

AUTHENTICITY IN ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM - DEFINING A CONCEPT

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, rural tourism offers diversity in close connection with regional specificity. In this sense, there is an increase in the tourist offer oriented towards the traditional, towards the authentic. The entrepreneurial attempts to reflect the local authentic in the field of tourism are not well defined, often the specific traditional elements are not respected, creating an inappropriate mixture of architectural, gastronomic and cultural styles. Thus, the need to define the concept of authenticity in rural tourism based on vernacular culture is noted and this is the main aim of this paper. Also, theoretical items such as rural space, rural tourism, vernacular, and authenticity are defined and systematized, and essential parameters like elements, principles and methods for substantiating authentic rural tourism are synthesized. These ideas are critically analyzed, and discussed, based on representative documentation from Romanian and foreign literature to which the authors added their modest contribution. Authentic rural tourism offers interesting experiences precisely through originality, local specificity, diversity, in a cultural and geographical framework that completes the knowledge and offers the tourist a truly authentic experience. In this way, an increase in tourist interest is achieved and the foundations are laid for sustainable, representative economic activities at the rural level.

Key words: rural space, rural tourism, vernacular, authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The complexity, richness and attractiveness of the Romanian rural space derive from the combination of the characteristics of the natural landscapes (plain, hill, mountain, Danube Delta, Black Sea) with the socio-economic reality and cultural identity. Dynamic environment, in a permanent transformation and often in confrontation with the urbanism [4], the rural is valued and capitalized also through the tourist activity. As the modern lifestyle imposes an alert rhythm with excessive exposure to technology, in a polluted environment there is a need, especially for the alienated/exhausted citizens, to relax during their free time, in a habitat far from the urban tumult, and the rural space offers a viable answer not only for the escape "from the madding crowd", but also for other fundamental human needs, which can be fulfilled through the direct encounter with the natural, cultural and social resources, valued and capitalized through

rural tourism. These human needs, developed and exploited from/through economic reasons, generated rural tourism (with its various subtypes), which experienced an upward trend in the last decades [3]. Why upward trend? Because, in the present time the globalization which standardize and levels many aspects of our life, also the tourism sector, and rural tourism is offering a large variety of services in close connection with local, regional specificity, noting the increase in the rural environment related tourist offer oriented towards the traditional, towards the authentic - the so-called *glocalization* [25].

To the previously exposed elements, we also note the fact that, in Romania, entrepreneurial attempts to reflect local authenticity in the field of tourism, although growing, are not well outlined, often the traditional elements specific to the place are not respected and/or are replaced through a disharmonious mixture of architectural styles, interior decorations, gastronomic products, the invention of festivals that do not originate in authentic

rural life, etc. which generates widespread kitsch.

Taking into account the importance of rural tourism, as well as the theoretical and normative gap relative to the valorization of vernacular culture in tourism, this paper aims to clarify/define the concept of authenticity in rural tourism by identifying the elements of rural heritage that must be included in the tourist offer, as well as of the principles and methods subsumed under the branch of rural tourism, which we propose and aim to doctrinally articulate: the authentic/vernacular rural tourism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The lack of specialized studies in this context, but also the increased interest of Romanian and foreign tourists in knowing and experiencing the rural specifics determine the need to bring to attention the authentic/vernacular rural tourism by defining and clarifying objective criteria for assessing a level of quality of tourist services, justifying this research.

Through the analysis of national and foreign specialized literature, the theoretical foundation of the essential notions in outlining the ideas of diversity, originality, specificity offered through rural tourism was achieved.

Thus, the present work presents the necessary elements for defining a new concept for the present rural tourism - *authenticity*, reviewing the basic elements that characterize the local/regional socio-cultural life and are able to provide specificity to each place. Basic well known notions such as: rural landscape, rural tourism, vernacular rural tourism, as well as the concept of authenticity will be defined, clarified, discussed – by case.

