A Lithuanian "Ethnographic Village": Heritage, Private Property, Entitlement

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Abstract

In this article, various aspects of engagement with the past and with heritage are explored in the context of Grybija village in southern Lithuania. The village in question is a heritage site within an "ethnographic villages" programme, which was initiated by the Soviet state and continued by Independent Lithuania after 1990. The article thus looks at the ideological aspects of heritage as well as its practical implications to Grybija's inhabitants. Moreover, local ideas about private property, righteous ownership and entitlement are explored in their complexity and in relation to the heritage project. Since much of the preserved heritage in the village is private property, various restrictions and prohibitions are imposed on local residents, which are deemed as neither righteous nor effective by many locals. In the meantime, the discourse of the "ethnographic villages" project exotifies and distances the village and its inhabitants, constructing an "Other" that is both admired and alienated.

Keywords: heritage site, private property, Lithuania.

The fieldsite

Grybija is a small village in the far South of Lithuania, Dzūkija region. There are around 50 permanent inhabitants and another dozen or so who stay for the summer, plus weekend visitors.[1] The village is in the territory of Dzūkijos National Park which was established in order to protect the landscape as well as natural and cultural monuments of the region. Grybija hosts an ancient crafts museum established in 2005 by the National Park and run by one of the village inhabitants. The museum hosts a small display of various archaeological artefacts, old tools and handicrafts, as well as a number of old-fashioned hives located in a forest. It is usually visited by one or two groups of visitors a week, mostly Lithuanians, some of whom also explore the village.

History of the village is not confined to books but is very much embedded in the quotidian life by means of reminiscences, narratives, comparisons and other kinds of engagements. The relationship to the past is much as Nadel-Klein described for the inhabitants of a Scottish fishing village: a "well-known, often visited, and longed-for second home" (Nadel-Klein, 2003, p.104). When speaking of the past, people often referred to previously owned livestock: cows, pigs and horses, which signified both prosperity and close community ties, as the herd of the whole village was looked after communally. Due to poor soil, livestock, foraging, beekeeping, and selling forest wood provided the main source of income to locals. Today berries and mushrooms are sold to a merchant from a nearby town who circulates a number of villages daily in a van buying up goods from locals at prices about a third lower than retail prices in towns. He is nicknamed *Gagarinas*

after a Russian astronaut and his blue van is anticipated patiently by villagers every afternoon. While previously foraging was mostly done in large groups, today it is almost always carried out in solitude, and only occasionally with close friends or kin. This change has gradually occurred over the last few decades.

In what follows, questions of heritage, private property and entitlement are discussed in the context of this small heritage village. Discourse and impact of the ongoing heritage project are analysed in historical context, looking at ideological as well as practical implications.

"Ethnographic Village"

Grybija is considered an "ethnographic village" - a heritage status first awarded by the Soviet state in 1967 and later maintained by Independent Lithuania with irregular project boosts between 2003 and 2011.[2] [3] An "ethnographic village" is defined as a rural settlement which has preserved traditional and historical ethno-cultural characteristics of a particular region. It is exceptional in its ethno-architecture (traditional buildings with traditional interior, structure, plan, etc.), archaeological, mythological, natural monuments, values and lived tradition (communal life, farming, trading, crafts, folk art, folklore, wisdom (Etninės Kultūros Globos Taryba 2003)[4].

In practice, it is a lived-in heritage site that functions very similarly to any other rural settlement in Lithuania. The only apparent distinctions of "ethnographic villages" are a slightly larger number of old wooden houses and a number of restrictions on construction works that the villagers have to face. While the project was aimed at creating "favourable administrative, judicial, informational, social and economic conditions, <...> to preserve ethnic culture heritage and support live ethnic culture phenomena" (ibid), these goals by and large seem to have failed and are unheard of to local residents unhappy with their living conditions. More than that, most residents know very little about the heritage project in their village and are bitter and confused about the constraints that it causes, in particular restrictions and prohibitions on construction and

