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Safeguarding and revitalising the intangible cultural heritage of craftsmen in the Mastorochochia traditional mountain villages in Greece and in the broader Balkan Peninsula

Authors:

Fotini Giannoulidi, Greece, *MA Heritage Management*-University of Kent and Athens University of Economics and Business (fg85@kent.ac.uk)

Theodosia Maroutsi, Greece, *MA Heritage Management*-University of Kent and Athens University of Economics and Business (tm392@kent.ac.uk)

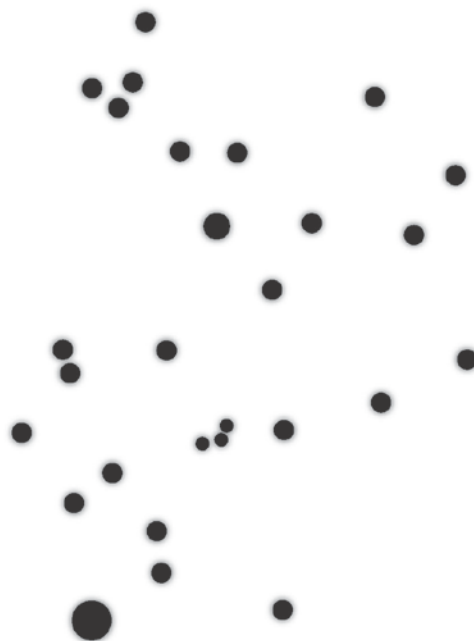
Tetyana Straszhevska, Ukraine, *MA Heritage Management*-University of Kent and Athens University of Economics and Business (ts420@kent.ac.uk)

Carmen Talbot, UK, *MA Heritage Management*-University of Kent and Athens University of Economics and Business (ct334@kent.ac.uk)

Paraskevi Zafeiri, Greece, *MA Heritage Management*-University of Kent and Athens University of Economics and Business (pz27@kent.ac.uk)

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¹ MaNet: Mastorochochia Network

Introduction

“The word Balkan comes from the Turkish word for a chain of wooded mountains”. With this minimal definition, Barbara Jelavich, the awarded historian, introduces the first volume of her book *History of the Balkans* [1]. The Balkan Peninsula has been inhabited continuously since the Prehistoric Era, whilst it is the unique geomorphic characteristics and its location as a natural frontier for Western Europe and the Mediterranean which are the crucial factors for the evolution of its habitants. The area is dominated by high mountains which are interrupted only by valleys formed from magnificent rivers. The Peninsula is surrounded by the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean and Black seas that created through time safe ports and prosperous islands. As a crucial crossroad with limited passages, the Balkans formed two major particularities for its habitants. Various tribes from the Asian steppes passed, conquered or even settled on this land, whilst the indigenous population and the oldest nomads moved to the mountain slopes and in most cases isolated themselves from the “new others” [1]. The population synthesis changed continuously. Hellenes, Macedonians, Thracians and Dacians, Illyrians, Romans, Slavs, Magyars, and Bulgars were the foundations for three major successive Empires; Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman, that ruled the area as an entity with respect for local customs and traditions. Under the dominated dogma of the Orthodox Church and the Muslim hegemony during the early modern era, customary law, and accordingly ethics, determined the everyday life of the majority of ordinary people. It is precisely this multicultural synthesis, this mosaic of peoples, languages and traditions living in this distinctive natural environment dominated by rocks and forests that created a common cultural framework, vivid in the mountain communities until the rapid changes of the second half of 20th century [2, 3].

The intention of this paper is to research common characteristics that developed in the mountain communities of the Balkan Peninsula around the specific culture of Masters of Crafts of stonemasonry, hagiography and woodcarving. The examination of the shared tradition is contributing to discovering how the Greek and wider Balkan community can cooperate in order to efficiently safeguard, transmit and raise awareness for the intangible heritage of these crafts. Point of reference is the Mastorochoria villages of Epirus, located in an area close to the Greek national border that was for centuries a cross-borders or even more, a non-borders territory.

The Crucial Role of the Community

Community involvement is considered an indispensable part of heritage, since the latter aims for dissemination of tangible and intangible goods from generation to generation [4]. According to the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the widest participation of communities, groups, individuals who create, maintain and transmit heritage, has to be insured [5].

