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Iosif, Daniel

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# ECOTOURISM AS A COMMUNITY INDUSTRY. CASE STUDY: TRANSYLVANIAN SAXON COMMUNITIES WITH FORTIFIED CHURCHES

**Daniel IOSIF**

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Ph.D. Std.  
Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest  
Department of Geography, University of Paris 10 Nanterre  
*iosif.daniel@ymail.com*

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## **Ecotourism as a community industry. Case study: Transylvanian Saxon communities with fortified churches**

Daniel Iosif

**L'écotourisme comme une industrie communautaire. Etude de cas: les villages allemands de Transylvanie avec des églises fortifiées.** Il y a plus de 700 ans Transylvanie possède une grande civilisation allemande qui a amélioré la vie et la technologie des communautés autochtones. Ils sont ceux qui construisent le plus grand territoire du monde avec des églises fortifiées, plus de 200 dans un habitat relativement petit (notamment les collines de Hârtibaciu). Les activités touristiques sont là au début et les communautés des Saxons sont très sensibles, voici pourquoi il faut construire un tourisme durable qui met en évidence les caractéristiques des villages saxons. Une réponse pour cette démarche est l'écotourisme qui, avec ses caractéristiques intrinsèques, peut bien aider les communautés allemandes de Transylvanie en croissant notamment leur niveau de vie.

**Mots clés:** écotourisme, églises fortifiées, Transylvanie, tourisme durable, conservation culturelle.

**Ecoturismul ca industrie comunitară. Studiu de caz: localitățile săsești din Transilvania cu biserici fortificate.** De mai bine de 700 de ani există în Transilvania o spectaculoasă civilizație germană ce a ameliorat nivelul de viață precum și tehnologia comunităților autohtone. Ei au construit cel mai mare teritoriu cu biserici fortificate din lume, mai mult de 200 astfel de monumente găsiindu-se într-o regiune relativ mică (în mod special în Dealurile Hârtibaciului). Activitățile turistice sunt aici la începutul lor iar comunitățile de sași sunt foarte sensibile, iată de ce aici trebuie puse bazele unui turism durabil ce scot în evidență caracteristicile satelor săsești. Un răspuns pentru această încercare este ecoturismul care, prin caracteristicile sale intrinseci, poate ajuta foarte bine comunitățile săsești din Transilvania contribuind la creșterea, în special, a nivelului lor de trai.

**Cuvinte cheie:** ecoturism, biserici forificate, Transilvania, turism durabil, conservare culturală.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues about the relation established between tourist and ecotourist activities in a peculiar case, the case of the Transylvanian Saxons and their fortified churches. Generally, worldwide, the fortified churches are monuments valorized at maximum from the touristic point of view. Also, we can notice that almost all the fortified churches (except those situated in big town) are directly related with a continuous expanding ecotourism. In that case, we put the inevitable question: what we can make with our fortified churches from Transylvania? And, can those historical monuments help the Saxon communities?

This subject about the fortified churches of Transylvanian Saxons it was an avoided one. Some scientific papers have occurred after the 1990s in the Romanian geographical journals especially from Grecu and Sârbu [1-3]. The attempt to discover more about those fantastic constructions has given recently also a bachelor study [4].

For almost seven centuries of existence of the Saxon fortified churches in Transylvania there was no question about the problem that tourism phenomenon can trigger at a time. One of the most important industries which is in continuous development for about 50 years, tourism has become a major cultural and environmental problem in fragile areas simply because he is indifferent to changes brings in long term.

Like other industries, sustainability in tourism has three sides employed:

- a) The economic side;
- b) Social and cultural side;
- c) The environmental side.

Sustainable development presents a *sine qua non* characteristic, permanence, practically it is understood a number of factors such as: optimal resources utilization, minimizing the negative economical, ecological and socio-cultural impacts and maximizes benefits to local communities, national economies, and the nature conservation.

## 2. THE SAXONS OF TRANSYLVANIA AND THEIR FORTIFIED CHURCHES

Saxons place of origin are still a subject of dispute between the historical and geographical scientists. Carefully assessing the assumptions of the historians we reach to a unified conclusion, that the origins of Transylvanian Saxons established since the XII century is situated in the Lower Rhine and Mosel regions. Aspect mentioned in a previous paper [5], the Saxon name is not relevant in determining the areas of origin. In the oldest documents they are called Teutonic or even Flemish. Saxons name that uses the Hungarian king Andrew II to appoint settlers of Romos, Cricău or Ighiu seems closest to the Romanian version [6]. After the research of Manchat, the Germanic peoples were

called immediately after the Second Crusade in 1147-1149 and located here in 1150 A.D. to strengthen the royal power, quickly forming "privileged groups" documents naming them Teutonic, Latin or later Saxon [7].

