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# The Discreet Charm of Lists

## The Relevance(s) of Heritage Practices in a Subaltern Rural Area in Transylvania

ÁGNES EITLER

### Abstract:

This study endeavours to analyse the seemingly surprising attitude of the local society towards its position of being listed in the Regional Inventory of the Collection of Hungarian Values. In 2015, a regional inventory of cultural heritage was established in the Nyárád Valley, a rural area of mostly Hungarian population in Transylvania, Romania. The creation of the regional inventory was a project of the local LEADER Association, which aimed to develop rural tourism by creating and promoting a touristic image of the region. Some elements from the village Szentgerice were also inscribed into the regional inventory, however, the list has remained almost completely unknown to most of the locals. Despite the list's obscurity, local heritage is not without significance in the village. A comparison of the development strategy of the LEADER Association for the rural area, and local patterns of action shows that through these different ways of managing material and immaterial resources, different visions of cultural heritage and the role it could play in the future of this rural area can be discerned.

*Keywords: heritage practices, subaltern rurality, LEADER programme, regional development, envisioning future*

In 2015, members of the Nyárád Valley LEADER Association (Asociația LEADER Valea Nirajului), collaborating with journalists and ethnographers, prepared a proposal for a Regional Inventory of Cultural Heritage in the Nyárád Valley (Valea Nirajului, Transylvania, Romania) under the umbrella of the Collection of Hungarian Values.<sup>1</sup> The latter is a state-sponsored heritage regime that approaches herit-

1 The research was funded by the NRDI K\_22 142797 (K\_22 143295) Heritage Construction in Contemporary Community Settings – Identity, Memory, Representation. The Association is the legal form of the LEADER Local Action Group, that is the fundamental unit of the operation of the LEADER programme. It consists of the actors of public, private, and civil sectors in a region, thereby it aims to develop the cooperation between the different sectors. Nyárád Valley LEADER Association uses the Romanian name of the region in the English form of its name (Niraj Valley LEADER Association). In my study I use the Hungarian version (Nyárád) in each case, for easier identification of the region.



age primarily from an ethnic perspective.<sup>2</sup> The Collection of Hungarian Values was established by the Hungarian state in 2012 by the Act XXX “on Hungarian national values and hungarikums”, which created a hierarchical system of multiple levels building from the bottom up: from lists on the local level up to an inventory that contains a selection of elements considered to be the “greatest achievement of the Hungarian nation”.<sup>3</sup> It also attempted to integrate the heritage of Hungarian communities living as ethnic minorities in the territories of neighbouring countries into its bureaucratic system. The Collection of Hungarian Values operates simultaneously with the institutions that represent the global organisation of UNESCO at the national level, in Hungary and in those countries where Hungarian populations live as ethnic minorities in the Carpathian Basin. Therefore, a Hungarian community in Romania may find itself and its local practices in the intersection of two heritage regimes with different origins and approaches to cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the association’s efforts, some fifty elements, such as endangered plant and animal species, pieces of religious architecture, customs, and festivals from 46 settlements inhabited mainly by Hungarians, have been successfully inscribed into the body of this inventory. The designation as a region of rich cultural heritage was a clear aspiration of the Association, which coincided with the strategic guidelines of the LEADER programming period (2014–2020), which also focused on the development of rural tourism in the Nyárád Valley.<sup>5</sup>

This case study attempts to analyse the seemingly surprising, indifferent attitude of local society towards its position of *being listed* in the regional inventory. The subject of my research is a choreography, known as “bottle dance”, which has been the basis of the reputation of the village Szentgerice (Gălăţeni) and its inhabitants among other Hungarian settlements at the regional level since the 1940s. Although the LEADER Association has built the touristic image of the Nyárád Valley on this collection and promoted it by publishing an attractive anthology and establishing a website, the fact that bottle dance of Szentgerice became recognised as an element of the Collection of Hungarian Values has remained almost completely unknown to most of the locals. This does not mean, however, that the choreography has no significance in the eyes of the people of Szentgerice. The staging of dance scenes, songs, and costumes in a choreography that is considered to be the essence of local

2 Bendix, Regina; Aditya, Eggert; Peselmann, Arnika: Introduction. Heritage Regimes and the State. In: id. (eds.): Heritage Regimes and the State. Göttingen 2012 (Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property, 6), pp. 11–20.

3 Collections of Hungarikums – Collection of Hungarian Values. Frequently Asked Questions, [www.hungarikum.hu/en/gyik/all](http://www.hungarikum.hu/en/gyik/all), 28. 4. 2024.

4 While the Collection of Hungarian Values was called to life to emphasize the cultural unity of a nation, the UNESCO policy aspires to maintain cultural diversity at the global level. Wright, Susan: The Politicization of ‘Culture’. In: *Anthropology Today* 14/1 (1998), pp. 7–15; Niedermüller, Peter: Ethnicity, Nationality, and the Myth of Cultural Heritage. A European View. In: *Journal of Folklore Research* 36/2–3 (1999), pp. 243–253; Taylor, Mary N.: Intangible Heritage Governance, Cultural Diversity, Ethno-Nationalism. In: *Focaal. European Journal of Anthropology* 55 (2009), pp. 41–58.

