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Who wins? Who loses? Representation and "restoration" of the past in a rural Romanian community

Cheryl Klimaszewski
Bryn Mawr College, cklimaszew@brynmawr.edu

Gail E. Bader

James M. Nyce

Brian E. Beasley

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TITLE/AUTHOR PAGE

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Authors:

Full Name: **Cheryl Klimaszewski**
Affiliation: Bryn Mawr College
e-mail address: cklimasz@yahoo.com
Contact: 1916 Pemberton Street, Philadelphia, PA 19146, 215.696.3790

Bio:
Cheryl Klimaszewski is an information professional based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She holds an M.S. in Library and Information Science from the iSchool at Drexel University, also in Philadelphia. She currently works as the Collection Information Manager for the Art and Artifact Collections, part of the Special Collections at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. She is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: cklimasz@yahoo.com.

Full name: **Gail E. Bader**
Affiliation: Ball State University
e-mail address: gbader@bsu.edu
Contact Ball State University, Department of Anthropology, BB 312,
2000 W. University Ave. Muncie, IN 47306, 765.285.7512

Bio:
Gail E. Bader, an Assistant Professor at Ball State University, received her PhD from Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island, USA) in 1984. Bader, a cultural anthropologist, currently studies issues related to education and informational technology in contemporary American and Romanian life.

Full Name: **James M. Nyce**
Affiliation: Ball State University
e-mail address: jnyce@bsu.edu
Contact: Ball State University, Department of Anthropology, BB 304, 2000 W. University Ave. Muncie, IN 47306, 765. 285.7321

Bio:
James M. Nyce, an associate professor at Ball State University, received his PhD from Brown University in 1987. Nyce, a cultural anthropologist, studies how information technologies emerge and are used in different workplaces and organizations. A docent (in Informatics) at Linköping University, Sweden, Nyce is also adjunct associate professor in the Department of Radiology, Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis.

Full Name: **Brian E. Beasley**
Affiliation: Ball State University
e-mail address: bebeasley@bsu.edu
Contact: 12135 Sunrise Circle, Fishers, IN, 46038-1550, 317.442.2623

Bio:
Brian Beasley is a doctoral student in Adult, Higher, and Community Education at Ball State University. His doctoral cognate is in Anthropology. Brian holds an MA in Adult, Higher, and Community Education from Ball State University.

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Abstract

Purpose:
This paper argues that those involved in cultural heritage preservation efforts must look more critically at how preconceived notions of "history" and "tradition" affect both the design and outcomes of preservation efforts. This paper also adds to the limited LIS discourse on the problematic nature of significance as it relates to selecting aspects of cultural heritage for preservation, which is of particular importance to LIS practitioners as they work to help others capture, preserve and represent their traditional knowledge and ways of life.

Design/methodology:
The argument is based on research carried out in rural Romania in the summer of 2007. Faculty from Ball State University with students from several US universities used ethnographic methods to collect qualitative data about an ongoing historic preservation effort in the community of Viscri. In addition to the community case study, the authors review the LIS literature on the problem of assigning significance to cultural objects for preservation.

Findings:
Cultural preservation efforts tend to rely on and legitimate lay understandings of history, tradition and culture that inform social life in a community. This limited understanding influences the choices (programs and resource allocations, for example) made in cultural preservation efforts. It also finesses the role the elite and powerful have over these programs. Viscri provides a real-world example that illustrates the lessons to be learned about how the LIS community thinks about tradition and modernity and the relationship both have to cultural heritage preservation.

Research Limitations/implications:
The argument rests on a single community study. However, a literature review and analysis of a particular historical preservation effort strengthen the paper's argument.

Originality/value:
In order for preservation efforts to more equitably preserve cultural heritage, the LIS community has to ask more analytic questions about what history and tradition are. Those involved in cultural preservation efforts must keep at the forefront of their efforts an awareness of the problematic nature of selecting certain aspects of culture and heritage over others for preservation.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, History, Tradition, Preservation, Romania, Significance

Paper type: Research

Who wins? Who loses? Representation and "restoration" of the past in a rural Romanian community

In the face of widespread global development, the need for cultural heritage preservation seems more and more urgent. This is especially true a country like Romania which experienced a long period of isolation as a former member of the Soviet Bloc. This period of isolation has left intact lifestyles in rural areas that might be seen as under-developed, but that the Western perspectives on tradition and culture often characterize as more pure, untouched or unspoiled than those of the West. Thus, the goal of cultural heritage preservation efforts is to save these "traditional" ways of life before they are "lost" to modernization. Such perceptions of tradition mark these lifestyles as significant, that is to say, worthy of preservation efforts. However, it is equally as valid to argue that lifestyles thought of as "traditional" when gauged by Western standards must be able to change and develop in order to remain economically viable. These conflicting perspectives make preserving the past while also planning for the future an especially challenging task for Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals, who are an integral part of the process of cultural heritage preservation.

