

The Natural Landscape as Part of the Local Identity

Case Study: Izvoarele Commune, Tulcea County

Peisajul natural ca parte a factorului identitar local
Studiu de caz: comuna Izvoarele, județul Tulcea

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Abstract

Izvoarele village is located in the centre of the Tulcea County, at the limit of two large protected areas: Măcin-Niculițel and the North Dobrogean Plateau. Among its distinct elements is the fact that the place shelters a unique compact community of Greek population, the only one living in the countryside in Romania. They represent an anthropological living museum, as they are a living proof of the multiculturalism in Dobrogea.

Their presence here is not arbitrary, as the people in the village all relate to the legend regarding the 13 families whom crossing these places in return from the north part of Danube towards Greece stopped here for a while. The reason is said to be that there was a newborn in the group, which caused them to stop for 40 days, and adding to that they discovered the fertility of the lands, especially the soil, which would allow them to establish a life there. As a result, the 13 families settled and formed the village at the base of Consul Hill.

Today, the Consul Hill represents a central element of the surrounding natural landscape, both at mezzo and local levels, being a major part of the local cultural landscape. Given this fact, the identity of Izvoarele is strongly related to this natural element which watches over it and its inhabitants.

Keywords: *community, rural identity, landscape, Greek minority*

Introduction

The Izvoarele village is situated in the central part of the Tulcea County. With a surface of 9751 ha (according to MDRAP, Territorial Observer – Village Data), the village is located in an area which represents the intersection of the higher plains and the Niculițel Hill, approximately 32 km distance from the county seat, the Municipality of Tulcea.

The village is unique in the county not only because of its natural elements, but also because of its specific population and lifestyle. This is what determines a third specific feature, unique in its value, the anthropogenic/built environment. The ethnologist Narcisa Știucă describes this community as “*the only compact community of Greeks in Romania, the only ones that live in the rural area.*” (ȘTIUCĂ, 2010).

Starting from three defining elements for the local identity, **the anthropogenic/ built heritage, the natural heritage and the cultural heritage**, this article focuses on how an ethnic group of small dimensions manages to maintain alive its traditions, customs and lifestyle. The article explores how the local identity of a small group of people can be maintained alive in a temporal frame such as the one of the 21st century.

This frame is found under various influences, which all have the capacity of adding great pressure on the local identity factor. The 21st century is characterized by a dominance of macro-tendencies such as *globalization*, in a geographic area eroded by multiple cultural influences. Basically, in the same compact geographic area you can find small ethnic groups such as: Megleno - Romanians, Aromanians, Ukrainians, Romany, Circassians, Russians and so on. While each one of these groups is searching for its own individuality, they all respect the life and traditions of their neighbours. Above all the things mentioned above, this space is under significant social, economic and demographic pressure. The population is old and the migration of the youth is increasing dramatically, reaching alarming levels. The main reason for this phenomenon is the general poverty of the Romanian rural areas and the lack of possibilities of finding a job and acquiring a decent lifestyle.

The lack of resources brings in front the problems of the anthropogenic and built environment, which is in an alarmingly degraded state in most parts of the village, shadowing the beauty and uniqueness of this place. It is because of this that the natural elements surrounding the Izvoarele village exist solitarily, detached from the social life of the villagers although they all form an exceptional background in front of which the everyday life of the Izvoarele population is unfolding.

Materials and Methods

This paper represents the result of a one-year interdisciplinary research in the Plateau of Northern Dobrogea. Thus among the methods used in this research can be found both methods specific to urban investigation and sociological research. Specialists from different domains visited the research area, using observation and interviews, as well as the analysis of official data provided by the City Hall. In addition, we analyzed the statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics in Bucharest.

Theoretical framework

The French sociologist Henri Mendras considers the rural area a *society of interaction*, stating that in such a community people know each other and relations are stronger and longer than the ones in the urban areas, most of them lasting from birth till death (MENDRAS, 1989, p. 132, *in* BĂDESCU, CUCU-OANCEA, ȘIȘEȘTEAN, 2009).

The survival of an ethnic group of small dimensions is difficult, especially in the 21st century, when the traditions and customs are eroded by globalization, when the cultural boundaries are diluted and the symbols of identity present less and less value. However, because of these strong forces of interaction from the rural areas we can all discuss today about the preservation of the tradition in these restricted areas. Louis Wirth (1938) spoke in the article "*Urbanism as a way of life*" about the impact of high densities of population on the social connections. Thus, as Wirth was saying, the social interactions have a tendency of being stronger if the community is smaller, like a rural one is ((WIRTH, 1938).