5 Strategia de Dezvoltare Locală GAL Valea Nirajului Județul Mureș [Local Development Strategy Local Action Group Nyárád Valley, Maros County], [https://nirajleader.ro/assets/uploads/files/7e9a9-sdl\\_gal\\_valea\\_nirajului.pdf](https://nirajleader.ro/assets/uploads/files/7e9a9-sdl_gal_valea_nirajului.pdf), 28. 4. 2024.



culture plays a significant role in enabling the locals to experience local identity on a regular basis. Nevertheless, social practices associated with bottle dance have no connection with those social actions and events that follow the paradigm of the bureaucratic heritage regime at the regional level.

To understand this situation, I developed an approach to heritage practices that considers their relevance to a specific group of people. Managing heritage is increasingly intertwined with other aspects of social life. The ways in which it is constructed cannot be separated from social actors' experiences of how locality, a meaningful space, and a complex phenomenological quality can be successfully reproduced, nor from people's visions of a liveable future.<sup>6</sup> Yet, uncertainty in reproduction of locality and the social perception of uncertain moments are central to my analysis. Following Stef Jansen, I focus on how hope as *engagement with the future* is articulated in a society that encounters uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> What kinds of moments and situations does a local society consider to be uncertain? How does the production of hope structure the social environment by recognising certain contexts as hopeful, while rejecting others out of mistrust?<sup>8</sup> Uncertainties are seedbeds for the development of future-oriented practices. Nonetheless, experiencing the moment of the unexpected may encourage the re-reading of the past and its stories.<sup>9</sup> My analysis follows uncertainties from a longitudinal perspective to understand, how, or more precisely, why cultural heritage can be a relevant and meaningful pattern of social action for a rural community living as an ethnic minority in contemporary Romania. In order to grasp this, I study heritage here as a mode of interpretation, and in relation to time, to the past, as well as to the future.<sup>10</sup>

After a brief introduction to the fieldwork, I give an overview of the historical development of the choreography of bottle dance from its first mention in written sources to the present day. This overview, however, only includes those highlights of the story that the people of Szentgerice have retrospectively accepted as significant to the narrative. I will then compare in detail the two ways of coping with current uncertainties, namely the development strategy of the LEADER Association for the rural area and local patterns of action. Villagers who follow local ways of doing things sometimes cooperate with and sometimes ignore the relatively new LEADER paradigm, which derives from the social and economic process of Europeanisation. Based on this comparison, I conclude that through these different ways of managing material and immaterial resources, different visions of cultural

6 Appadurai, Arjun: *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis 2005, pp. 178–199.

7 Jansen, Stef: *Hope and the State in the Anthropology of Home. Preliminary Notes*. In: *Ethnologia Europaea* 39/1 (2009), pp. 54–60; Kleist, Nauja; Jansen, Stef: *Introduction: Hope over Time. Crisis, Immobility, and Future-Making*. In: *History and Anthropology* 27/4 (2016), pp. 373–392.

8 Hage, Ghassan: *Afterword. Questions Concerning a Future-Politics*. In: *History and Anthropology* 27/4 (2016), pp. 465–467.

9 Kleist/Jansen (note 7), pp. 7–8.

10 Harrison, Rodney: *Heritage as Future-Making Practices*. In: id. et al.: *Heritage Futures. Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*. London 2020, pp. 20–50.



heritage can be discerned in terms of the role it could play in the future of this rural area.

## Fieldwork in the Nyárád Valley

Szentgerice, my field site, is a village of almost 750 inhabitants, located in Maros County (Județul Mureș), in the Nyárád Valley. The distance between the settlement and the nearest urban centre, Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș), the administrative, economic, and cultural centre of the county, is 20 km. This area, the middle part of the Nyárád valley, is still a rural area with significant agricultural production and is less affected by tourism and newcomers from urban areas than the upper part of the valley. Szentgerice occupies a peripheral position within the Nyárád Valley. As it can only be accessed by a road connecting the village to the main road running along the valley, it is not on the regular route of public transport. As a result, commuting to Marosvásárhely is only possible by car, despite the relatively short distance to the town.

In Romania, communes are the basic level of local government in rural areas. A commune comprises one or more villages and it is named after its central settlement. Its authority is a local council with a mayor.<sup>11</sup> Szentgerice belongs to the commune of Backamadaras (Pășăreni), which also includes Backamadaras and Nyárádbálintfalva (Bolintineni). The three villages send their representatives to a common council in Backamadaras. Szentgerice is therefore administratively subordinate. The local elementary school only caters to the first four grades, after which children have to commute to the commune centre. According to the 2011 census, 96% of the inhabitants claimed to be Hungarian, with the remaining percentage covering the increasing number of Roma living in the village. Since the second half of the 17th century two churches, a Unitarian and a Calvinist, are present in Szentgerice, each of which has almost 300 members.<sup>12</sup> Most of the villagers depend to some extent on agriculture, although it is not their primary source of income. The Unitarian and the Calvinist churches, as landowners, also have income from the agricultural sector. In 2022 there were 39 private farms in the village. Moreover, from the second half of the 19th century, wine production provided a monetary income for the peasant households of Szentgerice. The prime era for it was the period of socialist collective farming. Subsequently, wine production decreased significantly due to changes in the structure of agricultural production in the post-socialist period.