This paper will present the problems that can arise in cultural preservation efforts when these efforts are based on a number of Western assumptions about tradition and culture. These assumptions can knowingly or unknowingly drive the call to preserve the past. In May of 2007, a group of researchers visited Viscri, a small historic Saxon village in the Transylvania region of Romania, where several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are leading cultural preservation efforts. Viscri provides a real-world example that illustrates the lessons to be learned about how the LIS community thinks about tradition and modernity and the relationship both have to cultural heritage preservation. This is particularly important as LIS practitioners and scholars attempt to help others capture, preserve and represent their traditional knowledge and ways of life.

Best practice culture theory will be used here to critique, challenge and extend the widely held notions of tradition and culture commonly held in the West. Cultural preservation efforts in Viscri will be presented along with a summary of Viscri's Saxon history as it is currently presented for an English-speaking audience. It will be shown that what drives the preservation efforts in Viscri is not some essential "Saxon-ness" inherent in the village that these NGO's are attempting to preserve; instead, what is being preserved is a particular version of Saxon tradition and history, in this case, one that is held by the leaders of the NGOs and the local elite. The Saxon history is the one being validated as the most significant (i.e. the most worthy of preservation) by the NGOs. However, as recent anthropological theory argues, cultural heritage approximates not a historical but a rhetorical reality-- rhetorical because the past is "edited" and represented selectively to achieve certain ends. Therefore, the significance placed upon Saxon history today reflects not the past but the context in which that perception exists in the present and includes factors such as power and class. In Viscri, those in power are literally (re)writing the history and presenting one historical past, one that is more a mirror of Western angst about modernization and globalization than it is about preserving a dying culture. Despite the NGOs claims to the contrary, these activities actually limit Viscri's possibilities for growth and development. And development and modernization are necessary if communities like Viscri are to survive, let alone thrive.

The research project

Observations of the NGOs and their development work in Viscri took place in May, 2007. Drs. Gail Bader and James M. Nyce from Ball State University's Department of Anthropology brought a team of twelve student researchers to Viscri to introduce them to qualitative field research. The group included graduate and undergraduate anthropology students from Ball State University and the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and Library and Information Science students from Drexel University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This community study focused on information/knowledge use in post- and pre-revolution Romania and continues research Bader and Nyce have carried with students out since 2004 in Romania

(Littrell, et al., 2006; Whipple and Nyce, 2007; Klimaszewski and Nyce, 2009; Closet-Crane, et al., 2009; Beasley and Nyce, 2009).

Qualitative data was collected in a series of in-depth interviews, lasting at least one hour with each informant, conducted over a period of two and half weeks. The team broke into small groups in order to interview a representative cross section of community members. Interviews were conducted using three translators, two students and a tour guide, all native Romanian speakers who had studied English at university. The last had worked with Bader, Nyce and their students before in a 2005 community study of Hoteni, a village in Maramureş County, Romania. Informant selection took account of demographic, ethnic, social and economic variables and care was taken to include community members of various ethnicities and economic statuses as well as community leaders.

The research group was aware of the preservation efforts in Viscri from Web searches done prior to arrival in the village. Upon arrival in Viscri, it quickly became apparent that a research focus on the NGOs presence and activities was unavoidable, as the staff of several NGOs along with their supporters, patrons and advisers were omnipresent throughout the research group's stay. One of the most active NGOs hosted a conference in Viscri during the study visit, to which members of the research group were invited. The conference was one part of a preservation initiative entitled "The Whole Village Project: An Integrated Approach to Cultural Heritage Conservation in Saxon Transylvania" (Trust, n.d. b). The conference itself was titled, "Bringing tradition into the 21st Century: Concepts and Practices in Surveying Historic Buildings" (Trust, n.d. b). Members of the research group attended some conference presentations and also interviewed NGO staff, representatives and conference presenters during communal meals.

With informants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcripts produced. Field notes were made by all members of the research team to record what was heard during interviews as well as to record observations of daily village life. Whenever possible, researchers engaged in informal conversations about life in Romania with villagers in Viscri and elsewhere. When

permission was granted, significant aspects of village life were recorded by members of the team using still photos and video. While in the field, the group met at least once per day to brief each other on the day's activities and findings. This allowed the research plan and goals to be revised iteratively based on what was learned each day from informants and village observations. Researchers arrived in Viscri with a basic knowledge of the region and village. Prior reading had been done on the history of the Roma in Transylvania (Abraham, Vădescu and Chelcea, 1995) and the culture and history of Romania (Pop and Porumb, 2004). In Viscri, the group also met three times to discuss a number of readings that helped to analytically anchor the research (Carrier, 1992; Handler and Linnekin, 1984; Robotham, 1997).

The concepts of tradition and culture

Perhaps the most common Western idea of tradition assumes that it is possible to isolate and identify a specific set of "culture traits" that over time reflect the particular essence of a culture (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). This model identifies tradition by tracing the history of a set of traits over a specified period of time. For instance, in 20th century anthropological theory, it was believed that it took a trait "three generations" for it to become "traditional" (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). Anthropologists, however, have jettisoned this definition, having realized for many years that "cultures" are constantly changing and thus cannot be clearly divided one from another based on tracing selected values. Because culture is by its nature mutable, anthropologists find that what is selected out as "traditional" more often reflects the current situation than it does some essential, historical core of values (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). While anthropologists have not defined culture as a bounded set of traits for many years this definition of culture continues to be used by, among others, the LIS community and the elite and powerful in developing countries. Anthropologists in fact have rejected the idea that culture is a set of traits that can be equated to any national, political or ethnic boundaries. Culture is no longer thought of as co-terminus with what in the past had been called "culture areas" (Hannerz, 1997).

