

Cultural Identity in Saxon Rural Space of Transylvania

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Abstract

"It is not the city that determines the region, but the region is the conditioning factor and sustains the city." "The city can be considered only in a regional frame to whom it belongs." The partnerships between the cities and the villages are important in the regional network at micro and macro scale. Socially, economically and ecologically, the rural environment is a development unit. Tangible and intangible Transylvanian Saxon village's cultural resources are values that reverberate at a territorial level. The paper studies the Saxon rural space and its sustainability in its own and in regional development. The focus is on Saxon rural space cultural resources. The main objectives are exhibiting the problems that are modifying Saxon identity and identifying possible ways of enabling its potential. The purpose is to grasp the Saxon village and rural settlement network mechanism.

Rezumat

"Nu orașul este cel care condiționează regiunea, ci regiunea este factorul care determină și susține orașul."³ "Orașul nu poate fi luat în considerare decât în cadrul regional de care aparține."³ Parteneriatele între orașe și sate sunt importante în rețeaua regională la micro și macro - scară. Mediul rural este o unitate a dezvoltării durabile din punct de vedere social, economic, ecologic. Resursele culturale tangibile și intangibile ale satul săsesc transilvănean sunt valori care reverberează la nivel teritorial. Lucrarea studiază sustenabilitatea spațiul rural săsesc în dezvoltarea locală și regională. Atenția este asupra resurselor culturale din ruralul săsesc, obiectivele principale fiind expunerea problemelor care modifică identitatea satului săsesc și identificarea posibilelor moduri de revitalizare. Scopul lucrării este de a înțelege mecanismul satului și a rețelei rurale săsești.

Keywords: rural Transylvania, Saxon Villages, resource, sustainability, model.

1. Introduction

When visiting a Saxon village, one of the most important things to see is the fortified church. An old man sitting by the fortifications is offering a guided tour around the monument. After seeing the fortified wall and the inside of the church you are offered a privileged tour of the clock tower. As you are climbing the steep wooden stairs and admiring the village diffusing

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in a panoramic image from floor to floor, the guide's story becomes more and more interesting as it shifts little by little into a life story. The final part of the journey is at the bells level, that he is in charge of ringing. Going down, he pauses his story when he arrives at the clock system in order to explain how it operates, a procedure that only he knows how to do.

While climbing up in the Saxon church tower the guide is more and more empowered telling the story of what the church used to be, and a story of what a man like him used to be. On the way down from the top of the tower, after ringing the bells, towards the ground the view towards the village is becoming clearer and the narrative of the guide is shifting towards the present times, disclosing his fear and sadness. He is one of the last Saxons in the village only him knowing how to operate the clock. He represents the Saxon community and the Saxon village represents the clock mechanism that stopped once the Saxon migrated. Saxon villages are a mechanism, a broke mechanism with the Saxon operators disappearance.

2. Context

Romania is still a largely rural country. Before the communist regime the country was 80% rural. In 2007 the percentage of rural population still reached 45%. This is a proof of the survival of a a lively system of villages and small towns that continues to play a major role in the social-economic and cultural life of the country.[12]

The village is the true expression of the way the geographical environment transformed in order to fulfill the convenient conditions for the society. The village is integrated in space and time, in a territory with all that exists and happens in it, natural, social, economical and tehcnical processes.[12]

Balancing problems, excessed and deficits in urban and rural environments, ties between the two are obvious. Uncontrolled development of the built environment, broken human-nature link, homeless population, urban food resource shortages on one hand, and agriculture potential and vegetation predominance in rural areas on the other hand are complementary problems and solutions.

In the past, developing new settlements was the solution for rural demographic expansion. Among the new villages developed collaboration and mutual relations. One village's unbalance or deficit was solved by anothers unbalance or surplus. This approach may represent a model for urban agglomerations and desolated rural built environment.

Modeling an existing framework is motivated by tradition, history and legacy continuity and contemporary needs. This process rises questions on transformation, continuity and change of the environment.

