

The relationship between local communities and their heritage

Castro Laboreiro as a case study

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O presente ensaio tem por objetivo revelar os mecanismos subjacentes à relação entre as comunidades locais e o seu património, tangível e intangível, tanto no plano intelectual como emocional, através da análise das formas de vinculação afetiva, da perspetiva sobre o património enquanto propriedade ou bem material, e da sua utilização enquanto instrumento de atração turística. A primeira parte deste trabalho consiste numa abordagem teórica, seguida por uma segunda parte composta pela apresentação dos resultados obtidos durante o estudo de caso sobre a comunidade de Castro Laboreiro (2014-2017).

The present essay aims to unveil the mechanisms at work in the emotional and intellectual relationship, between a local community and its heritage, in terms of attachment style, as well as an asset or as an instrument of touristic attraction and entertainment, whether its tangible or intangible nature. After a brief theoretical approach, it will be presented a methodological instrument used during the research developed at Castro Laboreiro (2014-2017), and its results, which provide the necessary insight as a case study.

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his essay seeks to answer questions concerning the relationship between local communities and their cultural heritage, in such a way to make it understandable for the general and academic public. This relation translates into an intellectual and emotional bond, or a connection, which in turn conveys the use of specific terminology as “cultural identity”, “memory”, “sense of belonging” or “ownership”.

Such will be properly exhibited during the first section of this essay, where a theoretical base is built, through the answers to the questions: How is the connection forged?; Why is the community important?; How are cultural values transmitted to the outside?; Debunking the concept of “value in itself”; Can governments help the safeguard process?; Who is helping?; Is tourism a positive contributing factor?.

The responses sustain relevant information about how meaningfully the communities can relate to their heritage through their cultural identity, and what are the current strategies used to safeguard the tangible and intangible heritage, as well as how tourism plays as a contributing factor to sustainability or depletion of local practices.

To further illustrate the process of emotional and intellectual bonding that is established between people and their cultural inheritance, we resort to the case study of Castro Laboreiro local population. Informal interviews based on a carefully planned survey, were conducted in 2016-2017, allowing the people to talk at will, but aided with pre-determined questions to break possible communication barriers.

QUESTIONS THAT NEED ANSWERING

How is the connection forged?

Memory, identity, belonging, and tradition are intertwined concepts with that of cultural heritage, and it's selective process (Perla e Anico, 2006). However, memory is the key contributing factor to maintain the past alive, while making it's renewal possible within every generation (Smith, 2006). Memories are often organized in main events, approved, and cherished by all (Torrice, 2006); thus, the notion of cultural heritage is strongly linked with the act of remembrance once it's rooted in the communities very core of cultural identity.

Through the act of communication – an exchange of memories is generated – which in return brings up shared life experiences – therefore creating unity, coherence and stability – in turn creating a group identity (Smith, 2006).

Although the nature of memory is individual, the experience is not. Memory becomes a collective instrument for identity and commitment concerning cultural environment, and its preservation (Torrice, 2006).

Why is the community important?

The local community must be preserved as the structural entity of authenticity and “spirit” (sense) of the place, since the landscape that surrounds it is simultaneously a natural model and a shaped form for and by the people living in it: “Not only are landscapes inevitably physically shaped or altered by human cultural practices – and in that sense ‘cultural’, but they are also ‘cultural’ in the sense that

the way they are conceived and understood dictates how they are managed and used” (Smith, 2006: 78).

The community and their daily life are the grounds that created, and rendered the sustenance of their heritage, in the first place. Only the community knows how to properly comprehend and handle its cultural objects, buildings, or traditions, how to keep them alive, and explain why it became necessary to be different from other cultural outcomes.

That is how authenticity is translated into reality, though authenticity does not mean “freezing” tradition or customs in time and space, as if they only have a pure form, but rather allowing it to change and fit the new necessities of the locals, while being anchored in their knowledge of the Past.

Authenticity is being true to the connection built with the past. And only the communities can better recognize the proceeding.

How are cultural values transmitted to the outside?

There are many ways of mediation, but education is the foundation. To educate is to endow a subject or an audience with knowledge, fighting ignorance and prejudice. Through cultural training activities such as museum visits, guided tours, informal conversations with the locals, or local workshops and experiences, the public learns how to respect and relate with other people stories, objects, places, and practices. It also intends to build a sense of constructiveness that actively helps the perpetuation of local traditions (Varine, 2012; Zanirato, 2009).



In this aggressively touristic era, communities are counting on all help to assure their heritage holds its form in the same manner that it came to them. It is never enough to stress that their heritage is their object of inheritance for future generations. Today I protect yours, tomorrow you will help protect mine. These notions contribute to sustainable and autonomous local development.