Anthropologists reject this definition of culture because it is analytically and empirically incorrect. The study of cultural "borders" presents not discontinuous sets of traits but a situation characterized by the fluid sharing, manipulation and creation of the symbols, ideas and practices that are called culture. Attempting to map culture and cultural parameters like those of a culture area is an exercise in regression because it can never lead to a definitive endpoint. For at least two decades now, anthropologists have also been very careful when using the concept of "culture" because the place where one culture changes to another cannot be easily specified. This is not only a problem in identifying members of specific cultures, it also acknowledges how easily and quickly culture can be modified and transformed.

Given that the best practice definition of culture implies constant re-definition and change, the notion of what constitutes tradition has also changed (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). For example, Handler and Linnekin's (1984) work on tradition focuses on how the present influences the designation of what is "traditional." They argue that tradition is most typically identified with individuals embedded in and highly influenced by their current situation. Even the oldest, most deeply embedded members of a given culture or tradition cannot select or point to traditional elements unbiased by the changing social, political and economic trends they have experienced over the years. Consequently, these informants' identification of "the traditional" reflects their years of experience as they make sense in the present rather than some uninfluenced, "pure" experience from years before. (Handler and Linnekin, 1984)

Handler's and Linnekin's (1984) work on tradition leads anthropologists to consider the processes and individuals who define what will count as "tradition" and "the traditional." Their focus is on why certain practices, ideas or symbols are selected to stand for the past as well as on who is selecting those practices, ideas or symbols (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). Handler and Linnekin (1984) also emphasize that it is necessary to explore the present situation when one is trying to understand or represent the past. In addition, they point out that the selection of what is "traditional," even by those native to the tradition, is not the result of some objective mechanism

but is instead a highly subjective process that involves both power and politics (Handler and Linnekin, 1984).

This understanding of how "tradition" is created leads Herzfeld (2001) to suggest that any particular situation contains "multiple histories." He argues that through the study of tradition and history one must acknowledge from the beginning that empirically there exist not one but many histories. Multiple histories are found as each group of stakeholders (winners and losers alike) have and use different and competing histories to explain and support their economic and political positions. In short, Herzfeld (2001) warns anthropologists to think carefully about how and why a particular version of history is attractive to a particular group. Rather than attempting to decide whose history is "correct" (i.e., "factual"), Herzfeld (2001) argues that understanding this multiplicity of histories should be the primary analytic concern. This, and not helping grant legitimacy to any one group's version of "history", should be one of the LIS research community's and indeed any cultural preservation effort's goal.

When LIS professionals assist in a group's preservation, modernization and/or development efforts they need to acknowledge and beware the siren call of "tradition and history." Upon hearing pleas from others to help them save their traditions and history, one must ask "Whose tradition and whose history am I being asked to save? Who will 'win' if one version of history is saved over another? And who will be forgotten?" This problem cannot simply be resolved by turning to members of the culture, tradition, or community to identify "the correct" answer. This is because, as Herzfeld (2001) warns, within each situation there will be a plethora of histories and stakeholders. Merely selecting one group over another as the "most traditional" ignores the empirical situation of competing histories. Rather than seeking (or anointing) the most "authentic" version of history or tradition, Herzfeld (2001) urges documentation of the mix of traditions competing for dominance. Thus, LIS scholars need to ask questions about what version of "history" is being offered, by whom, and how that version of history positions the individual offering it not in the past but in the present.

Tradition and the problem of significance

The designation of a culture or aspects of a culture as "traditional" is often used to justify the preservation efforts surrounding that culture; that is to say certain tangible or intangible aspects of a lifestyle or culture that are deemed "traditional" are assigned significance. And it is the significant aspects that in turn become those worth preserving. However, the process of assigning significance is a problematic concept that is rarely discussed in the LIS literature (Lloyd, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Pymm, in Lloyd, 2007, p. 54). Lloyd (2007) suggests that this lack of discussion stems at least in part from the fact that significance is a fluid, subjective concept whose meaning can change over time. Perhaps more importantly, significance is often a reflection of the dominance or power of certain cultural groups over others (Lloyd, 2007; Harvey, 2007). The process of assigning significance is not an equalizing measure but a way to impose power and cultural hegemony. In a similar vein, Battles (in Harvey, 2007) points out:

> Much of what comes down to us from antiquity survived because it was held in small private libraries tucked away in obscure backwaters of the ancient world, where it was more likely to escape the notice of zealots as well as princes. Above all, it is this last point – the needs and tastes of private readers and collectors— that determines what survives. (p.268)