Since there are strong similarities in the traditional mountainous villages in the Balkan states in terms of history, landscape, occupation and crafts, the communities in the Mastorochochia area display similar social and economic limits like the villages of other Balkan countries. Most of the settlements face the trend of population decrease as consequence of emigration after World War II and the Greek Civil War, natural ageing and urbanization of Greek society [6]. Another remarkable feature of the villages is seasonal changes in population number: during the warm season people in retirement come to the villages and spend a few months along with younger people from urban centres or even from abroad, who visit their homeland villages for a short time mostly in August. Conversely, in winter the number of inhabitants in some villages declines to as little as 5 people [7]. However, the population density in Albanian mountain settlements is higher in comparison with the Greek, as well the number of young people [8]. Despite the slight differences in demography, the communities of the mountainous villages express the common need for the development of policies on cultural sustainability through local engagement and ensuring that those who are the carriers of cultural heritage, are aware of the values of the traditional crafts and are willing to safeguard and transmit the traditions. The core idea for achieving sustainability through revival and transmission of traditions throughout the Balkans is tightly bound to the communities themselves, since people make heritage possible [9].

The communities of the traditional mountainous settlements need a platform for safeguarding and transmitting the living heritage all over the Balkans. Such a platform should have as a core objective the promotion of community initiatives, and the enhancement of the interaction between communities with common heritage. Moreover, an interaction between communities and other stakeholders should be developed and the identity should be strengthened [10]. As a basic outcome, such an exchange platform will contribute to the cultural sustainability of the whole region.

Case Study: Ethnological Museum of the Craftsmen of Epirus

A platform based on this framework is planned to be provided by the Ethnological Museum of the Craftsmen of Epirus in Pysrogianni, which was founded by the “Progressive Association of Pysrogianni”, one of the organizations that were created with the objective to safeguard the cultural heritage of the craftsmen of Epirus. A series of other centres have been supported since 1883 by local community associations, the craftsmen and the masters of the Greek Diaspora, who were transferring new ideas and lifestyle in Greece, enriching the cultural heritage of Balkans and supporting the economy of the area through the creation of libraries, conservation of architectural sites, and even the protection of the natural heritage [11]. The strategic location of Pysrogianni within Mastorochoia on the borders will contribute dynamically to the inter-Balkan communication [12]. The “Progressive Association of Pysrogianni”, while contributing to the creation of the Museum and Conference Centre [13], promotes the development of knowledge, raise the awareness of the public and enriches the local and international societies with relevant information reflecting the highest ethical standards [12].

The Ethnological Museum of the Craftsmen of Epirus is currently in the process of development, and incorporates the strategic plans of the most contemporary theories, according to the research of advisory bodies, such as UNESCO [14]. In its strategy it includes a variety of actions, such as holding conferences that provoke research interest in the societies and educational programs. These aim to disseminate and evolve the knowledge, being integrated in everyday life in the context of preservation of cultural heritage and ensure that the knowledge and skills associated with traditional crafts are passed on to future generations [15]. The Museum intends to provide the most complete and comprehensive information about the lifestyle, the profession and the projects of the master stone masons, as well as those of the masters of carpentry, woodcarving, hagiography and fresco painting [16] and participate in safeguarding the intangible heritage at a transnational level. The material that will be exhibited is a remarkable documentation of the local architecture and the trans-Balkan aesthetic trends of the last three centuries [17]. The museum objectives are focused on the communication of knowledge through the creation of technologically updated educational platforms and the organization of scientific conferences and lectures mainly based on traditional crafts [11], through collaboration with other Balkan countries. A Conference Centre of Architectural Heritage has been created and collaboration with a future School of

Masonry is planned. All these programs will facilitate the participation of the institutions from the whole Balkan Peninsula and will foster scientific, technical and artistic studies as well as research methodologies, with a view to effective safeguarding of the ICH² [15], as UNESCO convention indicates. Through experiencing the educational programs, visitors from the local society or the wider Balkan Peninsula and researchers [12] will participate dynamically in the Museum's research about the promotion and preservation of the tangible, intangible and natural heritage of the Balkan countries [18]. These efforts will facilitate an interactive relationship between the countries, enriching and enhancing the collected material concerning the cultural heritage and transmitting the knowledge to a wider audience.

