

VALORIZING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN LĂPUŞ LAND, TRANSYLVANIA

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Abstract: *Community-based tourism has been promoted as a means of development whereby the social, environmental and economic needs of local communities are met through the offering of a tourism product. Local culture may be a community's most valuable asset for tourism if planned and managed properly. Its intangible cultural heritage may provide a community with a competitive advantage and uniqueness, one that differentiates it from all other communities. However, with increasing commodification of tourism, many smaller rural communities face several challenges in developing community-based tourism. The present paper explores the concept of community-based tourism, as a basis for the valorization of intangible cultural heritage, with a special focus on a regional tourist destination in Romania. Aiming to identify tourists' experience, a research was conducted among Japanese visitors who discovered the intangible cultural heritage of the studied area during an academic summer camp.*

Key words: *Community-based tourism, intangible heritage, rural destination, local inhabitants, traditions.*

1. Introduction

The development of the paper is based on the results of a project initiated by two universities, *Transilvania University of Brasov* and *Meisei University Tokyo*, which aimed to cover some objectives in order to provide a framework for an extracurricular project-based learning for their students (Nechita & Tanaka 2017). *Transilvania Creative Camp*, the 2nd edition of the summer school on creative destinations and heritage interpretation, took place between August 29th - Sep 5th, and aimed at creatively promoting a Romanian rural destination. It was organized by *Transilvania University of Brasov*, Faculty of Sociology and Communication, in partnership with *Meisei University (Japan)*, *The Alternative School for Creative Thinking Bucharest*, *Universita Politecnica*

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delle Marche (Italy), *Salzburg University of Applied Science* (Austria), *Universidad de Extremadura* (Spain) and *Instituto Politecnico di Leiria* (Portugal). The 26 participants, students from Romania, Japan and Italy, together with 12 faculty members and communication professionals, 2 representatives of the *Tourism Information Center Târgu Lăpuş* explored the area in order to find insights for the creative promotion of this destination. During the 6 full days of the creative summer camp, the participants managed to combine workshops and presentations with actively experiencing the daily life in the villages in Lăpuş Land.

The students were to be set up for creating a promotion strategy for tourism destination by learning photo and video technique, marketing, digital media, heritage interpretation, anthropology. In exchange for hosting the participants, the local councils of Târgu Lăpuş and neighboring villages were to receive the promotion strategy, a presentation film in Japanese language and the ongoing promotion of Lăpuş Land on social media and academic conferences.

Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) can be considered as creative cultural tourism experience combined with a heritage interpretation project that followed a similar project, first developed in the summer of 2014 (Nechita et al. 2014; Candrea, 2017). Making the participating students understand the particular nature of the representational processes across cultures was essential for achieving the overall objectives of the project (Burlacu, 2017).

Lăpuş Land is a geographical and ethno-cultural region from the northwestern side of the historical and multicultural region of Transylvania, located in Lăpuş valley and crossed by the Lăpuş river. Part of the Maramureş County, in the area of the Lăpuş Land there are seven smaller administrative units and one town (Târgu Lăpuş) containing 30 villages. In the Maramureş County, four different ethnographic lands or countries can be identified: *Lăpuş Land* (it was historically attested for the first time in 1291 as "the state called Lăpuş" and then in 1315 in a document issued in Timisoara, the Romanian Lăpuş is mentioned by gold and silver mines, belonging to *Terra Lăpusensis*), *Chioar Land* (the name comes from the Stone Fortress, famous fortification located in the middle of the river Lăpuş, first mentioned in Latin diploma in 1319 under the name "Cheewar"), *Codru Land* (old ethnographic area, hilly /mountainous low height, dominating ancient forests and lying in Satu Mare, Maramureş and Sălaj counties), *Maramureş Land* (known as the historical Maramureş, and being attested in documents in the years 1199 and 1231, when in the Hungarian documents degrees of donation, the land is remembered as *Maramurus* or *Maramorisio*, so as that in 1299 to appear as *Maramorus terra*). Specific to this area is the beauty of the wild nature, the wooden churches that raise their towers to the sky, and traditions and customs habits of the inhabitants that come from immemorial times. All over Lăpuş Land it can be discovered many traditions, wooden churches as well as houses and typical gates carved in wood can be discovered. Local intangible culture is practiced in public spaces as a normal daily life.



Fig. 1. Detailed map of Lăpuș Land (Source: www.visitmaramures.ro)

The most important asset of *Lăpuș Land* is represented by the local inhabitants. The traditional way of farming doing agriculture and cattle breeding can be seen in every village, not only preserved in the ethnographic museums of *Rogoz* or *Groșii Tiblesului* villages. The majority of the inhabitants preserved the identity of their ancestors through traditional houses, traditional agriculture and old recipes for food and drinks. Part of the local landmark is the *horinca* (plum, apple or pear palinka), a strong distilled drink that is at the center of hospitality ceremonial. The local people are still wearing their traditional clothes during the religious rituals or at traditional weddings. One of the specific traditions is the song *doina cu noduri*, a particular way of deep throat singing as can be heard interpreted by Nicolae Pițîș, an elder person who is on the UNESCO list of living treasures (Bott 2015; www.cnipttargulapus.ro).