Battles here makes two important points. First, it can no more be assumed that an object has survived through the ages because it holds an innate significance than that it can be assumed the same object has managed to survive simply because of benign neglect. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Battles reminds us that it is the needs and tastes of the few that determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. More often than not, those individuals or institutions in a position to collect do so from a position of power – whether economic, political or cultural. Lloyd draws on the ideas of Fletcher when she explains:

> Significance will be underpinned by notions of truth held by the powerful in society and by the decisions of the powerful about which truth, or which versions of truth, are valid and worthy of preserving for the long term. These decisions will be inherent in any criteria for selection for significance and in the availability of funding for the long-term retention of items that contribute to shaping the collective memory of that society. (2007, p. 57)

Because of the charged nature of assigning significance, Sloggett (in Harvey, 2007, p. 269) goes

so far as to describe significance as being, "So culturally loaded as to be, at best, an irrelevant

and, at worst, a dangerous tool with which to address issues of local or distributed culture."

Sloggett also reminds us that ". . . [T]here are many examples where national agendas are best

served by the marginalization or negation of local cultures" (in Harvey, p. 270).

Even the most large-scale cultural preservation efforts, including the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Memory of the World and World

Heritage programs, are not immune to the problems inherent in assigning significance. As Lloyd

(2007) explains, "Decision makers do not have the resources to preserve everything. Therefore,

decisions have to be made about what is significant, and, consequently, whose interests are to be

acknowledged, what documented history is to be privileged, and whose history is to be

marginalized or silenced" (p. 59). In fact, a major problem with the UNESCO programs is their

focus on preserving heritage that "transcend(s) the boundaries of time and culture" (Edmondson,

in Harvey, 2007, p. 269). Some would argue that the concepts embodied in "World Heritage" or

"Memory of the World" are essentially flawed. As Sloggett (in Harvey, 2007, p. 270) concludes,

"Heritage is by definition local. The concept of world culture is as anachronistic and problematic

as any other globalised agenda."

However, neither Lloyd (2007) nor Harvey (2007) argue that preservation efforts should

cease; on the contrary, they encourage those involved in preservation efforts to begin an active

dialogue in order to bring these issues to the forefront. Discussion and debate should be

encouraged by the LIS community and at the very least this community should acknowledge that

assessing historical and cultural significance is problematic. One particular presentation on

"significance assessment" begins: "We know some items are more important than others but how

do we justify the judgment?" (Young, 2008, p. 2). What Lloyd and Harvey might argue is that it is

no longer enough for LIS professionals to simply "know" that some objects, cultures, or aspects of

cultures are more important than others. LIS professionals must move beyond simply assessing

significance to begin questioning why it is that "we know" that some cultures, traditions and lifestyles are "more important" than others.

The Saxons in Transylvania

Viscri is a German Saxon town that exhibits the village-with-fortified-church layout that characterizes German Saxon settlement in Transylvania. Transylvanian Saxons are descended from Germans who first arrived in the region during the 12th/13th centuries. These Germans were invited by medieval Hungarian kings to colonize the area, increase its population and strengthen its military defenses. The Saxons brought with them abilities as tradesmen, in light manufacture, and as farmers and merchants. This facilitated the success of their settlements and allowed the Saxons to be relatively self-sufficient economically and politically until almost the end of the 20th century.

The Saxon population in the region began to diminish after World War II, as many Saxons were sent off to work in labor camps in the Soviet Union. This occurred because the post-war Romanian government treated many Saxons as Nazi collaborators. This treatment led to the first large exodus of Saxons back to Germany, which helped to break the hold this ethnic group had on power for many centuries in Transylvania. A second large exodus of the Saxons back to Germany occurred after the fall of Ceaucesceau in 1989. This was a response at least in part to the years of oppression under Communist rule, during which time emigration was restricted and property rights were lost. In Viscri, these Saxon emigrations to Germany left many homes abandoned, which others, often Roma families, occupy today. Whether these Roma are squatters illegally occupying abandoned Saxon buildings or caretakers encouraged by the expatriated homeowners to live in and maintain their properties remains a subject of some debate. Further in Viscri and throughout Romania families and individuals of all ethnicities are still working to regain property lost to them during the Communist regime. In Viscri many residents' property rights have yet to be resolved and at least one Saxon family in Viscri spoke about their decade-long struggle to reclaim property which still continues.

Historic and cultural preservation efforts in Viscri

What distinguishes Viscri from other Romanian villages in Transylvania is the extent to which it has been able to exploit its identity as a Saxon village. During the Middle Ages the Saxons built fortified village churches for protection and defense against Ottoman and Tatar invaders. Viscri has survived with its fortified church and much of its traditional layout and architecture intact. Under the Communist systemization program, many villages faced the threat of being bulldozed in order to remove their rural populations to urban/industrial centers, a move that was considered "progressive" by the Communist leaders of the time. Though this plan ended with the 1989 revolution, it provided the outside world with the impetus to try to help Romania preserve some of its unique architectural traditions – among them Saxon villages like Viscri. This interest helped Viscri's church to gain its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993.