Once prolific settlements and communities, today Saxon villages are depopulated and Saxon communities are decimated to several ethnic German inhabitants or disappeared. Transylvania colonization by Germans and its outgrowth represents a substantial part of the cultural heritage and identity of Romania. Saxon colonizers legacy is more than built heritage, leaving behind a lifestyle and a basic model of development. Cultural identity combines qualitative and quantitative spheres. Cultural identity of Saxon villages from

Transylvania is constantly changing.

Structured in three main parts, the paper addresses sustainability trying to grasp the Saxon Rural Space of Transylvania qualitative and quantitative aspects of its cultural identity. First part describes the context in the Saxon space, the second underlines the emerging problems within and the third reveals possible directions that could generate solutions.

The complex context of the rural Saxon Transylvanian space concerns the social, architectural and urban dimensions. These dynamic dimensions of rural Transylvania are constantly changing, effecting each other and influencing the cultural identity. As V. Mihăilescu asserts: *"current territorial structure of the village is a slow generational effort, who have organized the territory [...] driven by the same needs, relentless explorations and adjustments, through repeated failures and successes."*[3]

2.1 Who are the Saxons?

Saxon Rural Landscape is characterized by the last millennium of political, economical and social events. In Romania, there are over two hundred villages founded by German settlers. In the XIIth century Germanic people came to Transylvania driven by military and economic reasons. Colonists from north-western part of Europe were mobilized by the Hungarian Kings. They expected colonists to contribute with an advanced agriculture and a good protection of the borders.[15]

First colonists settled in Transylvania were originally from Rhine and Moseley region, from Flanders and northern France.[15] The German ethnic colonizers are known as founders of the cities in Romania. They are attributed with the idea of bringing the urban principles, not only in Transylvania, but also south and east of the Carpathian Mountain.

The first German colonists, the Teutonic Cavaliers, settled between 1211 and 1225 in Bŭrzenland (Ţara Bârsei). Historical sources highlight the role of German ethnics in the development of the cities in all regions of Romania, not only in Transylvania. *"The cities, almost all, were founded by Saxons"*[17]. Hence, the oldest groups of German colonizers have come to Romanian countries since the 13th century. Germans colonists are associated with the beginnings of the country and with laying the basis of cities. They are present in the oldest cities in Romanian countries: their neighborhoods have a central position and a regular topographic structure, each city had one or more Catholic churches, the institutions have German origin and the German privileges obtained by the citizen communities contain common elements with the German cities from Transylvania and Poland.

The historians affirm that the foreign colonizers formed the country's oldest cities. They introduced administrative, judicial and economic elements.[6]

Saxon rural communities were strictly organized. The neighborhood (*"nachbarschaft"*) is an ancestral component of villages and cities. Is a fundamental component of human habitat. Hence the neighborhood is a spatial unit that meets identity need and belonging to the unit.[2]

In Saxon settlements, neighborhoods had a strong social character. Most importantly, the

neighborhood role in the rural area was farming guidance and surveillance. The base of production were the fields. They were suppose to be worked when the leader of the neighborhood would decide. The nature and order of agriculture works was established by the leaders of the community, as stipulated by regulations of this organizations. Neighborhood strict organization represented the *sine qua non* premise for common work. It was a survival element: “*Unity protects people in time of danger, and misunderstanding causes pain and disappearance*”.[5]

The Saxon culture developed for over eight centuries. Historical, social and economical events affected the 3rd largest ethnicity in Romania. Between the two World Wars there were almost 800.000 German ethnics in Romania, politically represented. Between 1940 and 1944, based on a Romanian - German agreement 63.000 people were enrolled in the German army. After the Second World War, German ethnics from Romania were discriminated, expropriated and 75.000 were sent to force labor in The Soviet Union. A wish to emigrate was triggered among German ethnics. After 1970, the German Republic encouraged German ethnics to emigrate. In 1989 there were only 200.000 Saxons in Romania, and in 2002 only 60.000.[19]

2.2 What are the Saxon Villages?

Saxons colonization was divided in three main parts, corresponding with the inhabited area. These are the areas around three main big cities in Transylvania: Brasov, Sibiu and Bistrita. German colonization in eastern part of Europe implemented planned settlement founding and regulated division of agrarian land.[5] Saxons developed during eight centuries of history in Transylvania specific way life, particular through living and building.