Debunking the concept of “value in itself”

It is crucial to realize that, before the construction of a scientific terminology, which today addresses heritage and culture, there were plenty of generations that gradually selected the most relevant cultural expressions, and practices, without resorting to proper inventory nouns, or research wording. Now, these generations, are being confronted with the notion of “cultural heritage” or “cultural identity”, and these concepts often come with a broader notion of collective experience and property, a sense of free for all, which is toxic for the community’s whole process of identity and ownership. Heritage as a concept should not superimpose ethical or moral notions, such as “value in itself” (Duarte, 2009).

Regardless, cultural heritage deserves everyone’s attention, not because it belongs to everyone, but because it is everyone obligation to respect and help protect it.

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According to António Ponte (2013), “communities living in the vicinity of cultural resources have a primordial, sometimes even determinant,

importance in the protection and preservation of existing cultural resources” (Ponte, 2013: 87). Heritage implies recognition and value, and one can only implement and perform a protective strategy towards what is known and recognizable.

Can governments help the safeguard process?

In theory, the government, and the institutions responsible for safeguarding cultural heritage, should be the ones to implement specific training actions dimensioned for local populations. They should be designed to foster degrees of autonomy, defensiveness, and sustainability, preparing people to claim, protect and value their own legacy, using their own criteria, and in their best interest, as opposed to the tourist best interest, and as opposed to social exclusion, as Varine (2012) and Zanirato (2009) already argued.

However, Varine (2012) refers to this practice as an ideal, because most governments do not fully surrender the heritage to its community, while lacking the proper instruments and educational strategies or accessible language, about cultural heritage. Qualitative methods to build closeness with the population are seldom implemented, and the available pedagogical instruments do not contemplate entertainment, using the same matrix of knowledge transmission to all audiences, therefore destroying possible links between the local community and the publics (BABO, 2007), making the legacy unattractive or an object of evasion. This struggle for clearance between formal and non-formal narratives, is a concerning obstacle.

Who is helping?

Currently, museums are the main institutions capable to mediate formal, and informal narratives, which means, government or researchers, for example, and local populations or laypersons. Museums seem to play a profound role in the development and administrations of cultural training. They often conduct multidisciplinary educational strategies while being dependent on human and material resources that allow them to prepare for it. Objectively, there is no way around local populations for a museum to be born and to become a safe space for the deposit of goods or collections, as well as to lead research projects. They hold both merit and responsibility for transforming heritage into a circuit of information, pleasure, and development of skills. Their management deserves every gratification for their adaptability and skills of communication. To approach the public, and the local community, to diagnose both contexts and audiences, while defining strategic plans and providing human resources, is no easy task (Babo, 2007; Faria, 2006).

Is tourism a positive contributing factor?

Tourism contributes to the community continuity through the economic injection on local businesses, which helps improving its conditions, while developing, maintaining, or increasing their safeguarding strategies, and their availability to keep their heritage alive. Sustainable touristic policies are imperative and should involve the communities that will foster them. Their elaboration must rely within

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the boundaries and potential the territory has to offer: “It is essential to observe the sensitivities of each community, to analyze its heterogeneity, its limitations of cultural and religious tolerance, the carrying capacity of the destination” (Ponte, 2013: 89). Otherwise, the impact of tourism may compromise the available resources and replace artisanal and traditional resources with industrialized solutions, thereby destroying the core values and unique characteristics of this destination (Ponte, 2013). As Alison Gill wrote, “In tourist communities, as in everything else, local opposition to growth is based on a perceived decline in quality of life” (Gill, 2007: 632). To prevent these negative impacts, local museums are fundamental managers, but they do have to prioritize the community, above all else (Babo, 2007: 1). In short, the goal is to maintain the balance between tourism, and the community (Ponte, 2013).

CASTRO LABOREIRO AS A CASE STUDY

Methodology

This case study is intended to demonstrate what is the affective and intellectual connection between the community and its cultural legacy, and how it works for, inwards and outwards, socialization. Informal conversations, and interviews (based in nine questions), were the preferred methods, since the population already knew and hosted the researcher amidst them, for several years. This was an advantage which boosted the inquires to be more outspoken and straightforward. The questions were also sent to emigrated members, giving them the opportunity to share and participate. The objective was to

collect information that would allow a “diagnosis” of the thoughts and emotions felt by the population towards their cultural assets. The topics listed below address the questions that have been raised, each accompanied by a brief argument.

1. Can you recall the most remarkable moments you lived in the past with your neighbors and family? And why?

This question was formulated to help reveal the social experience between the locals, knowing in advance that their social universe develops according to kinship and close relations.

2. Which of these moments no longer happen today? What happened?

The objective of this question was to activate their reasoning about their cultural evolution, and to understand which arguments were dominant in each generational set of surveyed people.

3. If you could bring some of those moments to the present day, which ones would you choose? And why?

This question highlighted experiences and unveiled the nature of the related emotions.