The expression of these theoretical principles and concepts through the entrepreneurial offer of tourist services, framed as authentic rural tourism, must consider the parameters considered characteristic of the rural space and its essential millennial functions, aspects described schematically and systematized in this work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The rarity of studies in this context suggests a lack of attention inconsistent with the needs of consumers and providers of hospitality services, thus underlining the need for fundamental research in this field [17, 18, 19, 20].

Supporting the importance of promoting traditional authenticity in tourism, Salazar claims that “diversity sells”. The marketing of cultural and heritage tourism, which promotes the experience of so-called authentic traditional cultures, “vividly illustrates this” [25].

On the other hand, through the expansion of tourism in rural areas which is specific to a local and global economic growth, a deconstructive tendency can be found that leads to kitsch, as Cole states: “tourism transforms culture into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in loss of authenticity” [7]. In fact, tourism activity leads to changes, both on the landscape and on the lifestyle and local cultural heritage, which can lead to a loss of authenticity [15].

It is of particular importance the awareness of entrepreneurs in Romania about the branding mechanisms of hospitality, as part of a tourism marketing strategy. This means the reactivation of their “social memory” related to the rural socio-cultural universe [5]. A realistic solution is the production of cultural tourism identity that can be created based on scientific criteria for the appreciation of vernacular culture which is specific to each area of Romania. Thus, several categories of impact are identified: entrepreneurs, tourists, local community. They will be able to benefit from the increase in awareness of the cultural heritage, the value of specific Romanian hospitality and consequently the economic value of tourism, sources of local sustainability [29, 10, 11, 1].

The evaluation of authenticity from the tourist perspective must consider all the elements that generate his experience in the context of Romanian traditional elements [29]. The promotion of Romanian authenticity through a private initiative in tourism proves to be a

successful way that draws attention to local traditional features and helps to preserve characteristic ethnographic elements [9].

The conceptual boundaries between notions such as rural space, rural tourism, rural vernacular tourism can be taken into account through the definitions written below.

Rural space is defined as a particular way of using space and social life and is characterized by:

a) a low density of inhabitants and constructions, mainly including a vegetal expanse in the landscapes.

b) economic use of agro-forestry-pastoral farming dominance.

c) the way of life of its inhabitants, characterized by their belonging to communities of limited size and by their relationship with the geographical space.

d) a specific identity and representation, with strong connotations of village culture [14]

In conformity of actual Rural Areas European Union policy, in rural space which includes inland or coastal area villages and small towns, the land is used in different activities such as: agriculture, aquaculture and fishing and forestry; economic and cultural activities – crafts, services and local industry; development of leisure and natural reserves; and other uses [3].

One of the important components of the modern lifestyle that interferes with the rural space is tourism – not just a recreative activity, but more complex with cultural, social, economic impact – developed in rural areas implying rural communities (agritourism being a subtype).

Another simplest definition regarding rural tourism refers to tourism destinations in rural space with accommodation facilities and other variety of services [27].

World Tourism Organization emphasize the role of local population in tourism activity, local natural, sociocultural and patrimony resources, as well as building and facilities including guesthouses and agritourism farms [23].

Regarding agritourism, this form of tourism activity is based on services like accommodation, meals, leisure and others,

based on local natural and human resources, capitalized in a superior way. One important consequence is rising of life standard in these areas. The peasant household and their agricultural products and also tourist participation in specific rural activities, represent the basis of this activity [27].

Taking into account the above-mentioned definitions, we propose the following conceptual delimitation for **vernacular rural tourism**: that species of rural tourism that capitalizes among the resources available in the rural space on those that are directly and necessary correlated with the zonal, regional/national identity heritage, are recognizable, coherent in the respective space and informally transmitted, which ensured the cohesion, authenticity and specificity (originality) of a community during its history.

Authenticity is a broad concept presented in the specialized literature, with multiple references.