Heritage and ideology

It is at first sight strange that an imperial power like the Soviet Union should try to preserve the ethnic heritage of its subjugated units. However, ethnic identity was at the core of cultural hegemony and propaganda used by the state. The state discourse promoted what Wilk (1995) called "systems of common difference" – displaying local differences in ways that are surprisingly uniform and predictable. "Ethnographic villages", folk song festivals, regional costumes and decorations – all of these and other forms of displaying ethnic differences were prevalent across the Soviet Union, but these differences essentially implied sameness as they were portrayed in standardised, generalised and essentialised ways. Moreover, these forms of standardised difference squeezed ethnic culture into a Soviet cultural kitsch, where certain traditional, familial, conservative norms and values were reinforced and internalized, appealing to sentimentality and nostalgia (Rausing, 2004, p.138). This rendered ethnic culture objectified and normative, serving the state ideology at that. Every ethnic group was stereotyped and readily comparable to any other group (ibid, p.72). Furthermore, in state propaganda different ethnic groups and nations were envisioned as coming together to build socialism. The idyllic image of comradeship of different peoples also worked to present the empire as a voluntary union to romantic leftist intellectuals in Western countries (Moore, 2001, p.114). It is not in the scope of this paper to analyse the complexities of the role of folklore studies, ethnology and anthropology in the Soviet project; an extensive discussion on the topic can be found in Hirsch (2005).

As Graham et al note, "heritage is about the political and economic structures of the present using the past as a resource" (Graham, 2000, p.6). Thus heritage is used to legitimise the state and its ideology by appealing to sentimental values and interpreting history; it is used to formulate popular opinion and work towards economic and other goals. However, "heritage is a meaning rather than artefact, thus it ensures a field of social conflict and tension, carrying differing and incompatible meanings simultaneously" (ibid, p.8). Put differently, heritage is a field of interpretations and meanings that are always contested and redefined, so various individuals and groups may perceive a certain heritage site in a number of ways regardless of ideological intentions of its managers. In the case of Grybija, the heritage project was initiated in the context of Soviet "common difference" ideology and subsequently continued by Independent Lithuania, both periods infusing the site with distinct meanings and significance and employing it in differing ideological contexts.

In particular, the post-Independence discourse of the "ethnographic villages" documents splits Lithuanian history into three strictly distinguished periods: pre-Soviet (up to 1940), Soviet (1940-1990) and current/post-Soviet (1990-present). The first period is seen as forming the essence of Lithuanian identity; culture and lifestyle of the villages is defined as "traditional", "authentic", "real Lithuanian", "built by hands of *our* ancestors", "people harmoniously co-existing with nature" (Purvinas, 2005). The second period distinguished in many of the documents is that of the Soviet occupation, described as a "time of falseness and fall", "mutilating the old culture" defined by "loss of virtues", (ibid). The third period started after Lithuanian Independence and is portrayed as a time of "healing", "regeneration", "social, economic, cultural and spatial ordering". In this period, "most layers of society are indifferent to traditional ethnic culture, tempted by the reflections of Western life" (ibid).

While it is clear that the Soviet regime had a massive and detrimental effect on the past and present of Lithuania, the concern of this article is not to evaluate the moral claims of the project documents cited but to notice and analyse the situated meanings and uses of heritage and the discourse of heritage documents. The heritage discourse is not stating the value of a certain object matter-of-factly, but it is infusing it with value from a particular point of view. Thus the same heritage site was deemed as valuable by the Soviet regime – for illustrating the "common differences" of the many ethnic groups of the Union coming together – and is now deemed valuable by the post-Soviet Lithuanian government for communicating the notions of authenticity, continuity with the pre-Soviet tradition and Lithuanian identity. A particular formulation of the past and the present is embodied and reproduced in heritage sites while remaining subject to changing socio-political climate and interpretations.

Private property

Crucial in the heritage project in question are issues of private property and nationalism, and the question of belonging, which in a sense ties the two. Verdery (1998a) discusses post-Soviet states as "ethnonationalist", where "nation" has a primarily ethnic and not political sense to it, which affects rights to citizenship (e.g., granting it to non-resident ethno-nationals but not residents non-ethno-nationals) and property rights (e.g., only citizens are allowed to own property in the country). Entitlement to property may thus be directly related to certain (ethnic) ways of belonging to a nation-state.

Although Lithuania has been independent for over twenty years, the processes of privatisation and re-gaining property are still taking place, due to the practical complexities involved and an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus. Similarly, these processes are very much alive in daily

conversations and actualities of village life. Ideas about entitlement rights are forming popular opinions, often in disregard and opposition to the state regulations.