2. Literature review

2.1. Intangible Heritage

Cultural tourism related to intangible heritage has become a driver for development as it has the potential to transform local identity into a generator of economic resources. Safeguarding the cultural identity of local communities is a sustainable development objective, intensively sustained within the European Union (Apetrei & Surdu, 2017). Intangible cultural heritage is defined in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Customs, folklore and oral traditions are part of the cultural heritage of the territories (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is constantly recreated by groups in response to their environment, their interactions with nature and their history, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity and it is manifested

in the following domains: handicrafts and visual arts that demonstrate traditional craftsmanship; gastronomy and culinary practices; social practices, rituals and festive events; music and the performing arts; oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage (World Tourism Organization, 2012). Intangible heritage does not exist isolated as it depends on actors that transmit their knowledge to younger generations (Giudici et al., 2013).

Tourism is an important source in valorizing culture and creating income which can support and strengthen cultural heritage, cultural production and creativity (Richards 2010). As the interest moves from specific cultural attractions, such as monuments and museums, towards intangible factors, intangible heritage becomes better framed for the traveler's requirement for more fulfilling and meaningful experiences (Şandru & Nechita, 2016; Botiş, 2017). Tourists are seeking for authentic experiences which allow them to better understand the culture and civilization of visited communities (Ispas & Candrea, 2016).

2.2. Community-based Tourism

Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (2012) defined community-based tourism (CBT) starting from the idea that „tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account. It is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life. *In spite of the acceptance of the notion of community-based tourism and the involvement of local stakeholders in tourism development in the theoretical debate, effective implementation is still considered a challenge among scholars, as well as practitioners, in the field* (Lindstrom & Larson, 2016).

Local authorities play an important role in developing policies to promote and shape the development of tourism in their areas (Ispas et al., 2015) while the cooperation of local authorities and other members of the community must be enabled (Dukić et al., 2014). Any tourism development should be aimed at improving the socio-cultural and economic conditions in the community (Hatipoglu et al., 2016). CBT suggests a symbolic or mutual relationship where the tourist is not given central priority but becomes an equal part of the system (Wearing & McDonald, 2010). CBT is promoted as a strategy to foster community development in developing countries (Baktygulov & Raeva, 2010).

Authenticity in heritage is very important to visitors who are looking for a genuine and distinctive experience. They particularly value aspects of a culture and heritage that are supported by the local population. Accessing 'real' experiences, which are enjoyed by the locals and connecting to the local area, is important in their overall satisfaction levels with their holiday (Fáilte Ireland 2014). Tourism becomes a complementary activity to agriculture, crafting and tertiary activities that assures income for the families used to meeting their needs, and one example found in academic literature comes from Romania (Iorio & Corsale, 2014).

As was discovered in previous research based on similar projects the interaction between participants and the local community generated descriptions that contain

subjective elements, mostly related to the appreciation of traditions and intangible heritage, which touched the soul of the visitors and generated different experiences from the urban life, in the company of people who preserved the unique values and identity of these places (Nechita et al. 2014; Nechita et al. 2015; Şandru & Nechita 2016).

3. Discussion

CBT projects can be initiated from within and outside the community (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2016), and the TCC project is an example that illustrates both approaches. The project was initiated by Transilvania University of Braşov after the discussion with local decision makers from the Lăpuş Land villages and Târgu Lăpuş Town Hall, and the content of the tourist experience was co-created. The co-creation process involved local authorities and project organizers. The aim was to generate participant narratives so that they would become drivers in the process of attracting prospective Asian tourists. Student narratives about the place have to be considered as a product of social construction because the recurrently told stories will construct a grand story which may provide cogent material to attract people to a particular destination, *Lăpuş Land* (Tanaka 2017; Nechita et al., 2017). The TCC project aimed to make participant students narrate their stories using their own ways of expression, so their experiences achieve a type of iconic status in their lives (McCabe and Foster 2006). People narrate their experiences in the online environment, and provide mediated experiences to other users or prospective Asian tourist in the context of the TCC project. So, the online narratives of the participants are considered to be user-generated content (UGC) and represent detailed and personalized narratives of tourism experiences (Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Social networking sites contain information for the promotion of a destination image with narratives that are associated with feelings and emotions for a place (Marine-Roig & Clave 2016).

The main finding after analyzing the stories of the non-local participants (14 Japanese, 7 Romanians and 2 Italians) was that elements related to intangible heritage were central to most of them.