When I first entered the field, I was interested in the social actors behind the formulation of heritage and the organisation of public cultural life in rural milieus.

11 Tanasescu, Simina: Local Government in Romania. In: Angel-Manuel Moreno (ed.): Local Government in the Member States of the European Union. A Comparative Legal Perspective. Madrid 2012, pp. 533–553.

12 The significance of Pentecostalism and Seventh Day Adventism has grown considerably among the Roma population in the last decade.



Even before I started my fieldwork, I knew from various sources (for instance websites and local history books, mostly published in the last decade), that heritage management practices were strongly encouraged by the local pastors at Szentgerice. Therefore, I contacted the Calvinist priest and his family during the winter of 2020. The fieldwork conducted in the village between 2020 and 2022 comprised approximately one month's worth of research, distributed across four visits. First, I met the inner circle of the Calvinist and the Unitarian parish. I quickly realised that most of these people were the leading figures of managing of cultural heritage and were also members of the commune's council and pivotal actors within the civil sphere. They occupied a variety of elite roles.<sup>13</sup> Later, I also encountered other members of the community, who were connected to some extent to the phenomenon. I recorded approximately 30 comprehensive, semi-structured interviews with 34 people. In addition, participating on public events and its observations served as a fundamental method of the research, too.

## Heritage in the Long Run: the Emergence of Bottle Dance

At Szentgerice, the idea of showcasing local culture was first formulated during the interwar period, within the context of the territorial realignments that occurred in the aftermath of the First World War. Due to the changes brought about by the Trianon Peace Treaty (1920), Hungarians of Transylvania have found themselves in the position of an ethnic minority.<sup>14</sup> The elites of the Hungarian population deemed it necessary to establish new models for self-organisation. In the absence of the former state institutions, which were also lacking in funding from the Romanian state, minority elites formed a network based on educational, cultural, and economic institutions that were supported by civil society organisations and the Hungarian churches. Additionally, minority elites shaped a collectivist ethic, which emphasised the importance of *serving the people*, and established this as a model of behaviour and mentality for local intellectuals to emulate.<sup>15</sup> This concept is predicated on the notion of the local intellectual, who is deemed capable of assuming a leadership role within the community and thereby plays an instrumental role in

13 Kiss, Dénes: A posztoszocialista vidéki elit szerkezete és jellemzői. In: Szociológiai Szemle 23/3 (2013), pp. 4–29.

14 Transylvania was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920 that ended the First World War for Hungary. As a result of the Peace Treaty, Transylvania came under Romanian rule. Transylvania was already a multi-ethnic space before the war, where Hungarian formed the second largest ethnic group after Romanians, with the population of approximately 5,200,000 people. According to the census of 2011 Hungarian population of Transylvania decreased to ca. 1,200,000 people in the last hundred years. Erdélystat, Erdély (Transilvania), <https://statistikak.erdelystat.ro/adatlapok/erdely/3280>, 28. 4. 2024.

15 Bárdi, Nándor; Filep, Tamás Gusztáv; Lőrincz, József D. (eds.): Népszolgálat. A közösségi elkötelezettség alakváltozatai a magyar kisebbségek történetében. Pozsony 2015; Bárdi, Nándor; Kiss, Tamás: Minority Political Agency in Historical Perspective. Periodization and Key Problems. In: Kiss, Tamás et al. (eds.): Unequal Accommodation of Minority Rights. Hungarians in Transylvania. New York 2018, pp. 37–70.



the organisation of the minority community at large. Their vision was based on the idea of a unit, comprising members who were bonded by shared moral and cultural values. Among these, the cultural characteristics of peasant milieus proved to be central, as peasantry constituted the largest social group within the Hungarian population of Transylvania. Valorising folk culture was strongly related to the idea of patronising the peasantry, therefore serving in the villages became a calling for intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> They were the main initiators of showcasing folk culture, by which they intended to create new modes of ethnic self-representation.

