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Cultural change in a fishing village in the Danube Delta: the consequences of environmental protection and tourism.

PhD thesis-Summary

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fishing, tourism, cultural change, rural community, environmental protection, family and household, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Danube Delta

Introduction

In 1991, the Danube Delta, the largest marshland in Europe, famous for its biodiversity, became a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Due to this new designation, new regulations concerning local use of the environment have been imposed by the Romanian government and the European Union. Despite the fact that elsewhere local and indigenous peoples—their language, culture and knowledge systems—have become central to conservation and development projects (Posey 2000:35), conservation and environmental management programmes in the Danube Delta have so far disregarded local people's knowledge, interests and wishes (Iordache 2003). Yet, these restrictions on the use of their most important natural resource, fish, coupled with geographic isolation, have created a set of social, economic and cultural problems that have affected many communities, and may continue to do so long into the future. The present and the next generation's values and moral standards, their social and economic life are being directly influenced by the changes in their primary economic activity, fishing.

Since the Danube Delta is the largest and best preserved of Europe's deltas (Navodaru and Staras 1995), it is a favourite research subject for biologists and botanists. Despite these numerous studies (Scientific Annals of the Danube Delta Institute 1995-2007), there is little focus on the human dimension; as one local fisherman put it: "there are hundreds of scientists interested in saving the fish, frogs and birds but nobody cares if people live or die here." There are a few anthropological studies focused on the Danube Delta's people, but if they are not outdated (Antipa 1916, Arbore 1935), they are just preliminary, offering only statistical survey data on

ethnic groups, brief descriptions of past communities (Garlan 2007, Ipatiov 2002, Nicoara 2006) or introducing basic ethnic-cultural assessments (Nichersu et. al 2004). Of particular interest is the Integrated Management of European Wetland project (Bell et al. 2004) that scrutinized four European wetlands (Lake Kerkini, Greece, Danube Delta, Romania, Nemunas Delta, Lithuania, Lake Pihlajavesi, Finland) and focused on local understandings of institutional frameworks, impacts of local livelihoods upon natural resources and conservation, and the potential of tourism. However, as the objectives show, the study did not address the cultural transformations that occur, and their approach emphasised the effects local livelihoods have on natural resources and conservation, while this research looks from a reverse angle, namely the effects environmental programs have upon culture.

This study's main objective is documenting and explaining local responses to the fishing bans and other environmental protection restrictions imposed over the past decade, focusing in particular on the turn to tourism and its consequences for the social and cultural life of Sfantu Gheorghe, a fishing village inside this biosphere reserve. The study seeks to broaden our knowledge of the contemporary life of fishermen and women living in the complex and intersecting contexts of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, Romania's recent entrance into the EU, and the lingering effects of the momentous post-communist transition. Although the Danube Delta has been a UNESCO site since 1991 and recently became part of the EU, the effects of the post-socialist transition are still visible here, as well as in the rest of the country, where people holding key positions in state institutions are using their power to pursue the objectives on their personal agenda, just to name one of the multiple effects (Chiribuca 2004, Tufis 2007).

As detailed in the next chapter, a review of existing literature reveals a severe penury of Romanian (and Eastern European) socio-anthropologic studies addressing the effects of environmental protection upon local culture, while the tourism studies limit themselves to proposing Western economic frameworks, largely disregarding other issues. In this sense, the present research aims to fill in this gap and to bring into

discussion the real ways environmental protection programs are put into practice and the subtle changes triggered by tourism. Since most of the studies look into particular causes, the present research can be considered a pilot study as it is the first to employ in-depth, holistic, and historical approaches to describe and explain the consequences on one hand, and to suggest solutions emerging from the local culture and adapted to the Romanian context, on the other hand. Enlarging the spectrum to the international level, this research is also relevant as it renders a picture of the applicability of environmental programs in Eastern Europe, while it explains the socio-cultural changes triggered by tourism.

1.2. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of the research described in this thesis was to better understand the processes of local cultural change in the context of shifting national and international policies concerning the environment through the study of the fishing village of Sfântu Gheorghe in Romania's Danube Delta. These change processes, persistent in an historical sense, have been more recently affected by a fishing ban and expanding tourism. By culture change, I mean changes in the values, norms, beliefs, knowledge, social organization and practices that compose the daily economic and social life of these people.