4. Nowadays, what do you like most to see happening in Castro Laboreiro?

This question aimed to understand if the notion of cultural heritage was known to the inhabitants, through specific examples.

5. In which places of Castro Laboreiro do you most like to walk, or visit?

The point was to understand if there is, still, any emotional relationship with the territory, through their leisure routine. Notion of

cultural heritage was known to the inhabitants, through specific examples.

6. What did you restore or build in Castro Laboreiro for your community?

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of whether the community still identifies as a unified group. It also aimed to verify the consistency of previous responses with the answer to this question. This is because if the previously studied concept of community contradicts this case study, then the reactions and responses to the proposals made through this questionnaire should all reflect a collective concern

7. What do you feel for Castro Laboreiro, as a territory?

This is a very direct inquire. The goal is to see if it is possible to dissociate one factor from another.

8. What do you feel for the community of Castro Laboreiro?

This is as objective as the previous question, however, it may have different outcomes, because it may be interpreted in different lights: both the feelings for the community as a part or as an excluded element, and/or the feelings towards him or herself whilst part or as an excluded member.

9. Observations/Opinions you want to express.

This was a space for intellectual discussion and a space for qualitative conversation.

The surveys were treated impartially, and the answers copied exactly, only sometimes aided by parallel research notes.

Results and conclusions

It was possible to interview 30 participants, spread amongst the 41 settlements in the 89 km² of Castro Laboreiro's territory and its village. AA sample that allowed a further understanding on how their emotional bonding works towards their cultural assets and landscape. The responses were always underlined by a tone of ownership, even on the part of those who are emigrated, or currently reside in another place.

The surveyed people demonstrated that their cultural assets and estates are inseparable from their social experiences, that they are naturally coupled with their cultural expressions. It seems impossible to dissociate an experience from a specific place, whether it is their birth home, a dam or a path to another settlement, or from a specific object, like their farming tools or their traditional black cloak.

It was noted that the majority values the moments of celebration, feast, and interaction, at work or at leisure. The surveyed villagers nurture a nostalgia for agricultural seasonality when the collective effort was an imposition, but that helped everyone survive and get through rougher times, while promoting and fostering good relations between neighbors and settlements.

The respondents blame unequal economic growth and the development of local political parties during the 1960's as negative factors, and fracturing conditions, between a past time of morality and values, and an individualistic Present, which are perceived as the doom of communal life.

The answers are, in this sense, of great dramatism. They also pointed out the outside newcomers that have established themselves in Castro Laboreiro as another contributing factor for the destruction of their traditions, since they don't actively participate or contribute to the continuity of their agriculture activities, and do not promote social interaction and togetherness within the community.

They welcome tourists for their ability to activate the economy and because they help maintain the symbols of the parish, such as the castle, or the church.

There was a repeated desire to reunite all relatives and neighbors, thus resuming the annual routine of agricultural work, herding, folk

dancing, and weddings, one of the main suggestions being the creation of a space that would bring people back together and reconcile them from their previous enmities. Castro Laboreiro already has a civic center, but its agenda is dominated by the winning political party at a given moment.

The words most often used to characterize the relationship between members were "betrayal," "hypocrisy," "lack of word of honor," and "falsehood." The emotional "status" of the community towards itself is depressing, aggressive, passive, and yet, nostalgic.

In the section devoted to their own thoughts about heritage, the most common replies was that without the castle, the bread oven, the water mill, the church or the spiritual check points, denominated as "alminhas", no one would know the history of the parish, making the community undefined. This came as a brutal conclusion and a validation of what researchers have been defending and publishing.

In short, this community feels denigrated and condemned also by the loss of inhabitants, but values everything that can be a projection of its collective past experiences. It becomes urgent to uplift their ego and their spirit, with projects and activities that help the community mingle within itself again. The ways this can be achieved were already object of discussion in previous points, but is never too much to reinforce that education, cultural training, civil awareness, ethnographic recreations, and environmental investments in the territory, related to agriculture and grazing. They miss the fields of rye, the turnips, and potato plantations. They long to see the fields filled with goats and sheep. They still crave the artisanal chocolate that came from Galicia, and from their own chocolate factory.

Not only would this be a cultural dynamic well accepted by the local community, but it would also foster economic, autonomous, and sustainable development.

LAST NOTES

Having been able to draw these conclusions, it is possible to conclude that this survey had some success within the community, since there were no refusals to respond it or fill it out. Overall, there was a positive willingness to participate. It was also possible to draw conclusions about the question that was intended to be answered, as well as to analyze the changes

in cultural values in the last three generations.

Lastly, it became evident the community valued these moments of dialogue, they cherished the possibility of sharing and asserting themselves.

It is hoped that this essay helps their cultural survival and continuity. ■

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