The rural environment has the capacity, through symbols and values, to preserve traditions and customs, offering them a physical frame for long-time existence, through exactly the lack of modernization which it is experiencing. Thus, exactly the one thing that represented the big rupture from the urbanized area (BERNEA, 1997; BĂDESCU, CUCU-OANCEA, ȘIȘEȘTEAN, 2009), the slow progress, is the one that offers today a sanctuary for local tradition. This phenomenon exists, at least for now, but its sustainability is debatable because the rural communities are in a vulnerable state, at the risk of disappearing both physically and symbolically, the migration of the youth taking with it all its defining elements.

Results and Discussions

The built heritage

According to the legend, the village was founded in 1828, all starting with 13 Greek families who left the village of Aspr - Acdere (Thessaloniki area) due to the Turkish persecution. Ethnologist Narcisa Știucă mentions that the Czarist Russians, great enemies of the Ottomans, had promised the Greeks "*protection and land exempt from taxes*" (ȘTIUCĂ, 2010). These families of Greeks were joined by seven Bulgarian families from Curuchioi, Varna area. The extended group went to the South of Basarabia where it tried to settle in the villages of Frecăței, Cișmechioi, Traianu Vechi, Pelini and Curcani (ȘTIUCĂ, 2010).

After a while, the group of Greeks and Bulgarians decided to go back home. There would be two possible reasons: some say they would have missed their home, others would say that the Russians did not live up to their promises. The group therefore left Basarabia and moved to Dobrogea. Legend has it that it was a late, cold autumn, and they camped somewhere in the shadow of Consul Hill.

One of the women was pregnant and giving birth, according to tradition, had to stay in that place for 40 days. Even today, the village elders remember that moment as the "40-day stop."

"The Greeks noticed that there were rich forests around, with good wood. They cut trees and sold them to merchants who were going to Tulcea, where

boats and ships were made. The Greeks got nice incomes from this, so they decided to stay there, even after the 40 days of childbed were completed" (Source: www.povestilemariinegre.ro, 2016).

The area is made up of three villages: Izvoarele, Alba and Iulia. The first name of the village of Izvoarele was Alibeichioi (Alibeykoy), which from Turkish would be translated as Ali-bei's village. The village of Alba was Accadana, and the village of Iulia was Cinili. Between 1924 and 1925, in the Dobrogea area the Turkish and Romanian names were replaced and a word game was created: **Regele Ferdinand (Alibichioi-Izvoarele) se încoronează (Dautcea-Încoronarea) cu Regina Maria (Ortachioi-Horia) la Alba (Accadâna-Alba) Iulia (Cinili)/ King Ferdinand (Alibichioi-Izvoarele) is crowned (Dautcea-Coronation) with Queen Marie (Ortachioi-Horia) in Alba (Accadâna-Alba) Iulia (Cinili)** (CORLEANĂ, 2007).

Izvoarele village, the largest of the three is a gathered village, crossed by a stream, tributary of the river Taița. The village spreads between two hills, Natura 2000 protected areas, the households being located to their base.

The street plot, with the national road DN22F that crosses the village, is organically developed in the central-eastern part of the village, and in the western area it is ordered, with relatively parallel streets. The plots are relatively small in size, but mainly rectangular in shape.

Alba village is located in a protected natural area – ROSPA 0073 Măcin-Niculițel and surrounded by ROSCI0201 Northern Dobrogean Plateau, it is bounded on the West side by the Alba river, and in the East by the Tilchilic river, the two waters joining in the south of the village. It is a small village with an organized street plot, developed to the east of DJ229, with parallel and perpendicular streets. The plots are generally rectangular in shape.

Iulia is a small village, made up of two bodies separated by the river Taița. The main body is crossed by DJ229 and has a rectangular street tram, while the second body, on the west side, has an organic street tram. The second body is at the eastern border with the protected natural area ROSPA 0073 Măcin-Niculițel and ROSCI0201 Nord Dobrogean Plateau. The plots are mainly rectangular in shape and large in size, so you can practice farming in the village.

Architecture

In the villages, the traditional houses (Photo 1) were preserved, made from local materials as they were conditioned by the geographical environment: wood and "chirpici". The houses have porches, the wooden pillars of which are shaped by cutting and carving. The profiles of the windows, doors but also the decorative elements of the porch represent repetitions of stylized bird profiles (*Strategia de dezvoltare a Comunei Izvoarele*, 2011).