The performance of peasant culture reached its peak during the Second World War. As a consequence of the Second Vienna Award in 1940, Hungary regained its sovereignty over the northern part of Transylvania, which it held until 1944. During the four years of its rule, Hungary made significant efforts to reintegrate Northern Transylvania into the Hungarian state. In the domain of cultural representation, the Bouquet of Pearls movement (Gyöngyösbokréta) had a considerable impact in rural areas of Transylvania. This movement was Hungary's first folk-dance revival, which evolved in the 1930s with the dual objective of establishing a national tradition and promoting tourism.<sup>17</sup> At Szentgerice, dances, songs, and costumes were staged regularly, as a group of villagers joined the Bouquet of Pearls after 1940. The idea of establishing a performing ensemble originated with the local pastors. Ultimately, the Unitarian pastor assumed responsibility for its organisation and management over the following years. Under his direction, villagers even travelled to Budapest in 1943 and participated in the Bouquet of Pearls festival. For nearly a decade, this event constituted an integral part of the celebrations held on the national holiday of St. Stephen, the first Hungarian king, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August in the Hungarian capital.

Right after World War II, the practice of staging local culture has temporarily ceased in Szentgerice. As Romania regained its rule over Transylvania and the communist regime came into power in the country, opportunities for local and minority self-expression became rather limited. Since churches were financially weakened through the implementation of the communist nationalisation policy, coupled with the anti-clerical stance of the regime, local pastors lost their central role in organising cultural life. Serving the people became the domain of local intellectuals, such as teachers and cultural organisers, and was strongly influenced by communist ideology.<sup>18</sup> In the latter half of the 1960s, a partial and temporary easing in the internal politics of the Romanian Communist Party permitted a greater scope for self-organisation and facilitated a brief flourishing of cultural activities among ethnic minorities. During this period, the teaching staff at Szentgerice were highly active in the process of reorganising and managing the dance ensemble.

16 Egry, Gábor: *Nép, nemzet, állam, társadalom: népszolgáló közösségkép és közösségszervezés az erdélyi magyar politikában, 1918–1944*. In: Bárdi/Filep/Lőrincz (note 15), pp. 48–71, here p. 58.

17 The Bouquet of Pearls movement (1931–1944) aimed to place villager's dances and festive traditions on the stage, on occasion of touristic presentations and national holidays. Taylor, Mary N.: *Movement of People. Hungarian Folk Dance, Populism and Citizenship*. Bloomington 2021, pp. 40–46.

18 Bárdi/Kiss (note 15), p. 51 and pp. 57–61; Lőrincz, József D.: *Népszolgálat*. In: Bárdi/Filep/id. (note 15), pp. 288–322.



From memories of staging local culture in the interwar and war years and from local knowledge of dances and songs the local intellectual elites invented a new choreography: the bottle dance. The name refers to the women carrying bottles on their heads while dancing. By compiling the choreography, they aimed at creating a *brand* for the village that would encapsulate the most salient characteristics of the settlement. For instance, the songs included into the performance reflected the region's landscape, the village's daily life, and the wines produced at Szentgerice. The bottles, which played a pivotal role in the choreography, also served as a reference to the latter. This period of flourishing came to an end by the second half of the 1970s, as political and economic repression re-intensified in the country to such an extent that activities of social self-organisation ceased almost entirely.

Following the collapse of the communist regimes, a resurgence of interest in performing local culture was observed across the former Soviet bloc.<sup>19</sup> For the Hungarian minority community in Transylvania churches, which had recently re-emerged from a marginalised position, played a pivotal role in the organisation of cultural life in the new era. At Szentgerice, the Unitarian pastor was dedicated to reintroducing the choreography of the bottle dance and was instrumental in the re-establishment of the local dance ensemble in the 1990s. As a result of his patronage, the performance became a regular feature of all public celebrations in the village. Furthermore, the ensemble served as the cultural ambassador of the village on its tours, which were primarily organised and accompanied by the pastor. When I started my fieldwork in the village, the central role in heritage management had already been assumed by the Calvinist pastor. He, who had commenced his tenure at the beginning of the 2010s, became the next organiser in the history of performing bottle dance.

Bottle dance is primarily a fixed sequence of folk-dance movements chiefly performed on stage, which condenses local history, the peasant past, and the ethnic community. The backstory, the narrative behind the condensation symbol, is a shared knowledge of the community and its existence makes referencing heritage possible at any time.<sup>20</sup> Even from this brief overview, it is evident that the concept of heritage assumed greater significance during periods of heightened uncertainty. I argue that uncertainty is not good or bad in and of itself, it is rather an experience that accompanies turbulent processes of transformation. Consequently, uncertainty can serve as a catalyst for self-identification on one hand, and on the other, it can impel a sense of compulsion.

19 Puzsai, Bertalan: Das Schicksal der Kultur und des Lokalen in der postmodernen Image-Produktion. In: Csilla Schell, Michael Prosser-Schell, id. (eds.): *Re-Invention of Tradition in Ostmitteleuropa nach 1990. Neue, "gefundene" und revitalisierte Feste mit Schwerpunkt auf Ungarn*. Münster 2018, pp. 21–38.