Transylvanian villages are known as settlements “*characterized by a specific land-use system, settlement pattern and organization of the family farmstead that have been preserved since the late Middle Ages. They are dominated by their fortified churches, which illustrate building styles from the 13th to the 16th century.*”[5]

The Saxon community reflected itself in the village, both the configuration and buildings. The houses are built in strong lines one next to each other, but with a wall fence towards the street. The common spaces are generous and large, emphasizing the fortified church.

Maurice Cerasi phrases six principles in order to define *community space*, principles followed in Saxon space: spatial continuity, homogeneity, recognoscibility, public functions, spatial subordination and historic form continuity. *Spatial continuity* is understood as functional and aethetic space aggregation, *homogeneity* as formal harmony, stilistic and expresion unity, *recognoscibility* refers to those particular elements, unique, unrepetable, the necessity for *public functions* invests space with community nexus, *spatial subordination* refers to public space hierarchy and historic shape continuity.[5]

The rural way of living interferes with cultivated civilization. Rural Saxon living is influenced by its contemporary urban version. The house, the fence and the gate are closing the street front. The street is defined by continous fronts, almost urban. Moreover the houses are decorated with Baroque decoration. The village is shaped by narrow and long plots distributed along both street sides.[18]

There are **two types of settlements** known as French and Flemish. In Transylvania developed, almost exclusively, the Flemish settlement. A first glance reveals the plotting's technical shapes chosen by the domain master or the owner. This two types of settlements also defined two types of people and communities. The settlements types were strictly related with people nature and came from it.[15] Saxons community had a cooperative character. Triennial rotation needed a unitary approach, the individual was subordinated to the others work rhythm. Use of common grass and forests configure to tighter communities.[5]

French plotting was a unitary surface clearly delimited by the surrounding fields. In a initially forested field, crossed by several rivers one was chosen as an axis for the settlement. This way a rectangular shaped field was achieved. Depending on the terrain, the plots could go across hills, for 2-3 kilometers in length even if the fields were across or parallel to the level curves. In villages with rectangular plotting, attached to the garden and the courtyard, village neighbours were also field neighbours. Further, there were individual grasslands and afterwards, individual forests. Each villager had an alley along the property of 25-28 hectares. The French type village is also known as deforestation type, the household and the garden being part of the plot. The common grass, the river valley between the two courtyards aren't part of the measured terrain.[15]

One essential characteristic of the settlements from Transylvania was the land division in **Flemish plotting system**. The fields are situated outside the village. Therefore houses can be arranged in regular rows. This kind of closeness contributed to community spirit development. Housing, yard and field land was divided between the villagers. The forest, the rivers and the grazing were for common use. German colonists brought modern field cultivation methods (triennial rotation) and livestock. [7]

Traditional **household** is set on a rectangular plot, narrow and long. With one or two rooms house, a small shed, barn and stable for cereals and animals, chicken coop, fountain, vegetable garden and fruit orchard. Saxon household is a small self sufficient rural household that even today is adapting to villagers needs.

2.3 What is the current situation in the Saxon settlements?

Nowadays, the industrialized agriculture and farming along with globalization and capitalized economy negative effects are more and more visible. Saxon villages are depopulated, the built heritage is in a state of degradation, the new developments are chaotic and the existing population is aging.

Depopulation. Local population disappearance or decrease is due to expatriation, urban migration or aging.[7] Starting with the Second World War the Saxons were enrolled in the German Army. After the War they were sent in Russia for forced labor, expropriated and colonized. Later during the communist regime, the Saxons emigrated from Romania. After the Fall of communism, they mass migrated to western part of Europe. The Saxons houses left behind were either abandoned, sold or kept by the owners, depending on the time and conditions of departure.