While several NGOs are active in the village and throughout the region, the Mihai Eminescu Trust [1] (the Trust) was by far the most visible. Its founder, Jessica Douglas-Home, visited Romania and felt the call to preserve its past. Of her first visit to the Saxon area of Transylvania, she writes:

> I had expected to find an enclave of German culture: in fact I discovered an image of Europe as it must once have been everywhere – a landscape still disputed between wildlife and people, villages still fortified against marauders, a deep intimacy between farmers and domestic animals, and a religious tranquility radiating from churches adorned by centuries of pious workmanship. (Trust, n.d. a, "About Us" page)

Today, the Trust's website states its mission as being "dedicated to the conservation and regeneration of villages and communes in Transylvania and the Maramureş, two of the most unspoilt regions of Europe" (Trust, n.d. a, "Home" page). It further describes its activities as follows:

> The Trust concentrates on the Saxon villages of Transylvania, a special case because of the age and richness of their culture and the emergency caused by the mass emigration of the Saxon inhabitants to Germany in 1990. These villages – farmers' houses and barns built around fortified churches, substantially unchanged since the Middle Ages – lie in spectacularly beautiful surroundings. The hills and valleys are rich in wild flowers.

> Wolves, bears and wild boar roam the mountains and the forests of beech and oak. (Trust, n.d. a, "about" page)

The history and community of Viscri presented to Western audiences

It was extremely easy for English speaking visitors to learn about the history of Saxon Transylvania through the filter of the Trust. For example, a library in the researchers' Viscri guesthouse was filled with literature in English, French, German and Romanian about the activities of the Trust and related groups in the region. The authors of these materials were most often employees or agents of the NGOs or British journalists. A reading of the materials finds a particular narrative being constructed about the region's cultural heritage:

The Saxons possess a "remarkable, unspoilt" (Wilkie, p. 11) way of life that is characterized by "a rare equanimity and balance" between humans and the natural landscape. This way of life has "changed little since the 12th century" (Wilkie, p. 1). This lifestyle has been severely threatened in the past by Communist leaders who wanted to bulldoze it and it continues to be threatened today by large-scale agri-business or commercial development projects (Wilkie, 2001; Akeroyd, 2002 & 2006). "The first impetus for intervention . . . (was) an awareness that something special and rare has survived in Transylvania and that it is under threat" (Wilkie, p. 16). Indeed, the survival of the Saxon villages is "a miracle in the modern world" (Akeroyd, 2002, p. 19). The frontier existence of the Saxons "nurtured courage, independence, isolation and self-sufficiency" (Akeroyd, 2002, p. 21) and the remaining landscape "vividly echo(es) our own lost meadows in western Europe" (Akeroyd, 2002, p. 22). HRH Prince Charles [2] gives further legitimacy to this narrative when, as a patron of the Trust, he writes: "This area represents a lost past for most of us – a past in which villages were intimately linked to their landscape" (in Wilkie, p. v). In fact, "There is a hope that Transylvania could hold the key to a more sustainable and integrated agricultural and social economy by leap-frogging the mistakes of the 19th and 20th centuries and showing the way to a saner twenty-first century" (Wilkie, p. 15). Therefore, the West must aid in the protection and conservation of the special way of life in the Saxon villages before

it is lost. And this message must be transmitted to current village residents, Saxon or otherwise: "Maintain your Village!" (Boila, 2007; Huelsemann, 2007).

From this narrative, one could conclude that saving Viscri is an open and shut case about saving an important traditional lifestyle from extinction. However, this argument only documents and preserves the Saxon side of Viscri's story, which the Trust sees as its mandate, and ignores large segments of the current-day population and its history, namely that of the majority of village's population - ethnic Romanians and the Roma. First and foremost, the idea that this landscape/village/lifestyle is somehow more "traditionally Saxon" because it is "unchanged" must be questioned. In fact, the medieval landscape so identified with Viscri today that is being enacted by the Trust and others has, in fact, changed considerably since the 12th century. For instance, Romania has gone through a number of significant changes in only the last 150 years alone. It was one of the last European countries to repudiate feudal land polices and it was only around the late 19th century that land reform was carried out so that peasants received any property from the large landowner's holdings (Boia, 2001). Property owners then lost their land to collectivization practiced by the Communists in the 1950's. Currently, residents are at least theoretically experiencing privatization and liberalism with the coming of democracy and capitalism to Romania after the 1989 revolution.

Another problem with this narrative is that the authors are neither village residents nor are the majority of them Saxon, Romanian or Roma; they are most likely educated in the West and/or are often involved in occupations which gather, disseminate, and preserve information. What is being written by the Trust is not addressed primarily to the people of Viscri or of Romania. Instead, the narrative about Viscri as constructed by the Trust is being produced by and for literate people of the West. More notably, the history of Viscri is being told as a morality play that offers a meditation on the problems of modern life. The Trust's story of the Saxons addresses the angst and guilt of the members of the post-modern world and offers as a solution a

return to a more pure, less problematic way of life. This story arguably says more about the Western moment than it does about Viscri, its community members and its past.