Fortified Churches are not only in Transylvania. We can find many on the European continent in countries like France (Church of St. John of Poitiers, the fortified church of Romainmontier, Provence, Auvergne, Lotharingia, Correze), Netherlands (Frisia), Germany (Rhine Valley - Franconia), Denmark (Bjornholm Island), England (Earls Breton, Stevenage, Lincoln, Wigford), Austria (Weisenkirche church fortified in 1531 to block the Turkish invasions, St Oswald of Eisenerz). Fortified churches are mentioned in Poland (St. Peter and Paul mentioned during the Mongol invasion) but also in northern Italy (Lombardy, Tuscany), Spain (Ujué), Switzerland (Sion).

However, in Transylvania, like nowhere in the world, there are many fortified churches on a relatively small area resulting a region of a high density of fortified churches. In no region in the World we can't find over 200 monuments like this in an area as that one studied.

The fortified church which the tourist sees today encompasses an entire history. Do not forget that once put on the new places, the colonists sought to erect a place of worship for their spiritual needs. But there are many cases when the Saxons built their church on the ruins of another monument older, which contributes significantly to the cultural dimension of the space and the stronghold itself (see Copșa Mare, Biertan, Agnita). In many cases, the Saxons took over and subsequently modified the existing church (see Hărman, Viscri, Ungra).

Also, inside a church of XIII-XV century, we find many historical objects of ecclesiastical art. Among them, a special cultural importance is represented by:

(a) The altars: Prejmer - the oldest shrine in Romania painted in 1450, Biertan - the largest in the country with 28 panels painted in 1515, Feldioara - shrine in the fifteenth century now in the Brukenthal Museum, Beia - shrine from 1513, Mercheasa - altar paintings from the XV-XVI century;

(b) The chalices: Măieruș - XVI century chalice, Ghimbav - chalice from the sixteenth century with ornamental filigree enamel, Bărcuț - cup of gilded silver since 1533, Bunești - silver chalice of the fifteenth century, Seliste - silver plated chalice dated 1533, Sânpetru - cup of fifteenth century silver gilt, Mesendorf - renaissance of gilded silver chalice made in the sixteenth century, Toarcia - silver gilt cup from 1400, Prejmer - 2 chalices from XV-XVI century;

(c) The collection of carpets: Codlea - collection of four prayer Anatolian carpets from the fifteenth century, Ghimbav - four Persian rugs of the seventeenth century;

(d) The tombstones: Biertan - impressive collection of 11 tombstones belonging to the priests who served here, Cristian (Bv) - Anna May tombstone dated 1631 created by Nicholas Elian, Prejmer – Jakob Jekelius tombstone from 1692;

(e) Different statues: Ghimbav - statue representing Mary and John in the sixteenth century;

(f) Tower bells: Bărcuț - tower bell from the XV century with the inscription *O rex glorie veni cum* ("Oh, King of Glory, Come"), Prejmer – tower bell from the sixteenth century, Feldioara - a fifteenth-century tower bell;

(g) The pews: Prejmer and Biertan – a XVI century pews;

(h) Tower clocks: Harman – a XVI century tower clock, Bod – an 1800 tower clock.

The fortified churches are veritable museums with a original German culture of XIII-XVII century at their greatness. Saxons way of life is reflected until now, after centuries, by those buildings that housed them and gave them the possibility of defense if they were attacked. Here were created microstructures almost identically with the villages outside where any man has its well established role. The priest had his own home, as well as teacher or even ordinary inhabitant. Children went to school; all the activities were almost the same. By researching those strongholds it is much easier to appreciate how the cohabitation of the Saxons was, which was the relationship between them, or which were their habits and customs.

As we know it, the Transylvanian tourist infrastructure – especially in these villages - is lacking. This status is probably a good one if we want to build a sustainable tourism. The question is: how is this possible? To have a sustainable tourism, the development project applications must be made at the earliest stages of design and construction of material and technical base. In other words, you can't design a sustainable tourism in a region whose tourism infrastructure works for years, and it is not designed for sustainable tourism. This can be an asset in a project for sustainable tourism, a tourism that aims to harmonize with the environment, with local communities as the other sectors of the economy.

To have sustainability in the touristic processes, at least in our case in the Saxon villages, a number of conditions must be met. Of these, we mention the most important:

1. The transport used. This preference goes to long-distance train, or bicycle or other forms of transport (riding) for short distances. This is the most important aspect when we talk about ecotourism. In an interesting study Simmons and Becken develop discusses about energy use and carbon dioxide emissions associated with ecotourism [8]. They argued that for ecotourism, a travel component can occur at three distinct scales: first, transport directly associated with the ecotourism experience (here we recommend "clean" activities like biking or horse-riding); secondly, travel between

various sites (in our case between fortified churches) and thirdly transport from the home location to the destination, where the ecotourism experiences take place (Transylvania).

