a Saxon village through a process of heritagisation promoted by three key actors, namely: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a British non-profit foundation called Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET) and a local resident of Saxon ethnicity. Thus, the selectors of Saxon culture as heritage have mainly been foreign experts and, among them, MET has certainly played a leading role. Other foreign NGOs and organizations operate in the area (such as Opération Villages Roumains and Iceland-Liechtenstein-Norway European Economic Area Agreement Grants), but their actions have not been as pervasive as the ones by MET.

The starting point of the heritagisation process was the inclusion of the Lutheran fortified church of the village (Fig. 4) in the World Heritage List in 1999, together with the fortified churches and villages of Bietan, Câlnic, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz and Valea Viilor, as an extension of the previous inclusion of Bietan alone (1993). The motivation for the inscription was that: “these Transylvanian villages with their fortified churches provide a vivid picture of the cultural landscape of southern Transylvania. The seven villages inscribed, founded by the Transylvanian Saxons, are characterized by a specific land-use system, settlement pattern and organization of the family farmstead that have been preserved since the late Middle Ages. They are dominated by their fortified churches, which illustrate building styles from the 13th to the 16th century” (UNESCO, 1999).

In the case of Viscri, almost all the village has been incorporated into the UNESCO protected area of 48 ha, excluding a few modern houses in the lower part of the settlement but including some of
the areas historically populated by Romanians and Roma. The whole village and the surrounding hills are included in a “buffer zone” of 217 ha, aimed at protecting the historical landscape.

The first initiatives that led to the inclusion of Viscri in the World Heritage List came in the early 1990s from the Ministry of Culture of Romania and from the University of Bucharest, but the advocacy provided by the former Saxon resident and by an English writer (Jessica Douglas-Home) was decisive. The former is one of the very few Transylvanian Saxon inhabitants who chose not to leave the village in the early 1990s. She worked as a teacher in the village and, since 1992, has been Municipal Counsellor at the Council of Bunești. Her conversations with the authors revealed that she was one of the very few people who fought to attract national and international attention towards the cultural heritage of Viscri. In 1994, she encountered the writer and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) consultant Jessica Douglas-Home, already active in the preservation of Romanian cultural heritage during the difficult years of Nicolae Ceausescu’s regime. This encounter created the basis for the subsequent process of heritage management which occurred in Viscri and turned it into a cultural highlight of international importance. Douglas-Home was, and still is, the president of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, created in 1999 to further promote several actions aiming at the preservation of traditional architecture and landscape in Transylvania, almost exclusively focusing on the former Saxon villages. Douglas-Home, thanks to her network of acquaintances, was also able to involve Charles, Prince of Wales, who is the Royal Patron of the Trust and bought a house in Viscri, which helped to promote the actions at the national and international levels.

The Saxon resident mentioned above was appointed as MET’s vice-director. As she reported to the authors and as stated in the official MET website, the aim of the Trust is to preserve and restore the traditional Saxon architecture of this part of Transylvania. The Trust describes its activities as follows: The Trust concentrates in the Saxon villages of Transylvania, a special case because of the age and richness of their culture and the emergency caused by mass emigration of the Saxon inhabitants to Germany in 1990. These villages – farmers’ houses and barns built around fortified churches, substantially unchanged since the Middle Ages – lie in spectacular beautiful surroundings. The hills and valleys are rich in wild flowers (http://www.mihaieminescutrust.org/).

Great emphasis has been put on tangible heritage, through the restoration of the Lutheran fortified churches in several Transylvanian Saxon villages, opening them to visitors, giving information on their history, and restoring the façades of traditional houses belonging to the Saxon architectural style. In Viscri, since 1999, the first and main actions have led to the restoration of around 105 buildings, basically all the houses located within the UNESCO site, which formed the core of the Saxon settlement. Restoration works have been done according to Saxon traditional styles, techniques, colours and decorations, employing a local workforce and using locally-produced materials (MET, 2009). The Trust pays for the restoration of the façades, while work in the interior of the houses is the responsibility of the owners, who are free to modify them to non-Saxon or non-traditional forms. The medieval fortified church has been restored and opens regularly for visitors with tours provided in several languages. An ethnographic museum, solely focusing on Transylvanian Saxon history and heritage, has been opened inside the walls and towers of the fortress.