The history of Viscri is presented as a story of equality, idealism and hard work. The Saxon lifestyle is regularly described as "conservative, industrious, and well-ordered" (Akeroyd, 2006, p. 53). Mention of the village as a place troubled by ethnic and religious discrimination is glossed over by statements such as: "Enthusiasm for the apparent idyll of the landscape must not however become romantic and overlook the poverty and hardness of Romanian life" (Wilkie, p. 15). More often, the troubles are supplanted with details about the "green" lifestyle of the medieval Saxon village that lives close to nature and practices "organic" farming. There is no discussion of the fact that many village residents are subsistence farmers by necessity who continue to live a hand-to-mouth existence and who must rely on organic farming methods because they could likely not afford chemical fertilizers even if they wanted to. But such difficulties are not discussed. Instead, one hears about "industrious" families providing for themselves and their own protection and the focus is on a community whose residents depend on each other and who share common values and a common culture – something (sadly) now sorely missing in modern life in towns and cities in the developed West. The harmony that exists among the members of the community, their environment and their culture is stressed as characteristic of life in Viscri. Further, the Saxon culture and lifestyle is presented as an example of the kind of society that nurtured and led to Anglo-Saxon democracy and individualism. This is the birthplace of the Western liberalism and democracy. It is the kind of environment that allows the individual to achieve what s/he wants through hard work, faith, cooperation, and strong character. When issues like conflict, power and hierarchy are finessed, Viscri becomes a poetic remnant of what the West has lost.

But avoiding the more difficult issues reduces Viscri to a façade of itself. Perhaps this is apropos as it reflects the kind of historic restoration the Trust funds and supports in Viscri – in which they rebuild just the outside, the façades, as it were, of the buildings there. If this is the case, then those who benefit most from the work of the Trust are the Western tourists, who can

engage in eco-friendly, sustainable tourism and can now stay comfortably in guest houses with modern conveniences like central heating and flush toilets (only the guest houses in Viscri were refurbished with indoor plumbing) as they come to see a village described and portrayed as much like the yeoman society of Britain from which today's Anglo-Saxon society emerged.

Multiple histories in Viscri

Today Viscri has a population of roughly 450 people and fewer than thirty of these individuals are Saxon. The majority of village residents identify themselves today as ethnic Romanian but a few families identify themselves as Roma or gypsies. These population figures, from the 2002 national census figures, were provided by Viscri's mayor and were confirmed by other villagers [3]. Certainly these numbers should give pause about categorizing Viscri as a "Saxon" village, as it is presented by the Trust. Transylvania has historically been made up of a number of different ethnic groups and there is no reason to suppose that Viscri is any different. If Viscri has had different ethnic groups living within its environs, why should the Trust privilege one group over another in its portrayal of the village history? Perhaps it is because the architectural features of Viscri, which are the major focus of the Trust's preservation efforts, reflect "a certain unity that defines the 'Saxon-ness' of the villages" (Wilkie, 2001, p. 12), and, at one time, even Saxon power and hegemony. However, one must question whether this is enough to declare Viscri a "Saxon" village. Furthermore, by declaring Viscri a Saxon village, the struggles of other longtime residents of Viscri are marginalized if not ignored. In short, readers of the Trust's narrative about Viscri are not informed of the village's importance to its residents who are members of other ethnic groups.

As Herzfeld (2001) would say, there are multiple histories in Viscri. The Roma alone have a number of "histories" they could claim. For example, prior to the problems that the Saxons began to experience in Romania, they compelled non-Saxon village peoples to live on the outskirts of the village. It was only during the Communist period that at least one Roma family headed by a skilled blacksmith settled within the village proper. While this story was offered as an example of change and advancement by a member of the Roma family, it could also have been

seen as a story of forced settlement. During Communist rule, officials attempted to settle Roma families in many villages and towns. Such actions could be seen as an attempt to gain equality for Roma families just as easily as they could be seen as an attempt by the state to exert some measure of control over what was previously a migratory ethnic population.

Village residents discussed the history of the village with members of the research group from many different viewpoints, not only ethnic but religious, economic, social and political. There were some who had no tractors but only horse-powered plows and carts to carry out their agricultural work. Others missed the employment and social service practices of the Communist government because of the security that came from having their basic needs met "from cradle to grave." Others welcomed the new opportunities they felt were available under the developing free-market system while still being wary of the changes the recent entry into the European Union would bring to Viscri (Romania became a member in January 2007). All of the residents, members of this research group found, have their own version of the history of Viscri and all of these versions should have equal standing alongside the Saxon version created and disseminated by the literati organized around the Trust and Saxons in the village. At minimum, it must be acknowledged that the version of Viscri's history being posited by the Trust is being written by those who are in positions of power and who have the level of social and cultural capital to control what is written about Viscri. As Lloyd (2007) and Harvey (2007) both conclude, this kind of control of information and of history itself is equated with power.

While the Trust is telling something of a morality tale to the West, it does not address how the actual residents of Viscri are affected by the Trust's development work in the village. Though the Saxon population seems to be the main beneficiary of the Trust's work, most of the Saxon landowners no longer live in the village but have relocated to Germany. Today, no more than 7% of Viscri's current residents are Saxon. The Saxon population is largely an absentee population of land owners whose property values increase each time the Trust restores the façade of another Saxon house in Viscri. Over the last decade, the restoration efforts have led to a dramatic

increase in property values within the village. This puts the possibility of homeownership even further out of reach for the majority of Viscri's current residents.