Reminiscences of nationalisation as well as more recent and ongoing ones of privatisation were recounted to me repeatedly and often emotionally. Major themes of injustice, immorality, absurdity and unpredictability of the state were apparent. I shall provide here an excerpt from an interview with Justina, an outspoken and well-respected 78-years-old Grybija inhabitant.

> *"When they started the kolkhoz [state-owned communal farm]... Our village was the last one, but still. They sent this Russian officer and started the kolkhoz, and took everything away: the cows, the horse, absolutely everything, the grain even, and millstones, everything. They came with officers and [took] what we had, because they needed to sow <...> They sowed rye, sowed potatoes, but they failed. People's horses were taken away and they got run down and died, everything died, and the grain was taken away and nothing came out of it, and we were left with nothing at all. <...> And that's how we lived. <...>*
> *We had this little house, we all lived there. Father died, and left everything to his eldest son, and we didn't need to sign anything, not anything. He died, and he left it to him. And now try to make documents if you can! Is this justice? That's what it's like... When you had it, you had it. And now you have to buy it, because it's state-owned. The kolkhoz took it away from us, we didn't sell it, nothing like that, and now they say they're returning it to us, but what kind of returning is it when we need to buy it? This isn't returning.*
> *And for exiles - they give land to exiles when they come back from Russia, and us who stayed in Lithuania and got all taken away - we don't get anything back! The exiles got more than they should, in money and land, double of what they had. Even their grandparents never had that much. And they took everything away from us. And those who were closer to the top, accountants, secretaries, guards, all of them, they got it better... And our village... We didn't get anything, and don't have anything now. Is this equality? <...>"*
> *[When asked about owning forest land] "I don't have any documents. Now that my husband died, the documents were on him, you just try to get it back... On and on and on, it's been 4 years and there's nothing yet... There's this law, that law, we don't know anything, on and on and on. I've heard you need to buy it off now. And how can I buy it off, with my 5 fingers?*
> *We've never been Lithuanians anyway... So this is what life is like, and all..."*

Local consequences of state policies are visible in this excerpt. Ready-made uniform Soviet projects did not work equally well everywhere - a large agricultural kolkhoz made little sense in a mostly pastoralist and foraging land of poor soil in Grybija, which made the state be perceived as a formation of all-power and no-sense; it is thought of and experienced as bringing death, exile and hardships upon people, and taking their property away. Moreover, the present Independent state is seen as irrational, immoral and senseless, wrongly redistributing the land and compensations, and favouring exiles over locals. Interestingly, a distinction between the Soviet and the Independent state in not made by Justina; the important opposition in her narrative is that between the state and the people, rather than between the Soviet and the Independent state. She does not identify with either one, suggesting that Grybija has "never been Lithuanian anyway". What Justina expresses here should not be taken as a sincere resignation of her Lithuanian-ness, but more as a profound

disappointment with both the Soviet and the post-Soviet political realities, such as bureaucracy and restitution processes.

While questions of nationality, belonging and righteous ownership are obviously complex and multiple in Grybija, the following discussion will instead focus firstly on questions of entitlement to property and secondly on its relation to heritage.

Entitlement

Verdery calls for an understanding of property which considers not only "markets", "democracy", but also broader moral concepts and processes like entitlement, accountability, responsibility, which form a large part of what is understood and experienced as property relations in practice (1999: 54). Moreover, she suggests that "property is best analysed in terms of the whole system of social, cultural and political relations" rather than parts of it, such as "rights" and "claims" (1998b: 161). Thus, she suggests we should analyse property not as a bundle of rights, but as a bundle of powers (ibid). The state plays a large role in these power relations in the post-socialist context as it is the re-distributor of property. However, local ideas of entitlement do not necessarily correspond to the ones defined by law, therefore resulting in disagreements regarding righteous ownership.