Degradation. Social and economic decline affects traditional built fabric.[7] After the village community fell apart, the decay of the settlements was implicit. The social and economic systems of the villages dissolved and the wound produced in the Saxon Transylvanian Village

is still open.

Chaotic building. Saxon exodus was partly counterbalanced by the repopulation of other ethnic groups, Romanian, Hungarian and Roma. Reinhabiting the houses, the household, the villages the "colonists" are transforming the Saxon heritage "imprinting their own identity"[9], but also adapting to demands of contemporary lifestyles. Newcomers with different mentalities of the local population follow new housing aggressive models. Compared with the traditional houses, scale, location on the plot, volume, shape, low quality materials of new out of control developments offer a poorer housing conditions. There are new mansion neighbourhoods being built while many traditional houses are being sold.[7]

Aging. Rural population is in an ageing process. Young population is migrating to urban area looking for better opportunities to develop, and also a medium that is a better representation of themselves. A place that is disintegrating materially, losing its identity, only living through its memory of the past carried and valued only by its old inhabitants is not valued by young generations.

3. Problems

Depopulation of the villages is the cause for the *mechanism blockage*. Saxon mass-migration before and after communist regime depopulated Transylvania's Saxon villages, not only their houses and properties being left behind, but homes, a legacy and architectural heritage.

Degradation is responsible for the *loss of values*. The dwellers are modifying their houses guided by their own criteria of *venustas*, *firmitas* and *utilitas*. "There seem to be two recurring ways of adapting the homes [...] First, is the introduction of a first floor balcony reminiscent of Swiss chalet architecture. Second, is the removal of the small pitched roof leaning towards the short side of the house (which is almost always the street facade), a typical feature of Saxon village houses." [9] Furthermore, old houses and annexes demolition for new constructions, irreversible modernization and faulty installation equipment [7] are causing irreversible damage to the traditional heritage.

Chaotic building means *irreversible recovery* of identity values. While old neglected houses are collapsing, new buildings are emerging. These are not obliged to follow the local specificity. Without constraints, there is a big contrast between the old and the new constructions.

Aging population of the villages is a sign of *museumification* of the settlements. A village without people to inhabit it can be at most a museum that captures the village in a still image. Tradition transmission is interrupted, threatening to be lost without a receptor. Even if valuable, the true tradition packed with symbols is disappearing. The absence of a new generation means that beyond this disappearance there is a void, there is nothing to continue or change the traditional society.

4. Solutions

The Saxon village is an unused mechanism, a part of it being removed (Saxon community), it no longer operates. Saxons had particular way of being that reflected in the village. This

mechanism has to be put into service. As a social, cultural and economical entity, the Saxon village is not only the problem, but also the solution for its own rebirth. Activating the Saxon village is based on three strong points: *community*, *foodscape* and *heritage*. These points are oriented in fulfilling human needs. *Foodscape* involve activities that ensure fulfillment physiological and safety needs. The *community* is a medium of love/belonging and esteem needs fulfillment. *Heritage* is linked with self-actualization needs.

Foodscape. Traditional household is adapted to the local factors and is easily adaptable to new present and future factors. „*Tradition proves divers living and multileveled progress.*”[7]

Saxon villages are resource for food, shelter and craft, but also exhibit a model of living, hence a certain lifestyle that involves an equilibrium between human and nature, „*several generation settled result*”[18]. The rural lifestyle is an independent way of living, respecting relations with nature and representing an upgrade from the dependent urban lifestyle.

Saxon household is a self-sufficient unity that offers the opportunity of living, producing (vegetables and animals) and storing food and fodder in a standalone household. Gardening is considered a therapeutical activity. In Gușterița, Sibiu, therapeutic gardening is practiced by citizens in their free time in order to produce organic vegetables.

The relationship with nature through crafting materials by hand using natural resources is rewarded with healthy living. Handcraft products are used locally as building materials, clothing, tools, instruments, furniture.