Trans-border Cooperation

The tendencies of the European Union for the safeguarding of ICH of crafts have enabled dynamic actions in the Balkan region [19, 20]. The cross-border collaboration between Greece and other countries of the Balkan Peninsula has been encouraged by several organizations and programmes³ in order to promote, protect,

² ICH: Intangible Cultural Heritage

³ Indicative cross-border, collaborative organisations and respective programmes for the safeguarding of ICH in the Balkan Peninsula:

- **The IPA - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.**
Cross-Border Programme Greece-Albania 2007-2013 from Neighbourhood to Partnership
- **STONEWOOD**
Stone and Wood: Enhancement and promotion of traditional architecture in the areas of Ioannina and Gjirokastër
- **Cultural Heritage Without Borders (CHWB)**
Regional Restoration Camps
- **INTERREG IIIA/CARDS Greece – Albania, 2000-2006.**
BALKAN CULTURE AGENCY-Promoting common cultural identity through the information, and promotion of indigenous culture and activity as a factor in ensuring cultural continuity and promotion of tourism development the Region of Western Macedonia and the Chief Prefect Korytsa.
- **Mediterranean Centre of Environment.**
Balkan Architectural Heritage Campus or when young students become witnesses of the historical European Cultural Heritage
HeriQ - "Heritage Story Telling – Quality Interpretation"
Restauration, Entretien et Revalorisation des Terrasses de Culture
European Carrefour for Dry Stone
- **Balkan Heritage Foundation**
Balkan Heritage Field School (BHFS), <http://www.bhfieldschool.org>
- **EGNATIA EPIRUS Foundation**
CULTURAL LIBRARY OF EPIRUS & ALBANIA
EUROPEAN VALUES IN HERITAGE (EVAH)
- **Gjirokastër Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO)**
Trained Wood and Stone Craftsmen of Gjirokastër

safeguard and revitalize the tangible and intangible aspects of the cultural heritage of craftsmanship in accordance with the recommendations of the international advisory bodies. The aforementioned efforts, coordinated or individual, aim at unifying transnational cultural ties through educational programs, training or restoration camps and conferences encouraging the mobility of students and participants, and the involvement of local communities, as well as wider-reaching partnerships. The contribution of national and international universities, foundations and institutions, governmental agencies and NGOs managed to form a promising cultural network, which is developing and expanding gradually in a sustainable way. In the meantime, significant actions have been taken in order to involve local museums in this network. The “Balkan Museum Network” platform supports, strengthens and promotes the role of the museums in Balkan Peninsula, which was weakened mainly due to political, social and cultural conflicts (breakup of Yugoslavia, hostilities, non-democratic processes, gender equality) [21, 22, 23]. Under the “communication and development platform” nineteen museums from Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia cooperate, act collectively and interact [21]. Using this opportunity to their mutual advantage, the Ethnological Museum of Craftsmen of Epirus in Mastorochochia could enhance Greek participation in the Balkan Peninsula through its involvement as an active member in the Balkan museum network. In this way, common policies and practices can be formed for safeguarding the shared ICH by using the same managerial tools of European law and standards. In addition, the Ethnological Museum of Craftsmen of Epirus in collaboration with Balkan museums can develop collective educational programmes and workshops for the dissemination of cultural knowledge. For instance, a creative cultural dialogue for craftsmanship could be developed between the work of the Museum of the City of Skopje, which concerns modern architecture, urbanism and design and the respective museum collection for the architectural works of the craftsmen of Mastorochochia. Finally, museums should be democratic places, using the cultural heritage as a unifying force. Consequently, the Ethnological Museum of Craftsmen of Epirus, located close to the Albanian border, could differentiate its cultural role in the context of Greek heritage by overcoming the territorial borders through the forging of bonds of common ICH throughout the Balkan Peninsula.

Conclusion

Concluding this paper we feel the need to point out once more with the bright observations of Barbara Jelavich. “The real revolution in the Balkans was [...] not the Communist seizure of political power, but the subsequent slow destruction of patterns of life that had held for centuries. Similar changes, [...] occurred in Greece, where economic advancement was inevitably accompanied by radical changes in the countryside” [2]. The 21st century should create a dynamic framework for the culture in Balkans. The Balkans that “have a powerful ontology [and] deserves serious and complex study” [24].

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