20 Cohen, Anthony P.: *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London 2001, pp. 108–110.



## Envisioning a Touristic Region

This section presents an analysis of the context in which bottle dance and cultural heritage in a broad sense emerged as a focus for the Nyárád Valley LEADER Association. In 2010, the LEADER Association was established in the Nyárád Valley (Maros County). The formation of the Action Group was also intended to facilitate a novel form of advocacy for the ethnic community, alongside the potential for territorial development.<sup>21</sup> The Local Action Group's development strategy for the 2007–2013 funding period was primarily oriented towards the promotion of agricultural production. Given the region's significant involvement in agricultural activities, the strategic guidelines were met with considerable enthusiasm by the local population. However, it became apparent that the number of resources accessible to people was less than initially anticipated. A significant proportion of the agricultural producers who were the focus of the strategy were unable to meet the administrative and bureaucratic requirements of the LEADER process. One of the impediments was the region's historical context, specifically the incomplete and unresolved status of the agricultural land register. In Romania, the necessity for the creation of a new cadastre arose following the restitution of land in the 1990s. However, this did not occur until a considerable delay had elapsed, due to several reasons.<sup>22</sup> There was a notable discrepancy in the degree of completion of the cadastres between different regions, with even settlements within the same region exhibiting varying levels of advancement. Furthermore, the process is still ongoing in certain areas. Additionally, joining the LEADER programme required a considerable financial investment from the applicant, which presented a significant barrier to participation for those engaged in small-scale agricultural activities. In fact, most agricultural producers in this region, as in general in Transylvania, cannot be described as farmers, in the sense of being agricultural entrepreneurs.<sup>23</sup>

Considering the ambivalent experience of the initial funding period, the Local Action Group devised a new strategy for the Nyárád Valley for the subsequent period (2014–2020), which emphasised the role of the rural service sector, namely of tourism, in the region's future trajectory. In order to provide a favourable hinterland for micro and small enterprises that were already interested in the development of tourism and the attraction of further potential entrepreneurs to the possibilities offered by rural tourism, the LEADER Association made every effort to create a distinctive tourist image of the region. Exploring, documenting, and representing the region's heritage became central to this concern. For a broader

- 21 The Nyárád Valley is a multiethnic region with Hungarian, Romanian, and Roma communities. In its territory Hungarians count are the major ethnic group on the level of the communes, however, it is not necessarily the case in every village.
- 22 Verdery, Kathrine: *The Vanishing Hectare. Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca 2003, pp. 98–100.
- 23 Szabó, Árpád Töhötöm: Does the Countryside Still Feed the Country? Producing and Reproducing the Rural in Transylvania. In: Luís Silva, Elisabete Figueiredo (eds.): *Shaping Rural Areas in Europe. Perceptions and Outcomes on the Present and the Future*. Dordrecht 2013 (GeoJournal Library, 107), pp. 165–180, here p. 168.



context it should be emphasised that in Transylvania and even in Romania at large, local elites and regional stakeholders in rural development thematise heritage and tourism as two sides of the same coin. As ethnographic case studies revealed, these agents consider heritage first and foremost to be a resource waiting to be *exploited* by tourism.<sup>24</sup> Relying on the expertise of ethnographers, the regional elite in the Nyárád Valley established an inventory of the region's heritage and successfully proposed its recognition as part of the Collection of Hungarian Values. At Szentgerice, agents of the LEADER Association selected the Unitarian Church, with its origins in the 14th century, and the choreography of bottle dance and inscribed them into the Regional Inventory of Cultural Heritage in the Nyárád Valley. Once these selected elements had earned the heritage label, stakeholders began to disseminate the idea of regional heritage in public discourses. This included the publication of an attractive anthology, titled "Snapshots from the Nyárád Valley", and the establishing of a website designed to serve as a tourist guide. Nevertheless, the Association's efforts met with an uneven reception in the region. Nyárád Valley is far from being homogenous, and not all its settlements could apply the same development strategy. In the upper villages of the valley, where tourism already played a significant role in the local economy, regional image building proved relevant and was well-received. However, in the lower part of the region, e.g. Szentgerice, where other well-trodden paths to development are common, the response was weak.

The activity of churches and their pastors in social and economic integration is a fundamental experience of local society at Szentgerice. This experience is mainly related to times of uncertainty, when churches go beyond the religious subsystem and act as initiators in other, non-religious domains of local life. Under the banner of serving the people, this behaviour was already common among local pastors in the interwar period, and it regained its importance after 1990. After the collapse of the communist regime, the political, economic, and social transformation in Romania was accompanied by a general regression, therefore, the state could not maintain its participation in many spheres of life in which it had previously been present.<sup>25</sup> The resulting culture of uncertainty was characterised by the invention of new local survival strategies.<sup>26</sup> In this situation, the Churches were the possible actors able to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the state. The public relevance of religious institutions increased both among Romanians and Hungarians, and religious institutions regained their influence in social and economic domains that had previously been almost completely secularised.<sup>27</sup> In Szentgerice, local churches were the only organisations capable of gaining access to extra-local

24 Ibid., pp. 177–178; Szabó, Árpád Tőhötöm: From Folk Culture to Cultural Heritage. Some General Conclusions by Ways of Transylvanian Examples. In: id., Mária Szikszai (eds.): Cultural Heritage and Cultural Politics in Minority Conditions. Cluj Napoca 2018, pp. 179–196.