Traditions: *I think that the „crown jewel” of Lapus Land is the famous Nicolae Pitis, the UNESCO living treasure, the village song master (V.B. – Romanian), local people taught us how to execute the traditional dances (C.C. – Italian), beautiful traditions (A.F. – Romanian), dancing at the sunset (Y.H. – Japanese), clapping of hands, in a burst of joy (Y.H. – Japanese), all the people keep their traditions and I saw that everyone loves their country (T.N. – Japanese/Vietnamese), We were dancing with villagers. We had a good time. We don't know Romanian, but we communicate through dancing (Y.S. – Japanese)*

Gastronomy: *local people that prepared Goulash for us (C.C. – Italian), drinking palinca (A.C. – Romanian), our drinking is mostly based on a very low percentage alcohol (W.I. – Japanese), less thinking, more drinking horinca in Lapus Land (H.M. – Japanese),*

Way of life: *the simplicity of the local people's lives (R.G. – Romanian), in Japan we don't have that much space (W.I. – Japan)*

Traditional agriculture: *Hay stacks; you can find them anywhere* (Y.K. – Japanese), *many cows and sheep* (K.O. – Japanese), *My best experience in Lapus Land was when I milked sheep* (M.T. – Japanese)

Traditional costumes: *traditional clothes were beautiful* (M.M. – Japanese),

Local people in general: *...full of energy and stories* (A.C. – Romanian), *hospitality of the people living in the Lăpuş Land* (T.M. – Japanese),

To summarize the above categories on interaction with the intangible heritage of the Lăpuş Land, one Romanian participant that visited the place for the first time wrote the following testimonial: *I loved everything about Lapus Land. From traditions and clothing to local gastronomy and natural heritage. Locals welcomed us with the biggest smiles and the warmest hearts* (A.T. – Romanian).

As photography was useful for preserving the participants' intense first impressions in a responsible and usable form (Burlacu, 2017), the photographs provided by participants were analysed and interpreted according to multiple subsequent research frames. Based on the first sample collected from the Japanese participants at TCC, the results indicated that experiencing intangible heritage and interaction with the local people was the most comprehensive part of their experience as indicated in Table 1 (Nechita et al., 2017).

Table 1

Content analysis of photos provided by Japanese participants

	Name of the category	Number of photos in the category	Number of Japanese participants who posted in the named category
1.	Nature	53	14
2.	Traditional agriculture and cattle breeding	41	14
3.	Religion / Spiritual life	19	13
4.	Local People	23	10
5.	Folklore and traditional costumes	20	10
6.	Local artisans	8	7
7.	Food	11	6
8.	Traditional architecture + interior of houses	10	6
9.	Wooden churches and local history	6	5
10.	Participants bonding with the local people	4	4
11.	Outdoor activities	3	3
12.	Palinka	2	2
	Florean Museum	4	2
	Other	16	7
	Photos with participants	35	13

A thematic interpretation of local intangible heritage may prove to be a useful tool in creating a unique competitive advantage of the destination (Candrea, 2007). Local people, local gastronomy and other cultural resources (most of them being in the category of intangible heritage) are part the e-branding process for rural destinations

(Kavoura & Nechita, 2017). The promotion of the elements that a region has to offer is not only the problem of the authorities (Briciu, 2013).

These results have a series of practical implications in order to develop CBT programs. Most themes resulted from the analysis of textual and visual data and may inspire local authorities in their attempt to create image campaigns for this tourist destination.

Lăpuș Land have has to be reevaluated by a better developed tourist infrastructure and tourist programs are still poor (Deszi & Benedek, 2011).

As the most revealed themes relate to the intangible heritage of Lăpuș Land, we consider that the destination brand building process should be centered around this thematic. These findings should also be taken into consideration by tour operators when creating tourism products in this area aimed at foreign tourists. In addition, local authorities should focus on developing projects aimed at conserving and promoting the destination' s intangible heritage and enhancing meaningful interactions between visitors and local communities. As it resulted from the interactions with the local authorities from Lăpuș Land, there is a high interest in safeguarding the intangible heritage but there is no clear view in how to market it within the framework of tourism activities without overexploiting it. In the village of Groșii Țibleșului, a local museum of traditions was created and the local administration from Cupșeni village is very active in promoting the authentic folklore festivals. Similar initiatives have been present in Vima Mică and Dămăcușeni villages.

As demonstrated in other geographical contexts, one solution for addressing the different challenges of CBT is to develop a collaborative network (Tolkach and King, 2015). One of these collaborative networks has been created on the initiative of an Irish living in Romania who involved several villagers from Maramures region in an interesting event that promotes the intangible heritage of the area. However, the financial effort of local authorities from these villages was a determinant success factor (Digi 24, 2017).

As a massive number of locals worked or have relatives that work abroad, the cosmopolitan locals could be also involved in the creation of complete local attraction (Iorio & Wall, 2012; Iorio & Corsale, 2014).

The long-term aspect and success of CBT development that aims to valorize the cultural intangible heritage depends on establishing a partnership between the local investors and the local community. Consequently, the local community is the most important stakeholder and its general development should be at the center of the entire process. The local community is the owner of the local culture and in the end tourism products depend on their cooperation.

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