"Chirpici" is made by most of the inhabitants by grinding clay together with straw, which was put into patterns to form bricks and then dried in the sun. (*Atlasul Etnografic al României*, 1978)



Photo 1. Traditional houses from Izvoarele (source: Andreea Acasandre Archive)
Foto 1. Gospodării tradiționale din Izvoarele (sursa: Arhiva Andreea Acasandre)

The roof is short, with short mane, in three or four waters, thus being adapted to the climatic conditions in the area, where there are strong winds. (*Atlasul Etnografic al României*, 1978). Roofing materials are ceramic tiles or metal sheets (Photo 2).



Photo 2. Roof details (source: Raluca Duică Archive)
Foto 2. Detalii despre acoperiș (sursa: Arhiva Raluca Duică)

Residents

With a constantly declining population due to economic problems (which determines the rapid migration of the population to the big cities or abroad), the schools were closed in Alba and Iulia, the only one still functional being the one in Izvoarele.

"There are three schools, but two are no longer working ... Izvoarele secondary school is here in the village and we had two more, one in Alba and one in Iulia, but we don't have children anymore and even they are in a very advanced degree of wear and in need of rehabilitation. There is only one kindergarten here in the village of Izvoarele. We have buses that bring all the children here to Izvoarele. We have buses from the Ministry and we have a driver. Two trips in the morning, two trips in the evening and that's it." (Male, 60, Mayor of Izvoarele)

A visit to the only functional school helps us understand that this educational institution is among the few elements struggling to keep alive the local cultural heritage, even though the number of students is very small. *"The number of children is somewhere up to 160 children from kindergarten to the eighth grade. In my time there were 400. Now I have reached only 160. It is still good compared to other villages. Other villages have fewer children"* recalls the Mayor, who is also of Greek origin. The main peculiarity of the school in Izvoarele is that even though it's the only one remaining in operation, serving all three villages, there is an effort made to maintain the specific Greek traditions from one generation to another. Thus, entering this institution, we see on the right side the reception hall a closet in which are exposed some prizes won by students at various national and international competitions.

The natural heritage

The Izvoarele village is located in a very advantageous area, with a valuable natural environment and an increased accessibility related to the other rural and urban areas from the Tulcea County.

Thus, from the natural heritage perspective, the village has on its surface two of the largest natural reservations of this area: The Plateau of the Northern Dobrogea (Site Code: ROSCI0201) and Măcin-Niculitel (Site Code: ROSPA0073). In the south-western vicinity but without intersecting the territory of the village, is the Babadag Forest (Site Code: ROSPA0091) and in the proximity of the western limit of the village is the protected natural area of the Măcin Mountains (ROSCI0123).

As it can be observed, most of the protected natural areas are grouped in the south, west and north. The only protected natural area located in the eastern vicinity of the Izvoarele village is Deniz-Tepe and it is in ROSCI as well as in the ROSPA (ROSCI0067 and ROSPA0032).

Among those located on the territory of Izvoarele, the dominant from the north is Măcin-Niculițel (ROSPA0073), which occupies the north and north-western parts of the village. The surface of this natural protected area expands far beyond the limits of the village in the north and north-western directions. **The Natural Protected Area of the North Dobrogean Plateau (ROSCI0201)**, whose influence expands beyond the limits of the village towards south and south-west and north, is one of the dominants of the County, fostering a large variety of plants and animals. Basically, this village represents the area of intersection of various large natural areas which overlap and occupy a significant surface of the territory of the village.

This exceptional natural heritage offers a valuable diversity and represents a characteristic of the Izvoarele village. The northern protected natural areas “embrace” Alba, one of the components of the Izvoarele village, offering different perspectives all around it. Iulia, the third component of the Izvoarele village is situated in the southern part of the administrative territory, being surrounded by Natural Protected areas such as Măcin-Niculițel, The North Dobrogean Plateau and the Babadag Forest, all three of them framing it discreetly. Izvoarele is framed by Măcin-Niculițel, North Dobrogean Plateau and the Consul Hill (Photo 3).

This is an important landmark and the main touristic attraction of the area. It is also vividly present in the local memory of the population, being repeatedly mentioned by the locals.



Photo 3. The Consul Hill (source: Raluca Duică Archive)
Foto 3. Muntele Consul (sursa: Arhiva Raluca Duică)

The cultural heritage

One of the methods used to maintain the cultural identity is the participation in various national and international festivals dedicated to the Hellenic Community. The pupils from the primary school are still learning traditional Greek songs, customs, the village also having its own Folkloric ensemble that participates year by year in competitions and festivals organized in the various localities of Tulcea County.