MET also addressed the promotion of mixed forms of cultural and rural tourism. In each of the 12 villages where the Trust operates, a “model guesthouse” was opened to encourage similar initiatives in areas where rural tourism had never been previously practiced (Fig. 5). In Viscri, MET established three guesthouses and helped local residents to reorganize their houses in order to host tourists. Sixteen guesthouses are currently working, mainly located in the historical core of the village. Viscri is now a relatively well-known village, cited in almost all tourist guidebooks about Romania. In 2000, about 400 tourists visited the fortress; in 2008 their number had already increased to 10,000 and in 2010 it was 12,000 (data provided by MET). Most tourists are international, but the share of domestic tourists is growing (4600 in 2010), as a consequence of a slow but steady growth of interest in rural life and the heritage of ethnic minorities in Romania. Direct inquiries by the authors revealed that the average price for a night is 40 RON (US$1 = 3.3 RON), including breakfast, and a meal costs around 13 RON. According to the interviewees, tourism produces 40–50% of the involved households’ incomes. Almost all food is produced locally and cooked according to Saxon and Romanian recipes. Tourists are mostly day-trippers, but there is a significant presence of overnight stays. The latter mostly arrive through package programs organized by foreign and national tour operators that are in contact with MET. The involvement of Prince Charles, often cited by Romanian media, has also worked as an attractor, as many national tourists show curiosity about “Prince’s house” and about his concern for such a remote village.

As already observed, Transylvanian Saxon architecture and traditions received great emphasis, as the image of Viscri that is presented and sold to the outside world is basically that of a Lutheran
Saxon village (Hughes, 2008; Klimaszewsky and Nyce, 2009; Klimaszewsky et al., 2010), even though the population is over 90% Romanian and Roma and follows the Orthodox religion. Tourists take pictures of Saxon houses bearing freshly restored and re-painted German names and writings; the visit to the Lutheran fortified church is the highlight of the stay and the annex museum basically only shows history, culture, lifestyles and habits related to Transylvanian Saxons. The guesthouses themselves, even those managed by Romanian and Roma families, show a distinct Saxon architectural style. The Saxon house bought by Prince Charles is another attraction, as shown even by Google Maps (2013), although its interior is not open to ordinary visitors. The Orthodox church and the older Romanian and Roma sections of the village are usually skipped. As the Saxon church and houses are recognized and indicated by guidebooks, websites and tour operators as the highlights of the village, the Romanian and Roma families involved in tourism tend to arrange their guesthouses according to Saxon traditions.

Basically, through the AHD asserted by the MET, Romanian and Roma are expected to become the custodians of Saxons’ heritage and are also expected to do what they are told, in order to preserve and exploit this valuable heritage in the best way. This is perceived in different ways by different inhabitants, as will be discussed below.

6. The local perception of the heritagisation and the benefits obtained

When asked about what they thought of the restoration activity managed by MET, interviewees showed mixed reactions that seem to be related to their degree of involvement in the restoration work itself and on the tourism activities arising, rather than to their ethnic belonging. For example, the blacksmith and the brick maker, both Roma, expressed appreciation. Indeed, in order to obtain materials for the restorations, a brick and tile-roofed kiln has been built with MET’s funds, and the two village blacksmiths have been encouraged to re-start traditional ironwork to produce fixtures for windows and doors. The brick maker said: “I have produced most of the bricks and tiles used to restore the Saxon houses. My sons helped me, too. I earned a good amount of money, so that I could build my house near the forest, where my whole family lives”. The blacksmith reported: “MET gave me the chance to continue my father’s work, my brother and I worked a lot for them. Now tourists come here to see how I work the iron, and I sell them little horseshoes, as lucky charms. I am proud of my work and to live in Viscri”.