Thus, from the ethnographic perspective, the meaning of the term *authenticity* in the narrow sense refers to: the intrinsic character of everything that is truthful and accurate in relation to material and spiritual reality; that which cannot be disputed as such, all that acts by its own creative authority; in a broad sense: everything that integrates into a context of civilization or culture, as a constitutive and inalienable part and thereby manifests its own creative features, that which is identical to itself in the process of popular creation, reveals the essence of things, phenomena and facts of civilization or culture; what is original in a popular creation, without thereby altering the essence and the traditional style of the creation, the uniqueness of objects and ideas in their extrinsic character, the elementary condition of the crystallization of any ethnic specificity in a valuable popular creation [31]. In the view of Mac Cannell authenticity is a cultural notion that places the past (authentic) in opposition to the present (modernity) [16] but the dichotomy between a premodern (authentic) and modern (inauthentic) has been contested [24]. Thus, modernity includes

elements of authenticity and promotes it as community cultural values.

As typologies of the authentic, the *objective* authenticity (the museum version), the *constructive* authenticity (something that can appear or gain social recognition as authentic) and the *existential* authenticity (a special existential state in which individuals are true to them) are differentiated [32].

Constructive authenticity takes elements of authenticity (vernacular architecture, popular customs, regional traditions, and customs) which it valorizes through cultural tourism.

Also, in relation to tourism, another perspective of authenticity is that of the relationship authenticity - alteration in which three factors are considered essential:

- community control and acceptance
- cultural meanings
- tourists' perceptions [12].

The recognition as authentic of the cultural elements is done by the members of the rural and academic community by highlighting the cultural and symbolic meanings, as it appears from the ethnographic and museum literature.

In the tourist activity, it is necessary to be aware of the danger of the transformation of culture into merchandise, of the commercialization of culture, packed and sold to tourists [6].

Other distinctions required:

• **rural/ vernacular**

The rural can no longer and only partially overlap with the vernacular (in a very small part even) because nowadays the rural space, especially in the wealthy regions, is overflowing the civilization, technology, digitalization. Moreover, the integration into supranational structures, in the trend of globalization, in the waves of contemporary (e)migrations, have introduced values and actions specific to the market economy, resulting in massive depopulation of villages, massive sales of land at low prices, the mixing of ethnicities and implicitly diluting traditions or replacing them with recent customs.

• **original/ vernacular**

The original is what can constitute the first copy, which served or can serve as a basis for

copies, reproductions or multiplications; which was first produced in some form.

Vernacular refers to what is specific to a region, community, etc.

The vernacular also includes elements of originality that are taken over, with the associated symbols and meanings, by the members of a community.

By promoting local authenticity in tourism, the self-identity of the rural community is preserved and promoted, in its originality, in close connection and highlighting local cultural meanings, part of a vernacular culture.

In the case of Romanians, the parameters considered characteristic of rural space are:

- agricultural activities have the largest share, being associated with other activities, for example forestry activities in highland areas;
- family-type household private property predominates as a property regime;
- smaller number of population and lower density compared to urban areas;
- particular natural geographical spaces (due to landscape, water resources, soil and subsoil resources, air quality, fauna and flora, etc.);
- the lifestyle regulated by traditions, principles, norms, unwritten values but validated by millennial experience, "the village being a sanctuary where everything specific to the Romanian people is preserved. The entire social and cultural life represents an unparalleled heritage of humanity" [3];

- Aspects related to infrastructure;

- The way of organization and administration (the territorial unit is the village);

Moreover, vernacular rural tourism must consider the millennial essential functions of the rural space, presented in Fig. 1.

As principles we propose, condensed:

-regionalization of services: each area should preserve and promote its zonal specificity (the vernacular);

-rural tourism operating norms regulation of (by evaluating/classifying tourist units according to objective criteria related to the defining elements of authentic zonal, vernacular culture - architecture, interior design, local gastronomy, traditional folk customs, popular costumes, crafts, rural

landscape, language) as noted and illustrated in Fig. 2.