Saxon **community** is a ghost. There are only a few old Saxons still living in Transylvania. Rural community from Saxon Villages can be revived and strengthened based on rural life quality and opportunities of the rural environment. The aim is developing alive, active, solid and tight communities by reversing migration from urban to rural environment motivated by the specific rural lifestyle and promoting rural customs, traditions, values, multicultural interaction.

Sociologists notice a social phenomenon emerging in the rural areas. People are moving from crowded cities to villages. Not only the survival need determines people to move, but also another view upon life, a different mentality. People that are moving to the rural areas are educated and are determined by the will to change their way of living and the environment. In 2011, about 16.000 Romanians moved to the rural areas. Sociologists state that Romanians rural migration is something more profound than economic reasoning. On one hand is about rural urbanisation, on the other hand the people are transforming. Nowadays, the village is not the same as it was in the 90's and neither are the people. [20]

Sociologist Marius Lazăr states that the real detachment from communism is occurring when Romanians understand to upgrade rural at city level and, moreover, not to leave the village in favour of the city. Still a rural country, the villages should unify and configure urban communities.[20]

An example of a developing community is Viscri's multi-faceted community. Community members capacity to cope with the complex changes that are happening in the village, from

Saxon exodus to turistification has been improved by the intervention of external actors. The existence of a local leader and the development of a network sustained the development of a *community based tourism*. "This far of tourism has enhanced substantially the community's livelihoods, providing new inputs, options, aspirations, as well as optimism towards the future." [11]

Valuing, protecting and promoting Saxon **heritage**: history, culture, architecture as part of ourselves and our everyday lives is vital. Architect Jan Hülseman emphasizes that origin, ethnicity or involved people's in Transilvanian's heritage life is not important, but the respect for their involvement and the will to transmit it to next generations is.[10] Continuity of tradition is a game played with all members of the team. Hülseman underlines that not only the house, but the ensemble defines the settlement's architectural character, comparing it with a game of football: "who is not playing the attributed position, threatens the entire's team success." [10] It's a challenge and a responsibility for future generations, professionals and owners to maintain the unique character and architecture.

Gheorghiu suggests work in psycho-social sphere of the rural population, stating persuasion about rural residential viability and adaptability to functional, status and cultural future changes. The proposals consist in implementing regulations at urban scale, traditional material maintenance, minimal equipment sanitary controlled extension at architecture scale. Moreover tourism is seen as an objective related with traditional housing as accommodation and the local environment as touristic interest.[7]

As a socio-economic resource *rural tourism* has become a policy in developed and developing countries. Romania is considered an attractive destination for tourists with cultural and natural heritage because of still surviving culturally diverse and lively rural society. Tourism is a sustainable activity that diversifies the livelihood options as a complementary activity. It contributes to economic diversification, also enabling ties with agriculture and crafts.[12]

In extreme protection of heritage, there are the risks of *monumentification* and *museumification*. Generalizing the "process of monumentification" threatens to reverse the concept of historical monument, any building being protected. The built environment would be used as economic asset. Built fabric maintenance, restoration and use has to be evaluated according to a hierarchy.[13] Museumification is a process in which "everything is a potential 'artefact' - entire villages, or abstractions such as 'ethnicity' and 'nation' or human beings" [4]. Saxon villages are threatened to become "cultural villages", which museumify living of vanished traditions, minority or majority ethnicity.

5. Rural-urban relationship

The **village** is the first form of stable, standalone human settlement generated by work division – separation between agriculture from shepherding. The main features of the village are the limited number of inhabitants, the limited dimension of the center ("vatra"), extensive occupation of the terrain and limited equipment. In the past, demographic excess generated population transfers. New settlements were founded through swarming. Even from the oldest times the villages were cooperating in order to enhance the productivity and

making the most of the land. Gradually the village loses its independent and unitary character and becomes subordinated to the city. Karl Marx asserts “*The village is history's starting point, its development takes place under the village – city opposition.*”[8]