As for the non-Saxon residents, the Trust talked much about the jobs and training opportunities its activities provided for Viscri's residents (see Trust, n.d. a, Wilkie, 2001). However, almost all of these jobs (at least those available to non-Saxons) provided part-time, seasonal positions and paid no benefits. Members of the research group were told that this was done to '"spread out" a limited amount of resources as broadly and fairly as possible among the village residents. However it was not clear how these jobs were advertised (conflicting accounts were presented to the research group) nor on what grounds particular individuals were hired or rehired. What is clear is that not all the ethnic groups in the village were equally represented in the Trust's work force. For villagers these inequities seemed to be accepted largely as part of the natural order of things; only the local priest was willing to discuss these issues directly and openly with members of the research group.

Increased tourism does provide limited economic opportunities for a select group of village residents. For example, several families cooked meals served to tourists at a communal eating place. A few others were able to convert portions of their homes into guest houses. A small handicrafts shop/café sold souvenirs – mainly handicrafts made by residents from around the region (not just from Viscri). But these were often the Saxons or Romanians who were property owners and who had more than a subsistence-level income. As a result, they had the time to turn their efforts to other income-producing ventures. They also had the appropriate social capital to know who to talk to in order to, for instance, get the paperwork required to run their guesthouse. However, those more marginalized and poorer members of the community had neither the capital nor an understanding of the "entrepreneurial spirit" required to engage in new business endeavors. They were left at the margins with the same limited opportunities they had before the Trust arrived.

The gold standard for authenticity in Viscri

Viscri illustrates a community, like most, where a number of histories contend for audiences in a given place and time. It also illustrates that the selection of one history over the others is always related to issues of power. Given the Trust's mission in Viscri, there has been no recognition of the various conflicts and inequalities that have been part of the village's history. Further, the Trust has both applied to and extrapolated from Viscri a single "gold standard" – that of the idealized Saxon village and lifestyle - that it has used to define and defend those aspects of village life that it selects for preservation. Again, what is most striking is that the Trust's preservation mission has focused mainly on the restoration of the exterior of the village's buildings. The Trust insists on restoring the facades of buildings according to best practice historic preservation standards, using locally manufactured historically accurate materials and "traditional" forms of labor seemingly regardless of cost when it comes to exteriors or facades of the village's Saxon buildings. At the Trust's conference, members of the research group sat through at least two presentations that extolled the virtues of historically accurate wooden windows over their PVC counterparts. No mention was made of the fact that few Viscri residents could afford the PVC windows, let alone the "historically accurate" wooden ones that cost up to five times more. One of these presentations was given specifically for village residents, to inform them of the Trusts activities and to encourage them to embrace "their" Saxon heritage and to "Maintain (their) Village." This presentation included images only (literacy rates are often low among village dwellers) and was narrated by a Trust representative in Romanian. Its goal was to show images depicting the "right way" and the "wrong way" to repair the outsides of their village houses.

The interiors of the houses, however, may be redone by the owners however they wish. They may have electricity, running water and flush toilets. The interiors of homes in Viscri resemble those of almost any rural village in Transylvania. What the Trust has focused on is restoring the medieval facades that lie along the village's tourist route that leads to Viscri's fortified church. This particular restoration strategy is legitimatized in presentations and

publications by experts or advisers to the Trust, often German, Dutch or British scholars and architects interested in historic preservation.

It is not clear what the Trust has done to improve village infrastructure. At one point, they did institute trash collection, which was quickly discontinued because villagers could not afford the monthly fee (which amounted to less than three dollars per month). They have provided funds for a school "bus" so that Viscri children could attend grades 5-8 in a neighboring village. While the Trust's (Wilkie, 2001) annual report noted that renovations had been made to Viscri's elementary school, village residents were unclear on what work was actually done and it was not immediately clear to the research group what changes had been made there. The Trust's (Wilkie, 2001) report also said that the school's library had been refurbished. However, as of 2007, the school's library was not cataloged, no weeding seemed to be done and the very few post-1989 texts in the collection there had been donated to the school by a member of the community.

Viscri still lacks basic infrastructure, with unpaved roads, lack of public transportation, only two telephone lines serving the village, nominal (at best) cell phone service, and only a few private residences with indoor plumbing. Electricity had been brought to much of rural Romania, including Viscri, under Communism in the 1960's. On several occasions, members of the research group heard architects and planners visiting the village talking about the importance of eventually running the electrical wires (strung up through the village on concrete pylons) underground, so that they would no longer interfere with the tourist's pictures. Among all of the potential improvements the village's infrastructure required, this one seemed to take precedence, if one judged by the amount it was talked about by NGO staff and advisors. Further there seemed to be little awareness or concern with the amount of money this would divert from other village infrastructure projects like sewage and wastewater treatment.