Others, apparently not directly involved in the restoration works nor in the tourism benefits, judged MET’s work as a mere façade action, while the real needs of the community have been bypassed since infrastructure and services are still poor. For example, some interviewees said they would like having the main street of the village paved in asphalt, which would make walking and driving easier. A Romanian store owner reported: “Instead of having the Saxon houses repainted, we need a paved street […] you should see what happens here when it rains or snows”. However, MET has insisted on using only old-style cobblestones to preserve the atmosphere of the village. Its director said: “If we paved the street, Viscri would lose its charm, and even buses with mass tourists would arrive, which we are trying to avoid”. Some interviewees of Romanian and Roma ethnicity also complained about the lack of public transportation, as people who do not have a private car face great difficulty for daily movements and for sending children to school, being forced to rely on neighbours’ help. For example, a Roma shepherd asserted: “See, I do not have a car, each time I have to go to Rupea I must ask for a lift”. A Roma farmer reported: “I wonder why MET did not buy a school bus to take the children to the school of Buneşti”.

A Romanian milk producer said: “Here boys and girls who want to attend the secondary school need to go to Rupea, but not everybody has a car […] we need transportation, not decorated façades”. A Roma housewife said: “There are no street lights in our quarter, when the sun sets, you see nothing; we need street lights. MET has forgotten us”. A Romanian nurse said: “the doctor comes here just once a week, and people do not have enough money to buy medication […] what do we get from a repainted church if people struggle to live?”.

Whilst MET works to preserve and restore the physical environment left by the Saxons, some of the interviewees complained about the restrictions imposed on the external restorations, which have to be in Saxon style, preventing the use of more modern materials, such as, for example, PVC windows and roller shutters. The Romanian owner of a grocery shop said: “I cannot understand why people who live in a former Saxon house cannot use PVC windows. They are useful and they cost less than repairing those huge wooden frames”.

On the other hand, MET’s director criticized a local Romanian resident who built a modern house within the UNESCO protected area: “That house is a shame, it is like a punch in the eye, it has to be removed, but it will not be easy to do that”.

It is interesting to observe that in the nearby villages, where MET’s action did not arrive, Romanian and Roma people living in former Saxon houses tend to radically modernize them adding roller shutters, PVC windows and doors, metal gates, and they sometimes introduce a first-floor balcony, remove the small pitched roof leaning towards the short side of the house (a typical feature of Saxon village houses) and change the colours of the façades, choosing stronger tones. Orthodox churches built in neo-byzantine style have appeared in many settlements, close to the abandoned gothic Lutheran churches. This could be interpreted as the desire from the new inhabitants to shape the villages according to their own cultural values and to the practical challenges of everyday life, regardless of their Saxon heritage (Hughes, 2008). It is possible to assume that even in Viscri this could have been happened if MET had not insisted on the restoration and valorization of the Saxon style.

Conversely, people who had their house restored by MET and/or are involved in some form of tourism activity, showed positive responses about the restoration of the built environment. In their view, as long as MET provides funds for the façades of the houses, there is no reason to oppose it. The tidy aesthetics of the houses and the use of traditional materials and colours, are directly associated with real income benefits. For example, a Roma guesthouse owner said: “I am happy when tourists come here to see the Saxon church and our nice houses. I think that we should park our cars inside the courtyards, so that the village will look even better without the cars along the main street”. The Romanian operator of a tourist shop reported: “Viscri is different from the other villages nearby where houses are falling down, here houses are well preserved and the village is neat; we have to take care of the Saxon heritage, it is our strength”. According to the view of the local MET director, “We need to preserve the Saxon houses and the church because they are the biggest asset for the future of Viscri. I am happy that many Romanian and Roma villagers have understood this”. The Romanian Orthodox priest said: “The Orthodox people of Viscri do not feel any hostility towards the Protestant church because they know that it is important to attract tourists to the village”.