25 Kiss, Dénes: Erdélyi falvak a 21. században. In: Magyar Kisebbség 9/3–4 (2005), pp. 60–77, here pp. 73–75.

26 Szabó, Árpád Tőhötöm: Gazdasági adaptáció és etnicitás. Gazdaság, vidékiség és integráció egy erdélyi térségben. Kolozsvár 2013, pp. 100–105.

27 Kiss, Dénes; Rosta, Gergely; Voicu, Bogdan: Between Romania and Hungary. Religiosity among Hungarians in Transylvania. In: Ruud Luijkx, Tim Reeskens, Inge Sieben (eds.): Reflections on European



resources. They could bring in financial support through their relationships with Western, American, and Dutch protestant congregations. In order to legally receive funds from the Dutch and American brethren, the Unitarian and Calvinist pastors initiated the creation of a foundation in the 1990s.<sup>28</sup>

Once the most urgent problems had been solved, the foundation was consolidated as a major player in the field of project management. As well as coordinating the development of infrastructure, it has been particularly active in organising the cultural life of the village. The choreography of bottle dance was reintroduced within the framework of the foundation, which ensured the operation of the newly formed dance ensemble. The staging of local culture was inextricably linked to the establishment of a strong relationship with the Western congregations. Performing bottle dance and other scenes of peasant culture to the friars was an indispensable event during their yearly visit to Szentgerice. Due to these visits, the people of Szentgerice, especially those who belonged to the closest circle of the Unitarian or the Calvinist church, gained experience in a quasi-touristic activity. It is noticeable that cultural heritage was a crucial component of the image they presented to their foreign guests of the community.

In the 2010s, the quality of the relationship between the local society and the Western congregations underwent a significant transformation. After helping with the lack of infrastructure, the Western congregations aimed to *invest* in such activities that might contribute to the economic sustainability of the community. Focusing on households, the Dutch congregation introduced a micro-credit system that provided 5,000 Euros per project to start local economic activities. In most cases, this programme targets small-scale agricultural producers, and it encourages them to expand their activity into enterprises. The credit application is open to all villagers; however, they have to apply for it through the framework of the Calvinist church, coordinated by the Calvinist pastor. Based on religious principles, this system is driven by piety rather than profit maximisation, and it operates on the basis of trust between the local society and the Dutch congregation, and towards the pastor from both sides.

I have argued above that uncertainty is not necessarily linked to crisis, but it accompanies turbulent changes and transformations of political, social, and economic structures. From the second half of the 2000s onwards, rural areas in Romania, as in other Eastern European countries, had to find out how to thrive in the new system of project-based redistribution that rural development policy promoted.<sup>29</sup> At

Values. Honouring Loek Halman's Contribution to the European Values Study. Tilburg 2022 (European Values Series, 2), pp. 179–194.

- 28 Due to the decline of the public transportation system, children were unable to access the secondary school in the centre of the commune, Backamadaras. Moreover, because a general crisis engulfed the health care system, the doctor's office also remained without financial backing. With the support of the Dutch and American congregations, the Foundation bought a minibus for the schoolchildren's daily transport, and it was able to finance the construction of a new building for a new doctor's office and buy a new medical equipment for it, too.
- 29 The preponderance of a project-based system of allocating resources in the governance structures in Eastern Europe is largely due to the Europeanisation process, therefore, it took place in the period fol-



the level of local governance, particularly in the last decade, the resources made available through project-based redistribution have played a significant role in the resource management of the communes. Focusing on the Hungarian ethnic community in Romania, as a result of the latest developments of Hungary's kin-state policies, it finds itself in a dual situation, as Hungary has expanded its resource redistribution system to it. Resources that cross the border, are mainly available in the form of projects. A large number of these projects benefit the churches, as they are considered to be the most prominent actors in the building of a minority community according to the Hungarian nation state's policy.<sup>30</sup> In the 2010s the Calvinist pastor of Szentgerice was highly successful in exploiting the opportunities provided by the Romanian, and especially the Hungarian project-environment. Some of the winning projects he managed were explicitly aimed at churches but with his expertise in writing proposals, he was also the key actor in some projects in the civil sector. "Speaking about project proposals, our pastor is the one who is very strong in doing it," a member of the Calvinist congregation emphasised to me, underlining the significance of the pastor in gaining external resources.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, the latest changes in resource management policies have strengthened the churches' long-standing role in the social and economic integration of the village.