As the literature review shows, there is a noticeable gap in the international context of studies focused on people living inside protected areas in Eastern Europe. Most researchers address questions of socio-cultural changes in relation to conservation in developing countries, focusing in general on indigenous rights, displacement, poverty, and so on. This thesis will present the way local people from a developed European country, a non-indigenous group, not geographically displaced (but "economical re-located" Cernea 2006), not ethnically oppressed, not poor, is trying to cope with the pressure of tourism and environmental protection politics.

Danube Delta has been scrutinized in past. The edited volume “Dobrogea. Identitati si crize”(Rom. ‘ Dobrogea. Identities and crisis.) represents one of the few studies that actually address the issues arising in the Danube Delta communities in the context of environmental protection. Furthermore, the Integrated Management of European Wetland project (Bell et al. 2004) that scrutinized four European wetlands shed some light on impacts of local livelihoods upon natural resources and conservation. The novelty proposed by this research lies in the emic perspective, based on long term participant observation, while the previous studies offered conclusions relying heavily on interviews.

The objectives of the study were:

- 1- to document changing fishing strategies, in relation to the new imposed environmental restrictions and with attention to the new context of tourism enterprises;
- 2 – to document local perceptions of the fishing bans and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority, the managing intuition;
- 3 – to document local perceptions of the new emerging tourism industry, with attention to fish stocks;
- 4 – to understand how housing and feeding tourists is affecting women’s lives, household social organization and village-wide cultural practices.

My research was focused on local culture of Sfantu Gheorghe, a village situated at the mouth of Danube, near the Black Sea shore, in an “economic area”, near strictly protected and buffer zones of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. I choose this village because the fishermen here used to rely on sturgeon fishing and the ten year ban introduced in 2006 deeply affected their livelihoods. In addition, the international film festival held each summer here brings in more and different types of tourists that equally influence the cultural practices and everyday life of the residents. The

preliminary field work revealed that other issues play an important role in shaping the present Sfantu Gheorghe and consequently, the research also addressed other topics such as: fishing strategies employed today in relation to the past ones, environmental and fishing rules enforcement, managing institutions, tourism and tourists today compared to the past decades, women's role and household organization in the context of the new form of tourism.

In order to get a holistic, in-depth and comprehensive picture of the cultural change occurring in this village, I have spent in total 15 months doing participant observation with men, women and children of Sfantu Gheorghe. I was actively involved with fishing, cooking, hosting tourists side by side with the local fishermen and women, of different age and of various implications with these activities. Furthermore, as I became accepted by different families, I celebrated the main religious holidays, family and village events in the midst of the people of Sfantu Gheorghe. Employing the *Grounded Theory*, I did participant observation in all four seasons, and at the end of the each, I spent time doing library research for analyzing and re-assessing the new issues as they emerged from the field work. The participant observation was doubled by structured, semi-structured and free interviews with the locals as well as various actors (tourists, DDBRA representatives, local officials and leaders, etc).

Since 1991, when the Danube Delta became a Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO site, and later on in 2007, when Romania became part of the E.U., the DDBRA has been imposing laws and regulations focused on conservation of biodiversity. At the same time, after the fall of communism in 1989 and the privatisation of the fishing cooperatives in 1999, the local economy has been under steady transformation, from communist system to capitalist market with fishing and tourism at the centre of the subsistence strategies. In this context, cultural traits such as patterns of natural resources use, social organization, local knowledge, local and household economy, language, attitudes, norms and values, gender role, etc, are undergoing a series of changes as detailed in the next paragraphs.

In terms of fishing culture, the patterns of use of the most important natural resource (fish) have changed; the restricted access to former traditional fishing grounds , habitat degradation, scarce resources, and market demand created tension and competition between the local fishermen, while the preferentially law enforcement led to social inequality and the burgeoning of the black market and corruption. Regarding local technology and tool use, this situation has led to a dramatic drop in tool variation and consequently to related knowledge loss and dependency on a few fish species. In terms of social values and norms, it can be argued that the traditional authority of the elders, the informal institution who enforced sustainable use of resources through shame or social exclusion, has vanished. Today, there is no social cohesion between the local fishermen, no informal institution to control the fishing and consequently no internal or external control over the unsustainable use of resource while locals become more individualistic, market oriented and less knowledgeable about their own environment. The study of the fishing culture in the village of Sfantu Gheorghe revealed that Western institutions and “green” discourse plays a tremendous role in shaping the culture, while it pointed to the critical issues that needs to be efficiently addressed by the Biosphere reserve administrations in order to prevent further cultural and environmental disturbance.