Furthermore, interviewees directly or indirectly involved in the tourism sector, regardless of their ethnicity, reported very positive opinions asserting that their livelihoods had improved significantly since the beginning of the heritagisation and the subsequent tourism development. Now they could better pay their bills, more easily buy what they needed, afford health care expenses and educate their children. A Romanian guesthouse owner, for example, reported that, thanks to the accommodation activity, she could more...
easily fund her two daughters’ studies at university: “We earn some money by hosting tourists and we use it to pay university fees for our two daughters who study in Cluj-Napoca. If we had not started this little business, we would not have had enough money to educate our daughters”. A Saxon guesthouse owner asserted: “It has been important to restore the church and the houses. Now tourists are coming and we do good business with them, our life is better than before and the village is in a better condition than all the neighboring ones”.

A Romanian grocery shop owner reported that she had diversified the goods in her grocery store to meet tourists’ requests: “See, I sell all sorts of things that tourists ask for: ice-creams, beverages, snacks, postcards and some crafts, I do good business with them!”

A Roma housemaid said: “I feel lucky to have found a job in the village guesthouses. I rented a house and I am now able to live with my son”. A Roma cart driver for tourists reported: “I like to share with tourists the beauty of the landscape, and I earn money at the same time. I bought a washing machine for my wife and I hope to build another room for our children. Tourism is helping a lot; just those who are lazy do not benefit and this is their fault”.

On the contrary, people not involved in tourism benefits showed mixed perceptions about the enhancement of livelihood options as a result of heritagisation. Several interviewees argued that most jobs are temporary and just related to the restoration of Saxon houses, such as work for a bricklayer, brick maker and blacksmith. The Romanian milk processing facility owner said: “In the past years, when MET was restoring all the houses, many people worked, but now things are getting worse again, most people try to live out of farming and they do not earn much”. A Romanian farmer said: “I cannot see new job opportunities. Soon my son will leave the village to look for a job in Germany. I keep farming and struggling every day”. A Romanian grocery shop owner said: “To me everything is just a façade, now it is even worse than in the past […]. I used to be a chauffeur, now I have this small shop, but actually I do not earn much; tourists just buy a bottle of water; they consume everything in the guesthouses […]. People who have guesthouses are the only ones who get real good benefits”.

In order to better understand community participation in the benefits brought by the development of heritage tourism, an analysis of the ethnic composition of the families involved in guesthouse activities was undertaken. Data reveal that, out of 16 families owning accommodation, 6 are Romanian, 1 Saxon, 2 Roma and 7 have mixed ethnicities (Table 3).

The Romanian and Saxon families run around 75% of guesthouse beds, in spite of being only 28% of the population. They are property owners and generally have the appropriate knowledge and social capital to deal with the bureaucracy and to start and run the business. In contrast, the Roma community, the most numerous and poorest group in the village, generally lacks the funds and the knowledge of how to engage in new business endeavors. However, it is significant that two guesthouses run by Roma have been opened recently and this is a sign of change. Undoubtedly, the Roma have a better opportunity when they marry Romanians, as has happened in 5 cases out of 16.

Observations revealed that around 10 young Roma women are employed as guesthouse maids and cooks, that there are about 14 Roma men who provide horse-cart tours for tourists and that almost all of the 70 women involved in knitting socks to sell to tourists are Roma.

From the above observations, it appears that tourism is bringing benefits to the community, but in different ways and ethnic shares. Compared to their size, it is clear that Saxons and Romanians are the ones who benefit more, while Roma tend to stay on the fringes. The marginalization of the Roma community in Viscri, in the tourism sector, is less pronounced than in the rest of the country, but still evident, both in terms of participation to benefits, as already reported, and as heritage promotion. For example, one of the strongest aspects of their cultural traditions, music and dance, is not part of the tourist experience at all.

The positive or negative perception of the Saxon culture heritagisation seems to be correlated to degree of involvement in the benefits obtained from tourism – the more they get benefits, the more they appreciate the heritagisation. For these inhabitants, the reinforced Saxon appearance of the village, basically used as tool for tourism development and as vehicle to obtain international projects and funds, is generally seen as an asset and is not associated with ethnic or cultural competition or clash. However, it also appears that part of the population of Romanian and, particularly, of Roma ethnicity, does not have a clear idea of “heritage”. A Roma farmer said: “I do not know what tourists seek when they come to Viscri. We live our lives here and there is nothing exceptional about it”. It is not easy to tell how deeply the Roma community wants to be involved in the heritagisation process that they are largely unconsciously experiencing around them, nor is it easy to understand how much they are willing to participate in tourism. For example, a Roma housewife, whose husband is a cart rider for tourists, said that if many Roma are not getting benefits from tourism it is their fault, because they simply prefer to survive on small incomes and do nothing to change their lives.