In Szentgerice, facing and coping with uncertainties was almost unimaginable without the guidance of the churches, whether the uncertainty was due to a crisis or resulted from being a *novice* in a new field of opportunities. It should not be forgotten, however, that this scenario has its antecedents in the history of the Hungarians in Transylvania as an ethnic minority, and its wider context is the de-secularisation that characterises post-socialist Romania in general. Returning to the local level, it is also clear that the absence of other local institutions also reinforces the central position of the churches. As a result of the structure of local governance in Romania, Szentgerice has no administrative body of its own. The administrative elite of the village is part of the council, which operates at the level of the commune. The cultural elite has been significantly weakened since the 1990s, as secondary education was no longer available at the local level, and elementary school teachers no longer resided in the village, but commuted daily. In Szentgerice, the economic elite consists largely of agricultural producers. Besides the problems this social group faces everywhere in Transylvania, they are struggling with the lack of available land to rent or buy.<sup>32</sup> To overcome this, the churches offer them land to rent on church land. This is far from enough; but it strengthens the connection between churches and the economic elite. The combination of these

lowing the EU accession of the countries. On the process of Europeanisation in the context of everyday life and social experience see Welz, Gisela; Lottermann, Annina (eds.): *Projekte der Europäisierung. Kulturanthropologische Forschungsperspektiven*. Frankfurt am Main 2009 (Kulturanthropologische Notizen, 78).

30 Kiss, Dénes: Churches and Religious Life. In: Kiss, Tamás et al. (eds.): *Unequal Accommodation of Minority Rights. Hungarians in Transylvania*. New York 2018, pp. 293–316, here p. 314.

31 Interview transcript, 5. 7. 2021.

32 Szabó (note 23).



factors prevents the emergence of a local elite that would be independent of the church and able to create and operate in a secular civil sphere within the village.

## Conclusion: Envisioning the Future in a Subaltern Rural Area

From the first half of the twentieth century, local interest in cultural heritage in Szentgerice has been periodic. It is apparent that references to heritage intensified whenever uncertainty became a pronounced part of everyday experience. In order to showcase local culture, the choreography of bottle dance was established, which was seen to be an appropriate way to present local identity, ethnicity, and historical tradition, when due to turbulent changes the future seemed hardly predictable. Although the choreography demonstrates the permanence of these supposedly *eternal* ideas, it is a continuously evolving pattern, as it has been deliberately filled with different meanings and symbols by social actors over time.<sup>33</sup> The invention and multiple reinventions of the choreography were managed by local intellectuals: teachers, cultural organisers, and above all, pastors. In this way, the cultural heritage with its constantly evolving nature serves as proof of the community's ability to overcome adversity, which eventually makes it possible to envision a liveable future, even in uncertain times.<sup>34</sup> It is also noticeable, that processes in cultural discourses are inextricably connected to practices that offer hope in the middle of economic struggles and to community members who can show a way out of uncertainty.

At the regional level in the Nyárád Valley, different visions of the desirable future simultaneously existed, related to social actors and interest groups. Stakeholders and key figures of regional rural development established a strategy for the 2014–2020 LEADER programming period, which made the duality of tourism and heritage an interpretative framework for the region's development.<sup>35</sup> However, the concept could not develop into a suitable framework for all the interest groups to imagine their future within, as it was not able to take into consideration the needs of all stakeholders in this heterogeneous region.<sup>36</sup> In addition, it quickly became apparent that the concept of development itself was not necessarily interpreted by the various social actors in the same way as it was envisioned in the LEADER strategic guidelines. One of the experts from the LEADER Association, who parti-

33 Pusztai, Bertalan: A történelmi múlt szerepe egy finn turizmus- és lokalitásfejlesztésben. In: *Ethnographia* 131/3 (2020), pp. 465–485, here pp. 482–483.

34 Holtorf, Cornelius: Embracing Change: How Cultural Resilience Is Increased Through Cultural Heritage. In: *World Archaeology* 50/4 (2018), pp. 639–650, here p. 643.

35 Groth, Stefan; Sutter, Ove: Kulturelle Repräsentationen von "Region" in der politisch-ökonomischen Entwicklung ländlicher Räume. In: *Rheinisch-westfälische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 61 (2016), pp. 225–245, here p. 234; Lange, Jan: Die Region im circulus virtuosus. Lokale Aushandlungen in der europäischen Entwicklung ländlicher Räume. In: *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 114/1 (2018), pp. 77–90.

36 On the possibility of coordination between social actors with different backgrounds in a Local Action Group see for instance the case study on the region Fläming-Havel (Brandenburg, Germany) by Lange (note 35).



cipated in the preparation of the Regional Heritage Inventory of the Nyárád Valley in 2015, summed up his observations for me in a critical way: “What is rural development? In the mind of the people, it means having asphalted roads, electricity, gas pipes, everything that generates bills. Internet, telephone, who knows what else. [...] They still live by these values, so in a proper village one’s boots should not be muddy, or dirty. [...] Well, when we arrived with this postmodern nonsense like heritage and villages – ‘What are they talking about here? What do they want? Leave us alone with this’”.<sup>37</sup>

At Szentgerice, practices related to tourism are not completely missing from the experience of local society, as American and Dutch guests regularly stay in the village due to their relationships with the Unitarian and Calvinist congregations. However, this quasi-tourism differs from market-based tourism even though it is inextricably linked to the local economy by bringing in external resources for the benefit of households and the community. The staging of local heritage is a tool for building relationships with the Western congregations. Therefore, people at Szentgerice link tourism and heritage, but through the lens of the hospitality they have experienced in their contact with the Western congregations.