One wonders what effect this preoccupation with façade has had on the lives of ordinary people in Viscri and what benefits this kind of restoration program has brought to those in Viscri, like the Roma, who have the least power and influence. At the time of the research group's visit no Roma houses had been renovated as part of the Trust's historic preservation initiative, though

there was some talk that a Roma house would be renovated later that year. This would be the first such restoration since the Trust began its work in Viscri in the 2002, compared to the several dozen Saxon homes and related buildings renovated during the same timeframe (Trust, n.d. a, Village Projects/Viscri page). In terms of considering what will restore Viscri's economy, the Trust has essentially "bet the bank" on tourism. At this point in time, at least when it comes to rural settlements in Romania, this has become something like received wisdom among the government and NGO entities (Closet-Crane, et al., 2006). The question for which there is not a clear answer is: to what extent does the Trust's restoration project create a viable economic and cultural development strategy for the village?

In Viscri, what for tourists and researchers alike created the impression of a rural "Saxon village" was contemporary village life. It was not the facades of village buildings that were as captivating as the village routine. Outsiders watched fascinated as the village animals were herded through the streets each morning and evening while villagers came out of their homes and socialized as they waited for their animals to return from grazing in the pasture. Visitors photographed the animals that shared the Viscri streets, sidewalks and paths with villagers and tourists alike. Members of the research group talked with the people who drove the horse carts through the streets on their way to perform daily chores, the Roma women knitting socks outside the guesthouse, and the blacksmith as he demonstrated his craft. These rhythms and patterns of rural life are not dependent on the Trust or Saxon heritage. In fact, these aspects of community are the "property" of those who have often been the victims of Saxon (and elite) power and hegemony. The way the villagers in Viscri live their lives today is a direct result of a series of historical, social and economic inequities others have inflicted upon them. The irony of course is that the deprivation (and its results) that ethnic Romanians and Roma have endured over seven centuries is what tourists (and researchers) now come to see and perceive as picturesque and idyllic.

Conclusions: Which traditions should be preserved?

The LIS community is tasked with "saving" cultural heritage and tradition. This task is nowhere more urgent than in Romania, which has experienced disastrous overdevelopment and has shown, until recently, limited interest in cultural or historical preservation. For these reasons perhaps, the LIS community and others involved in these efforts have not questioned the ways in which Western ideas about tradition and culture shape the way they assign significance to those aspects of cultural heritage they are working to preserve. As the LIS literature points out, it is not possible to preserve everything. It is because everything cannot be saved that choices must be made to select certain items over others. The result is that the elite, both local and "expert," often decide whose history is to be remembered and whose is forgotten. Unfortunately "folk" or naïve and romantic notions of tradition lead to the location and preservation first (and primarily) of those cultural elements or "traits" that are believed to have largely escaped change. In this way, the LIS community and others believe the mistakes and distortions of two centuries of cultural and economic "development" can be overcome, avoiding a totalizing modernity and forestalling the creation of a single, global culture.

Handler and Linnekin, Herzfeld and Hannerz suggest something different. They argue that we must be willing to document any number of histories, cultures and communities. The LIS community's role should be to preserve the variety of histories and traditions that exist rather than to define and preserve what at the moment seems to be the "most" authentic or traditional. It is not for preservation efforts to take "sides" on this question. Further, one cannot rely on "native" opinion to guarantee "authentic correctness" because there exist within every community many "natives" and many histories contending for legitimization. It must be understood as well that multiple histories can be involved in and invoked in any one situation. The result should be preservation efforts that represent as many major stakeholders as possible, including victims of power and hegemony.

The LIS research community must remember that there are multiple understandings of history and tradition at work in any preservation project. And the LIS professional's job should be

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to identify and document the multiple histories that inform and are characteristic of ongoing social interaction in a particular community. These multiple understandings of history and tradition often contain within themselves pleas for undertaking particular kinds of actions that will effect a community's social, economic and political development. These various understandings have costs and benefits for the groups that support them and for the groups that do not. As Viscri illustrates, a multiplicity of viewpoints should support and shape a restoration program. To ensure that everyone benefits, it is not enough to simply say, "Let the native(s) decide." This is not a sufficient answer because self interest is no more absent from "traditional" communities like Viscri than it is from more developed or modernized communities. But what LIS professionals can do is to help members of a community imagine, and even put into place alternatives to those "common sense" development paths that always seem to leave someone behind.

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End Notes

[1]   It should be stressed that although this paper critiques many of the Trust's activities, the goal is not to stop charitable activities from occurring in Viscri or elsewhere. On the contrary, the aim is to bring to the forefront the problems inherent in cultural heritage preservation especially when those leading the efforts may not be entirely aware of the difficulties that face them.

[2]   Why Prince Charles has become involved in the "restoration" of Viscri and the role he has played in giving this portrayal of Viscri legitimacy is discussed further by Beasley and Nyce (2009).

[3]   The only point of contention seems to be the number of village families identified as Romanian and Roma, as several community members explained that the majority of families in the Viscri today are Roma but that they prefer to call themselves Romanian. Because the Roma are often discriminated against, this is not uncommon in Romania today (Abraham, Vadescu and Chelcea, 1995).

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