However, the Mayor of the village sees it as essential for the communities, (this also being a project of the City Hall), the creation of a new Community Centre. This project is a priority for maintaining the cultural identity, since the inhabitants often organize festivals and meetings at the Community Centre. Even the school teacher mentioned that *"now the traditions of the village are organized at the Community Centre. Before each organized everything in its own, everyone was at home. Now we meet at the Community Centre and spend time together."* (Woman, 38 years old, teacher)

Within the village there are two churches, one on the new rite and one on the old rite (in the community there are still inhabitants on the old rite - most of the old ones), and the inhabitants observe some of the holidays on both the old and the new rites. One of the most complex celebrations of the Greek community in Izvoarele is January 6th-8th.

"What is specific to our locality is the feast of Saint John, Christmas on the old Rite. Whether we are in the church on a new or an old rite, everyone on the old rite keeps the traditions and customs during this period. It is on January 7th. Here, the Christmas on the old rite begins on the eve of the feast of Saint John with Drăgumanu, on January 6th." (Woman, 38 years old, teacher)

The teacher tells that the *Drăgumanu* celebration begins with a row of lads who go to the households and carol them, singing Greek songs. These carollers also look for grooms from throughout the year to "wet" them. The watering of the groom also happens on the same evening that the carolling takes place. *"They drag the poor grooms from well to well and soak them thoroughly. They hide, of course, and try not to be found knowing what awaits them. After that, after being bathed, the group invites them to party together."* (Woman, 38 years old, teacher)

On the second day, the bride's watering takes place. Thus, the Godmother comes to the bride's home, everyone dresses in local traditional costumes and the bride is sprinkled by the Godmother with the basil soaked in Holy Water.

"After the custom takes place at the bride's house, all the women descend into the centre of the village where the village round dance takes place. It is round dance within round dance ... it depends on how many women come to the round dance. The music resounds from the band brought by the City Hall. It's a big holiday and every year it is held. At least since I know myself ... there has been no year in which this did not happen." (Woman, 38 years old, teacher)

January 8th is the *Day of the Old Woman*. The symbol of the Old Woman is associated in the village with the midwife. The teacher mentions that even today there are old people in the village who come and help the young mothers in the care of the baby, in the first months after birth. Thus, the midwives of the year just ended are rewarded by the young mothers, at the Community Centre. They bring bread, chickens and pennies, and come *"to thank the midwife for help,"* says the teacher.

If at economic level the village has an acute lack of functional endowments to ensure its evolution, be it roads or other features necessary for progress, at cultural level, this community is grouped around the **local specific** and its survival is ensured, at least in this case, by the **Community Centre and the market in front of it**, places that have now become symbols of interaction (Photo 4).



Photo 4. The centre of the village where the Saint John round dance is held and the Building of the Community Centre (source: Raluca Duică Archive)

Foto 4. Centrul satului unde se desfășoară hora de Sfântul Ion și clădirea Centrului Comunitar (sursa: Arhiva Raluca Duică)

Local identity as the result of a three-layer heritage

The identity of Izvoarele commune is composed of the overlapping of the three types of elements: anthropic, natural and cultural, all having the same degree of importance.

Thus, the most important elements that define the identity are:

The Consul Hill is an important element at the mezzo-landscape, being not only the highest hill in the area, but also an intriguing element for the inhabitants, who dedicated legends but also explored it – through tourist routes and by cutting down trees.

The houses with Dobrogean specificity, as well as the Community Center along with the central market in Izvoarele, represents the anthropic elements that concentrate in them the local identity.

The presence of **Greeks** in this area it is explained both by historical facts, but also by legends related to the (quasi) natural landscape. The customs and traditions of the Greeks, maintained within the community, are a valuable element of their identity.

Conclusions

The population of Izvoarele represents in itself a valuable resource for the area, but together with the natural and built environment, they form a unique reality, which represent the soul and spirit of that specific place. A very important aspect of this research is the fact that the most imminent danger for this community is not the dilution of the traditions and customs that they have, but the physical disappearance of the community, caused by the global tendencies of the 21st century world.

The economic issues are the ones that most affect the cultural and built environment, leading the natural heritage to solitude and abandonment, vulnerability in front of irrational and unsustainable gestures such as deforestation and pollution.

Together, the built, cultural and natural heritages of Izvoarele, all of priceless value, can lead to sustainable development and, on the long term, a better quality of life for everybody.

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