The interviews among the local Roma community showed mixed feelings regarding their own culture, with parallel tendencies to assimilation, seeing Saxon and Romanian cultures as superior and more attractive, and self-closure, as if Roma culture ought to be preserved by Roma for Roma’s sake only.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity of the owner/keeper</th>
<th>Number of guesthouses</th>
<th>Number of beds</th>
<th>% of total beds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saxon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma/Romanian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian/Saxon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. The discourse behind the heritagisation of Saxon culture

The heritagisation process and the development initiatives of Viscri have relied so far on MET actions more than on the public authorities’ policies and the involvement of residents in development projects has been weak and sporadic. The weakness of the relations between the municipality and the population is still a widespread critical issue in many regions of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, and is further worsened when ethnic divisions still produce social fragmentation. In the case of Romania, even after over 20 years since the start of the democratization process, public authorities still tend to show weak support for bottom-up involvement initiatives. On the other hand, a still largely disoriented and disorganized civil society often fails to produce bottom-up participation claims. Moreover, widespread mechanisms of discrimination and self-exclusion still create deep chasms separating the Saxon elite, the dominant Romanian and the marginalized Roma population. The difficult relation between the population of Viscri and the Municipality of Buneşti emerged in some of the interviews. A Romanian nurse said: “Our politicians do nothing for us, neither in Buneşti nor in Brasov nor in Bucharest. If we have tourism here we must thank MET, not the Mayor”. On the other hand, the Municipal Secretary said: “Viscri is important for us, but we have several other villages to manage. The local community
is not responsive, the Roma people prefer to live on subsidies and we can not make miracles”.

The lack of institutional dialogue and actions gave MET the opportunity and the responsibility to choose which aspects of the local heritage were to be granted priority. Given the aims of MET and its persisting emphasis on the preservation of the Transylvanian Saxon architecture and the traditional landscape, the best options for the socio-economic development of the village have largely been identified with the heritagisation of the Saxony architecture. Saxon heritage, traditional landscapes and rural activities were openly chosen as the most attractive resources to guarantee inflows of visitors and funds. The Romanian and Roma characters of the population have thus been overshadowed by the image of the Saxon church and houses, which de facto renews the historic three-layer hierarchy of the local society, with a dominant Saxon component, a subordinate Romanian community and a marginal Roma population.

Thus, while the heritagisation of Transylvanian Saxon culture has been used effectively to start tourism development in the village, with some positive effects for the spread of benefits to the Romanian and Roma communities, its side effect is the replication, in different ways, of the historical social pyramid and cultural hierarchy.

MET is now the largest conservationist organization in former Saxon Transylvania. Its “discourse” to sustain the preservation of Saxon heritage is based on the image of a rural and natural landscape where villagers live side by side with wolves, bears, lynxes and deer (MET, 2008; Wilkie, 2001). The MET founder, during her first visit to central Transylvania, wrote: “I had expected to find an enclave of German culture: in fact I discovered an image of Europe as it must once have been everywhere – a landscape still disputed between wildlife and people, villages still fortified against marauders, a deep intimacy between farmers and domestic animals, and a religious tranquility radiating from churches adorned by centuries of pious workmanship” (http://www.mihaieminescutrust.org/).

Saxon Transylvania is thus portrayed like an idyllic land that should be preserved as the last refuge of rural Europe. It is not surprising that Prince Charles, known for his environmental conscience, has endorsed the MET’s approach and view, by acting as the organization’s patron. He wrote: “This area represents a lost past for most of us – a past in which villages were intimately linked with landscape [. . .]. There is a hope that Transylvania could hold the key to a more sustainable and integrated agricultural and social economy by leap-frogging the mistakes of 19th and 20th centuries and showing the way to a saner twenty first century” (cited in Wilkie, 2001, p. 15).