What do Szentgerice future-oriented practices focus on? The ways, in which people articulate their futures vary from individual to individual, however, a common core is recognisable. In envisioning a future, people express a strong hope for being able to control resources by localising decision-making processes. According to Árpád Töhötöm Szabó, contemporary rural areas in Transylvania bear the marks of being in a *subaltern* position, as their inhabitants have become increasingly dependent on external resources.<sup>38</sup> In the 1990s, self-sufficiency regained importance as an economic strategy among the rural population in post-socialist Transylvania motivated by the uncertainties accompanying the transition from socialism to capitalism.<sup>39</sup> However, after a decade and a half, the use of internal resources increasingly lost its significance while dependence on external factors and agents became dominant. This is a consequence of changes in the structure of agricultural production and resource allocation policies, mainly connected to the EU accession. Because of a general mistrust of dependency, the people of Szentgerice prefer strategies for obtaining external resources that they can monitor and control, preferably using patterns they have already tried and tested. Churches and their pastors are key actors in the struggle for resources, and their mediation mitigates the uncertainty of external dependency. The links between local churches and Western congregations guarantee the community access to economic capital without forcing them to follow a strict market logic. By bringing their skills and expertise into the realm of project-based redistribution, pastors also appear to domesticate the project environment in the eyes of local people. Although these

37 Interview transcript, 16. 7. 2020.

38 Szabó, Árpád Töhötöm: Háztartások és közösségek a lokális és az extralokális erőforrások tükrében. Erdélyi példák. In: Ethno-Lore 9 (2023), pp. 61–91.

39 Beside the economic constraints, a strong nostalgia that people felt for their pre-socialist, peasant past prompted them to aspire for self-sufficiency. In that sense, self-sufficiency became a code of ethic.



strategies are clearly aimed at attracting external resources, they serve the ideal of self-sufficiency by providing a sense of control over the process. In Szentgerice, the ideal of self-sufficiency continues to be a unifying, as it still seems to provide a sense of security in the context of the village's subordinate position.<sup>40</sup>

At Szentgerice, the attachment to local heritage is fundamental to the articulation of cultural self-representation. The way in which local society has managed heritage has always responded to extra-local contexts, as the history of bottle dance proves. However, the fact, that the recognition of the choreography as cultural heritage has remained almost completely unknown to the villagers reminds us that patterns of rural development and heritage policies derive from external contexts, that tend to be only partially relevant at the local level.<sup>41</sup>

### Zusammenfassung:

In diesem Beitrag wird die Haltung einer lokalen Gemeinschaft zu ihrer Aufnahme ins regionale Inventar des Kulturerbes in der Sammlung ungarischer Werte analysiert. Im Jahr 2015 wurde im Nyárád-Tal, einer ländlichen Region mit überwiegend ungarischer Bevölkerung in Siebenbürgen (Rumänien) ein regionales Inventar des kulturellen Erbes erstellt. Die Erstellung des regionalen Inventars war ein LEADER-Projekt, das danach strebte, den Landtourismus im Nyárád-Tal zu entwickeln und zu vermarkten. Einige Elemente aus dem Dorf Szentgerice wurden ebenfalls ins regionale Verzeichnis aufgenommen, was jedoch den meisten Einwohnern unbekannt geblieben ist. Trotzdem ist das lokale Kulturerbe im Dorf nicht ohne Bedeutung. Ein Vergleich zwischen der Entwicklungsstrategie von LEADER für den ländlichen Raum und den lokalen Handlungsmustern zeigt, dass durch diesen unterschiedlichen Umgang mit materiellen und immateriellen Ressourcen unterschiedliche Visionen des kulturellen Erbes erkennbar sind.

*Keywords: Kulturerbepraktiken, subalterne Ländlichkeit, LEADER-Programm, regionale Entwicklung, Zukunftsvisionen*

40 Gudeman, Stephen; Hann, Chris: Introduction. Self-Sufficiency as Reality and as Myth. In: id. (eds.): *Oikos and Market. Explorations in Self-Sufficiency after Socialism*. New York 2015, pp. 1–23; Vidacs, Bea: *The Ideal of Self-Sufficiency and the Reality of Dependence. A Hungarian Case*. In: *ibid.*, pp. 24–46.

41 In this case, the LEADER programme, which is initially based on a bottom-up approach and meant to engage local actors in decision-making processes and resource allocation, could not entirely successfully cope with the given characteristics of the region. Although churches hold a remarkable influence in local social and economic domains they cannot be involved as actors in the LEADER programme, since the LEADER paradigm was established according to a secular way of thinking in Western Europe.