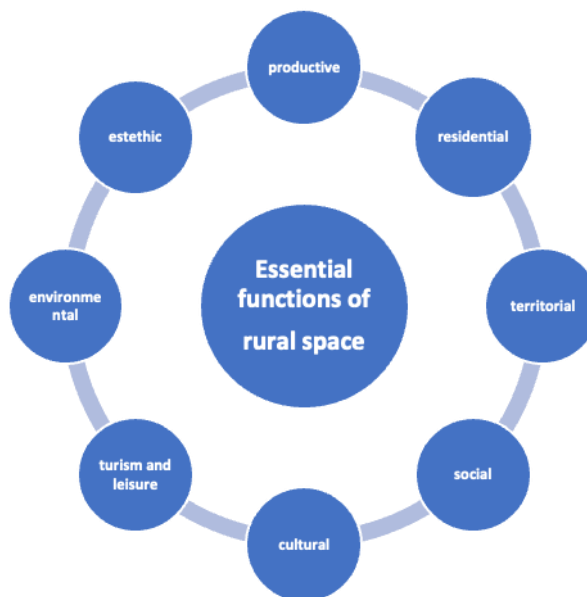


Fig.1. The essential functions of the rural space
 Source: own processing according to Bogan and Simon (2019) [3].



Fig. 2. Rural vernacular tourism - basic elements
 Source: own processing.

In the last decades, rural tourism (with its various subtypes) has experienced an upward trend [3] because it represents, a way of escaping from the urban environment aggression (multiple levels pollution), changing the digitalize system of human connections with direct contact with each other and with the nature and responds to a need for green (in the ecological sense) but

also exoticism of a foreign tourist curious to explore the national specifics of cultures other than the native ones.

But what do we offer to customers, in our days, in a practical way, people which need to experience the authentic, vernacular rural space?

Concretely, unfortunately, most of the time, we offer just a kitsch.

But through interest, education - resources and information, assessment and classification, the situation can be substantially improved. A solid starting point in the study of the traditional rural space is the essential contributions of the Sociological School from Bucharest, the "theory of the joint property community" of Henri Stahl, the "characteristics of the traditional countryside" of Henri Mendras, the "conformism of the soul" of George Marica, the "rural issue" of Ilie Badescu or the "community spirit" of Bogdan Voicu [26, 22, 21, 2, 30]. Equally valuable from a documentary point of view can be the actual living in the rural community that preserved the authentic regional Romanian lifestyle.

Popular culture preserves and expresses "our eternal ethnic" [8], and the rural space is the context in which it was conceived and can be optimally valued and capitalized under the aspect of natural and cultural potential, because the village maintains its "three main functions: economic, ecological and socio-cultural" [13].

The management of popular culture, also reflected in rural tourism, is associated with the promotion of development through self-regenerative systems and calls for a theoretical doctrine to formulate its central articulations: "the principles, concepts and methods of valorizing popular creation in general and folklore in particular" [8] and precisely this theoretical space we aimed to enrich through this research. With a deep philosophy and a methodical spirit, the rural culture manager has as his first premise the research of traditions, both those of an institutional character and those of a non-institutional nature" [8] without whom its activity becomes inappropriate, deviating from the vernacular source that it should preserve, promote, and valorize thoughtfully, because it belongs to the deep Romanian identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the importance of rural tourism, as well as the theoretical and normative gap

relative to the valorization of vernacular culture in tourism, we assume that this paper diminished the lack previously mentioned around the concept of authenticity in rural tourism. The rarity of studies in this context demonstrates also a lack of attention inconsistent with the needs of consumers and providers of hospitality services, thus underlining the need for further fundamental research in this field.

Although the authentic vernacular rural tourism may seem like a utopia at present, the promotion of the concept at the higher educational institutional level and central and local administrative units, but also through private initiatives in this sector, proves to be a successful method that draws attention to the traditional specifics and helps to preserve local ethnographic characteristic elements.

Through authentic rural tourism based on vernacular culture, on the one hand a local entrepreneurial and economic activity is created and supported, and on the other hand a unique socio-cultural heritage is preserved, and the idea of cultural diversity is promoted. Through these, authentic rural tourism correlates perfectly with the truly authentic experiences of tourists who come into direct contact with profoundly Romanian socio-cultural landmarks that have passed the test of time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was supported by the project "AUTHSCORING - Evaluation of the authenticity in rural pensions in Romania", No 844/30.06.2023 - winner of internal competition of University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Romania.

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