It is possible to assert that the heritage conservation model adopted by MET has taken inspiration from the approach used by the National Trust in Britain. In fact, this charitable body, which mainly preserves and manages historical buildings and landscape and supports sustainable development, has had a leading role in the production of heritage discourse and in the setting of the standards for heritage management (Smith, 2006).

Protecting and promoting Saxon heritage in Transylvania is a project that mobilizes certain Western nostalgias, funds and interventions by creating historical connections and claiming stakes in the fate of this space. Coupled with the projects carried out by MET, the resulting vision corresponds to a rural Arcadia where the local population is expected to fulfill traditional roles by working the land, producing crafts, or supporting a heritage-based tourism market (Hughes, 2010).

This conservationist approach risks treating the non-Saxon population, now the vast majority, like villagers of an immutable world, charged, regardless of their will, with the safe keeping of the Saxons’ heritage (Koranyi, 2010; Hughes, 2010). A subtle form of “cultural imperialism” might thus be spotted, with a pragmatic proposition of the superiority of Transylvanian Saxon heritage over Romanian and Roma heritage, while serious social problems that need more attention, with large rural Romanian and Roma populations lacking basic infrastructure, social services, jobs, or political representation, are treated as secondary.

The heritagisation of Saxon culture and landscape is embedded in a project of sustainable development through small-scale tourism, agricultural and crafts productions, and the protection of the natural environment and the traditional landscape. This type of development is perceived as the most suitable for Visciri, a well-recognized sustainable cultural-rural tourism product, cherished in Western Europe, and oriented toward a tourist market that was and still is in search of this kind of “old world” experience. The romantic image of a bucolic, medieval-like German village, with its traditional guesthouses lacking TV sets and telephones, is attractive for many Western tourists, but not necessarily for Romanian and Eastern European ones.

According to the director, MET tried to prevent the development of the more aggressive “Romanian-style tourism capitalism”, as happened in many other Romanian areas (such as Maramures and Bran), where deep modifications of the architecture of the houses, the landscape, the cultivations, the food habits, etc., have irremediably compromised the “authenticity” of the environment.

The well known conflict related to the controversial “Dracula Park” project in the medieval town of Sighișoara, where MET played a strong advocacy role to persuade the local authorities to reject it, while several local and national entrepreneurs tourism operators supported it, is another example of Western-dictated agenda although domestic opposition from several Romanian cultural and environmentalists was relatively solid, too (Câmpeanu, 2008). It could be argued that such view implies the imposition of the rhetoric of sustainable tourism and conservatism. In other words, a Western-originated model, validated as the best way for the area, has been transferred by MET’s foreign experts, without taking into account whether the locals might have chosen other types of development (Câmpeanu, 2008; Hughes, 2008, 2010). Instead of looking for Romanian reference points and advocacy groups, MET has basically imposed an external model of heritage management with a sort of “we know best” approach which, in some way, assumes that the locals are unable to find more suitable solutions to their problems. Effective heritage preservation required a body of knowledge and experience that were lacking in the area (especially soon after the fall of the dictatorship) and this justified the intervention of foreign experts. Issues related to power, authority and the reshaping of the Transylvanian landscape by Western models of heritage management are all involved here.

8. Conclusions

As Smith (2006) and Ashworth et al., 2007 argue, heritagisation approximates not a historical but a rhetorical reality, because the past is edited and represented selectively to achieve certain ends, usually economic, political and social. In the case of Visciri, the Transylvanian Saxon heritage and history have been “validated” by foreign experts (MET) and a local influential Saxon as the most significant, traditional and authentic, while the culture and the history of the other two ethnic groups, Romanians and Roma, have been overshadowed, at least for the moment.