Workmanship detachment from agriculture and slave state constitution are the two processes that configure the urban profile. The city becomes the craft, production and exchange center and also political, administrative, religious and military center. Between the city and the village cooperation and subordination connections take place. The city attracts but also polarizes. Urban overcrowding corresponds with rural depopulation.[8]

The **interdependence** relations between micro and macro – scale are underlined in Athens Chart, 1933. The role of the city is emphasized as a part of an economic, social and political entity that constitutes as a region. The city is sustained and determined by the region, and receives a sense in the regional frame. “*It is not the city that determines the region, but the region is the conditioning factor and sustains the city.*” “*The city can be considered only in a regional frame to which it belongs.*”[1]

There are three types of **regions**: metropolitan, small and medium cities networks and less populated areas with towns. *Metropolitan* regions have one or more big urban cores and an integrated hinterland. In a metropolitan area the economic engine is the urban core and organizes the entire regional area, the rural area becomes urban (peri-urban). These are residential areas with a high social and environment quality, with resources and space for various economic activities. *Small and medium cities networks* have a few small or medium sized cities are centers functionally linked through non-hierarchical relations. The development potential of these regions is associated with the urban core accessibility, qualified labor force resource, cultural dynamism (small cities with a campus). The limits between urban and rural areas are not clearly delineated. The areas less populated with towns are mostly rural with a low density in population. *Small urban cores* concentrate certain functions, but the economic activities in rural areas sustain the towns. Urbanization pressure is low in this case, but the link between the town and the surrounding territory is stronger. [16]

Bold, Matei and Săbădeanu classify **rural settlements** as *principal*, *secondary* and with a *limited lifetime* in relation with the way they can be equipped. The main villages are equipped with daily and frequent use equipment for the population of the village and the surrounding secondary villages. Secondary settlements are equipped with daily and periodic use facilities. Settlements with limited lifetime are minimally equipped. Depending on the urbanizing level of the rural settlements, the authors classify them as rural settlements in urban areas, nodal villages, large areas of rural settlements. Depending on the systematization types the villages are ranged as small that need prior equipment, small with the possibility of population increase, small with low systematization possibilities, and seasonal activities areas.[3]

Saxon villages classify in three main categories in relationship with the city: *isolated*, *standalone* and in *proximity of an urban pole*. The isolated villages are poorly connected with the region, with few connections with the surrounding settlements their development and survival on their own is questionable. Standalone villages are self-developing based on a strong asset. The villages positioned next to an urban pole have greatest potential to develop in the village-city relation. The city becomes sustainable through the village and the village

becomes sustainable through the city. The villages and the cities in the region constitute a settlements network that contribute to developing each others weak points and benefit from the outcomes of the strong ones.

6. Conclusions

Social, economic and cultural events are triggering changes in Transylvanian rural landscape. Saxon Village activation is motivated by inherited Saxon values, natural and potential housing fond, natural resources, aesthetic and informational value, authenticity, istoriality and beauty. This resources can generate possible directions that can fill the gaps: sustaining communities development, rising the standard of living, education through culture. The village can become a social, cultural and economic pole of interest and development.

Heritage conservation, sustainable living and education are key actions. The Saxon rural landscape revival is dependent on the local model and resouces. Foodscape, community and heritage, but also regional network connection need to be restored and enabled.

Saxon villages are development potential and represent a complex research material for professionals: ethnologists, sociologists, historians, archeologists, architects etc. The issue is complex as the villages are living settlements, each with its own particularities and complexity along with the city neighborhood links posed by the urban-rural binom.

Brasov and Sibiu are study areas. Both regions developed an identity in relation with Saxon colonization. Brasov is also known as Burzenland (Country of birth) being the region initially colonized, an area known also for its craft based economy. Sibiu is the second colonized region known for its wine-yards based economy.

For future interdisciplinary reseach we are concerned with the following questions: *Will the city-village migration solve the problem of sustainability? What role will the community have in the cultural identity? Is the countryside life a better solution in improving the quality of life?*

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