2. Quality of the landscapes and architectural heritage. It is necessary to preserve the traditional architecture of the Saxon villages and ancient agricultural landscape aesthetics.

3. The integration of accommodation structures in the environment. In this context the accommodation structures must be rustic, comfortable, based on elements of traditional architecture or restoration of older structures (country house, various annexes of the fortified churches, etc.).

4. The meeting with residents at which tourists will be sensitive to the manifestations of personality, authenticity of the locals, the hospitality exhibited, which plays a key role in rural tourism.

Sustainable tourism is not here to stop tourism activities, but he focuses on the benefits derived from it, benefits which involve all parties concerned. If Transylvanian tourist industry can develop naturally according to consumer demands, environmental conservation is a preparatory stage action which requires careful planning ideas for accomplish the mains goals. The goals of tourism plans will inevitably determine their role for environmental protection or conservation. It is Murphy [9] who argued for the first time that the most tourism goals and planning are oriented especially towards business interests and economic growth.

### **3. TOURISM - ECOTOURISM: SEVERAL THEORETICAL ASPECTS**

Generally, tourism is a relatively new field of study. It was just on the middle of the past century when the touristic studies were accepted in the caste of the social sciences. 35 years ago George Washington University was the first university that offered a study department of tourism management. Today there are numerous institutions worldwide offering a wide range of services, from undergraduate courses at various diplomas and certificates. With tourism development and its fragmentation is it very normal to occur and to impose new terms and ideologies. The link between tourism and sustainability was created in the 1980s by a number of advocates [10, 11]. They suggested that the environment and tourism should be integrated in order to maintain environmental integrity and successful tourism development [12].

The spread of the word 'ecotourism' has been quite rapid. Although he first appeared in the late 70s, in the early 1980s the term does not quite enjoy the attention of researchers. But during the last 30 years the term has become the subject of much debate: what it means, what should be or how it works are questions that continue to dominate the literature. Fennell [13] believes that ecotourism exist as a result of the





↑ Photo 1. Some of the fortified churches of Transylvania - (1) Fortified church of Cloașterf; (2) Catholic Tower from the fortified church of Biertan (UNESCO World Heritage Site); (3) Fortified church of Dealu Frumos; (4) Fortified church of Axente Sever; (5) Panoramic view of Apod village and the local fortified church; (6) Fortified church of Valea Viilor (UNESCO World Heritage Site); (7) Fortified church of Homorod; (8) Fortified church of Brădeni; (9) Altar of Copșa Mare fortified church. All photos taken by D. Iosif 2008-2010.

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classification of tourism activities which, at the initial level, implies a division of tourism in mass tourism and alternative tourism.

Mass tourism is a form of "traditional" tourism which seeks to maximize local economic phenomenon. Development of tourist industry was long seen as a "clean" but this only in terms of benefits, jobs or infrastructure development. How mention also Glasson *et al.* [14], tourism contains the seed of its own destruction, tourism can kill tourism, destroying the attractions that visitors use to experience. Hence, in the last two decades, the vision of this idea has changed and the term of alternative tourism has become a popular paradigm. According to the Travel Industries of America [15] 83% of all American tourists are willing to support such a "green" industry, spending on goods and touristic services more than 6.2%.

Yet, there is no generally accepted definition of ecotourism. However, many researchers argue that this type of tourism must to support conservation and development objectives to be called ecotourism [[16] p.543]. However, among the oldest attempts to define the ecotourism we record the definition of Hector Ceballos-Lascurain: "we may define ecological tourism or ecotourism as that tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, aswell as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas" [[17] p.13]. For Shores ([18] p.4) the ecotourism means quite simply "ecologically sound tourism" or "ecologically sensitive tourism." The same amount of caring we would afford our own home is implied. Ecotourism is "tourism to the house or home." All of the attention and maintenance that a homeowner puts into a house should be the amount of care we put into tourism. The ecotourist must care for the place visited as much as she or he cares for and appreciates home.

#### **4. THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ECOTOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SAXON VILLAGES**

The economic impact of ecotourism in any region can lead to an increase of political and financial support for conservation. Protected areas, and generally the

nature conservation, brings many benefits to a society including biodiversity<sup>1</sup> conservation, protection of historical sites, etc. Unfortunately, many of these benefits are intangibles. However, these benefits associated with recreation and tourism activity tends to create a tangible product [19]. Predictably, the benefits of ecotourism vary depending on various parameters such as: attraction quality, access, etc. In some cases, the number of jobs created may be small – in the case of Saxon villages - but even a small number of jobs created in those rural areas could mean much economically.