A discourse which used the rhetoric of conservation and sustainable development has chosen Saxon heritage, with its Lutheran fortified church, and traditional farmhouses, as the most suitable to generate development and to succeed in the so-called heritage tourism market. However, the re-construction of an image of the village strongly associated with the remnants of the former German presence has de facto re-affirmed the historical social pyramid
present in that area (dominant Transylvanian Saxons, weaker Romanians, marginal Roma), in spite of the deep demographic changes occurred in the past decades, which led to a Roma majority, a Romanian minority and the almost complete disappearance of the Transylvanian Saxon group. Should the non-Saxon majority of the community accept and assimilate themselves to the edited heritage? Or should they reject it and fight for their own heritage to be celebrated at the same time?

The study results indicate that the village residents have mixed feelings towards the Transylvanian Saxon heritage and the restoration and development actions related to it. Some residents, regardless of their ethnicity, pragmatically accept to be the custodians of Saxon heritage since it is perceived as a tool for participating in the benefits of tourism. Other residents, particularly those not involved in tourism entrepreneurship, are disappointed by the imbalance between the funds dedicated to the restoration of ancient buildings and the poor conditions of infrastructure necessary for daily life (roads, public transportation, schools, hospitals, street lighting, etc.). Lack of jobs, low incomes and the weak productivity of subsistence agriculture remain the main problems for the population. If they could benefit more from tourism, they would probably not show any form of disappointment. Living in an “olde worlde” UNESCO site, where the culture of a former population is given more emphasis than the culture of real people currently living there, has become acceptable when economic benefits can be derived directly from it. However, it is also apparent that part of the population of Romanian and, particularly, of Roma ethnicity, do not have a clear idea of “heritage”, as they are busy thinking about how to survive daily, more than contemplating cultural identity.

Should antagonist nationalism and heritage consciousness arise more vigorously or should tourism benefits decrease, disputes regarding the cultural, linguistic, religious and architectural characteristics of the village and its environment and the participation processes and decision-making practices, could arise at later stages. Issues related to the image of the village, as associated more with its former inhabitants than its current ones, might line up with other issues related to intermittently strict rules concerning UNESCO sites (particularly in the building sector), to dangers of museumification (e.g. the already reported cobblestone street issue), and to massive purchase of houses and other properties by external entrepreneurs and other people attracted by the bucolic image promoted by MET itself (e.g. emulation of Prince Charles’s choice).

No decision-maker ever asked the local population what kind of heritage they would have preferred to promote. The author’s interviews showed that the community does not necessarily perceive heritage the same way the “experts” do. The Mihai Eminescu Trust pragmatically applies a development model, revolving around the touristically attractive image of the picturesque Saxon village, which is supposed to bring the best results in the shortest time. However, following this path paradoxically denies the essential character of Transylvania, which has always been its multiculturalism, a feature that could well attract tourism as well. Including heritage diversity, rather than focusing on exclusivity and hierarchisation, could benefit the tourist sector and the involved communities in Transylvania as well as in many other traditionally or newly multicultural areas of the world.

Embracing the theory of Smith (2006, 2009) and Ashworth et al. (2007), this study demonstrates that heritagisation processes almost always create inclusion and exclusion. This leads to reflection on some critical points: is there a way to avoid falling into this sort of trap? How can the citizenship rights of those of all cultures and heritages be ensured, especially when major changes in the characteristics of the population occur? How can diversity be made into a shared resource whose benefits are accessible to the whole community?

Waterton et al. (2006) suggest that the “authorized heritage discourse” model should be challenged and that community participation in the negotiation process of heritage is the only way to ensure the ethic of conservation. In the same wave length, we believe 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. The example of Viscri can be used as a point of reflection both for other former Transylvanian Saxon villages as well as for other multi-ethnic places located elsewhere that are seeking to develop heritage tourism.

Future research can be done to expand this study. An in-depth analysis on the consumption of heritage by tourists and on the way tourists perceive the identity of this area would be particularly interesting. The perception and management of heritage by the Roma communities in the Romanian rural and urban context as well, and the attitude of authorities and tourism operators regarding their inclusion in the official heritage tourism proposal should be analyzed, too.

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