The second objective of the research, focused on the DDBRA rules and regulations revealed that ironically, the transition from communist system to conservationist model supported by the international and European legislation and institutions triggered a series of negative consequences for both local culture and environment. The details on the way DDBRA was founded, and then financially and logistic supported by the World Bank revealed that proposing Western frameworks and disregarding the shortages of a post-communist country, leads to negative effects at different levels. As the body of literature on environmental issues in Eastern Europe lacks an anthropologic approach and these studies employ conservationist frameworks and presents interviews with locals, at the best, this research could be considered a

pioneer study in this respect, which calls for similar research in other protected areas of this part of Europe.

With regard to the third objective, the participant observation revealed that tourism relies heavily on fishing, refreshing the cultural practices of fishing and cooking, while it empowers the locals, who act like individual with agency, employing this activity in different ways (men-fishing, women-cooking, children-offering rides). Unlike other villages world-wide affected by tourism, where locals are “powerless spectators, as they are either pushed away by corporations or get a wage job, the people of Sfantu Gheorghe successfully compete with the outsiders, in the tourist industry. This situation turned the former fishing households into small family enterprises, business oriented, comprising all the members of the nuclear family. On the other hand, unsustainable use of recourse (fish), erosion of moral values, practice and knowledge loss of cattle raising and home-gardening, competition and tension among the locals, points to the negative consequences emerged in the context of new tourism.

The forth objective of this study revealed that in comparison with the past, the traditional position of the woman as the “mistress of the household”, in charge of managing the family’s money and resources is actually being reinforced by tourism. Furthermore, the historical approach showed that Sfantu Gheorghe has been long exposed to capitalist market and in contact with other cultural groups, and consequently, tourism is not the trigger of cultural change, rather the new commodity that connects once more the locals to the international context. Analyzing tourism from a cultural change perspective, it can be argued that it accelerates transformations as well as reinforcing past cultural practices. Locals loose knowledge on cattle raising and gardening, look down on hard work, and become too dependent on the fragile, yet high income from tourism. On the other hand, tourism partially reverses the rural to urban migration, as youngsters and family members living in the city can help their relatives in Sfantu Gheorghe over the busy summer season. The sense of village solidarity against the tourist invasion is displayed though the use of the local language, as the people of

Sfantu Gheorghe speak Hahola to hide from the outsiders. From an economic perspective, tourism has encouraged the process of commoditisation occurring at national level, of the exchange networks established between members of the extended family and neighbours, whereas in the pre- and communist past were constituted on help and reciprocity. However, since families still help their kin and neighbours for free on special occasions or in response to priest's call, it can be argued that not all the relations are becoming money-based and village wide practices still follow the ancestors' ways. Sfantu Gheorghe is still guided in some aspects by the logic of a rural community and not a tourist resort.

The third and fourth objective findings support the argument that tourism plays an important role in accelerating change as well as reinforcing past cultural practices and social organizations. The ethnographic descriptions on tourism and local culture offer details that should be acknowledged and integrated in the future management programs in order to achieve DDBRA's objective of sustainable development. Through this study, the anthropology of tourism in general and the one of rural Eastern Europe in particular, was enriched with fine-grained descriptions of how tourism actually affects the local culture.

Environmental programs and tourism alone are not the engine promoting cultural change. The present situation is the result of many other factors, some obvious, while other more subtle. The following chapters discuss several issues, in relation to international context, history of the region and other relevant research, as it follows:

Chapter 2 discusses the way I emerged myself in this community, and how preliminary field worked helped me tailor the focus of my research while becoming aware of the tension inside this community and raising the issues of ethical approach of some delicate topics. This chapter also presents the main research methods and schedule and the way I was able to employ them in the field.

Chapter 3 offers a review of the relevant literature on fishing and tourism, as these are the main topics addressed in this research. In relation to the past studies, this chapter presents common issues as well as particularities of the Sfantu Gheorghe

village, while setting the general theoretical frameworks employed in the analysis of the field data.

For a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the transformations occurring today, Chapter 4 presents the ethnographic background of the village Sfantu Gheorghe. The brief history of the local people and fishing sheds a light on the past practices, while points to some of their continuity up to the present days.

Chapter 5 (Fishing strategies), Chapter 6 (DDBRA and Locals), Chapter 7 (Tourism in the fishing village of Sfantu Gheorghe), and Chapter 8 (Women, households and community events) offer current ethnographic details on the topics mentioned in their titles. Chapter 9 discusses and analyzes these data, employing the relevant theoretical frameworks, comparing them with other cases world-wide and in relation to the history of these practices.

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