In terms of the favorite season for ecotourism travelers, the data are often insufficient. To make an idea, we compare our situation (Transylvania) with data provided by Wright [20] for the North American continent. Thus, the vast majority of North Americans prefer to travel in the warm season (23% in June, 40% in July and 40% in August). There is also some interest for the winter season especially for intermediate periods of the two seasons: 16% for May and 29% for September. The "experienced" ecotourists, being frequently tourists, are more interested to travel throughout the year than the "casuals". For Transylvania it exist no data to make such analysis, a tourists monitoring is almost impossible to achieve. However, from subsequent experience, we can admit also the dominance of the summer season when tourists are eager to live in nature. But the winter season is not devoid by tourists, now and here we can remark the presence of a number of tourists who still has family connections in the Saxon villages. Winter holidays are thus constructing a true "tourist magnet".

The potential of those villages ecotourism is based also on the idea that to visit the fortified churches it takes a longer period of time (8-14 days). Usually, the practice of an ordinary tourism involve fewer days than the ecotourism. In a study by Yuan and Moisey [21] it is discussed the following aspects: tourists from Montana (USA) interested in ecotourism spend more time on vacation (approx. 6 days) compared with ordinary tourists (3.5 days) . From the data we have, we can say that in terms of time spent on holiday tourists who visit the Saxon villages organize their trips for more than six days.

From the many trips that we have made in the Saxon villages we noticed that many of the ecotourists are members in various pro-nature clubs and organizations. Later we found out [20] that indeed the ecotourists are much more willing to affiliate with nature-oriented organizations (50%) than ordinary tourists (11%). Diamantis [22] shows that among ecotourists enrolled in divers pro-nature organizations, 67% are very actively involved in the organization, for the ordinary tourists the percentage being 37%.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the concept of biodiversity, *sensu lato*, mean not only the historical monuments and nature conservation but also the survival of human communities that possess unusual cultural features - in our case the unique possessors of the true German culture in Romania.

For the phenomenon of ecotourism to be successful in Saxon villages it should promote sustainable development through a process of establishing a durable productive base that will enable the Saxons and the ecotourism services providers to raise the standard of living in these communities. It is believed that ecotourism is the perfect business to promote both the sustainability of activities and also the regional economic development. But the sustainability of ecotourism depends directly on three levels or aspects that we mentioned in the introductory section: it depends on economy, on environmental conservation and on the social side. Of course, every step is supposed to have only positive results through the implementation of ecotourism as a tourist industry, a method of protection, a social connection. But in many cases the theoretical features are not accordingly to the practical features and so we can give birth to major discrepancies. And these studies, as the present one, have exactly the role to determine the actual parameters of a connection like this.

Firstly, any form of ecotourism will not be supported if it is an unprofitable one for the tour operators. In a world dominated by the economical condition, the degree of profitability should seriously be taken into account. On the other hand, another economic purpose of ecotourism is to create jobs. However, researchers like Place have argued that even such tourism can't create many new jobs for locals because they are not adequately prepared to handle such positions [23]. Indeed, the aging correlated with the percentage increase of Roma population in these localities make an obvious decrease in the opportunities that these jobs are occupied by residents.

The ecotourism is one of the most prominent manifestations against environmental degradation. However, the ecotourism in McLaren's acceptance [24] is a form of development that leads, normally, to destruction of the natural environment. In the same direction goes Jarviluoma too [25], taking into account that the ecotourists tend to discover places the least affected by human activities, places where *nobody had ever set foot*. Given the natural conditions of the environment in which the Saxons built their places of habitat - the alternation of hill / valley with the settlements in the lowlands - allows us to say that the Transylvanian region is not as vulnerable to development than other regions just because of its anthropogenic pressure / absolutely natural environment alternating, which has not determined for the whole region a significant anthropogenic pressures.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The sustainable tourism practiced in the Transylvanian Saxon communities reflects three important aspects [26], namely (1) *the quality* that enhance the quality of life in Saxon communities and protect the environment, (2) *continuity* through which is realized the continuity of the Transylvanian Saxon culture (the unique culture of this

type in Romania) with satisfactory experiences for tourists, (3) *the balance* which ensures a steady balance between the needs of the tourism industry, the Saxons owners the touristic objectives and the surrounding cultural environment.

Also, here may be practiced the ecotourism, a sustainable tourism industry which is based in these regions by contemplation of nature and culture, a nature which has been generous with Transylvania, as well as the traditional activities and societies that make the Transylvanian Saxon communities to be among of the most interesting habitats in Romania.

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