In Verdery's own ethnography of a Transylvanian village (1998b), culturally- and context-specific factors must be fulfilled in order to righteously own a property, such as contribution to the property by one's kin, ability to use it in ways beneficial to the community, and a specific kind of belonging to the village. This morality of entitlement reflects certain power hierarchies of the village itself, such as relations of in-migrants and inborn residents, different families, occupations, alliance with certain groups. Another example that shows cultural specificity of the concept of private property comes from Anderson's work in Siberia (1998). He argues that entitlement to the land among Evenki people is gained through a lifelong contact with it, as well as through "knowing the land". Anderson expands anthropological understanding of property relations, arguing that they consist of the whole ecological framework of different kinds of human and non-human agency.

What then are the culturally specific ways in which entitlement to property is defined by Justina and others in Grybija village? Firstly, previous ownership by close kin is crucial. Secondly, long term residence in the village is essential. Justina reflects on this point by complaining about the inequalities of redistribution, where exiles were treated preferentially over locals who stayed in the village. Thirdly, a righteous owner is one who contributes to the village community. As put by another informant when talking about a summer-and-weekend-resident from a nearby city, "What's the use of him? He's a fine young man, mingles with locals. But he won't help in daily labour. I was away and I left my animals for three days and I told him that, I was testing him. It didn't occur to him to go check on them. You can't trust these people". Thus to be a righteous resident of the village one has to not only contribute to village life, but also have competence in the daily labours of the villagers and sense the need for help and cooperation which may at times be covert.

Another example of the understanding of entitlement in Grybija is apparent in the use of nicknames. When referring to a person in his/her absence, a nickname would be used to complement the name, mostly due to little variety of first names in the village. Every single individual residing in the village had a nickname. To those having ancestry in Grybija, nicknames stemmed from one's mother or father, spouse's parents, or a more distant ancestor: e.g., *Augučio* Laimutė - Laimutė of Augutis (grandfather). Importantly, people who were not born or married into the village but bought property from locals were all known by the name of previous house-owners: e.g., *Janinos* Dalia (Janina - previous house-owner). In this example, Dalia has spent several months every year in

Grybija for the last 20 years, often went on foraging trips with locals, and mingles with them daily when in the village, however, she was not perceived as a fully entitled resident of Grybija. On several occasions when mentioned to local residents, they would ask "What Dalia?". "My neighbour", I would reply, and after a few moments of thought I would hear "Oh, *Janinos* Dalia, *apspirkus*". *Apspirkus*, used interchangeably with *nuspirkus* (*apspirkęs/nuspirkęs* for masculine) is a past participle form of a verb *pirkti* ("to buy"), thus loosely translatable as "she/he who has bought". A reflexive particle *-s-* in the word implies a self-directed action, defining the action of buying as individualistic and giving it a slightly negative shade, distinguishing one from the village community.

Apspirkęs/nuspirkęs was used nearly every time one of the 8 *apspirkį* people in the village were mentioned regardless of the topic of conversation. The only person that avoided the term was Valdas who moved into the village 17 years ago and lives there all-year around contributing to the community by helping others out, mowing the public areas, and living a village life complete with agriculture, foraging and keeping animals. Although he bought a house and was first referred to in previous house-owner's nickname (*Genios* Valdas), through long-term residence, contribution to the community and living in traditional village ways (as well as coming from a nearby village), Valdas was naturalised into the village, and came to be nicknamed by his (now ex-) wife rather than the previous house-owner. Thus entitlement to property and residency in Grybija village is a negotiated process of belonging and becoming while being defined in terms of relationships with locals, knowing and practicing traditional livelihoods in the village.

Heritage and private property

In the context of an "ethnographic village", what is the relation between private property, entitlement and heritage? This is an important question, as the most actively preserved heritage in the village is in fact houses, privately owned by the locals. However, the state enforces numerous regulations on their maintenance. Every construction work has to be institutionally approved, which is costly in time and money as construction plans have to be prepared by a hired architect, who assesses if the plan is "ethnographically suitable for the area and the village" (Statybų saugomose teritorijose regioninių architektūrinių reglamentų aprašas 2009). On many occasions, I was told that the approval of the official architect was near-impossible to get without bribes, and several villagers loathed the bureaucratic procedures and thus altogether abandoned the idea of renovating their properties. Although the restrictions have been in place since the 1967 act, throughout the Soviet period they were not actively enforced, resulting in the current architectural chaos in the village, where 100+ year old wooden houses stand next to standard Soviet style houses of the 70s, next to Soviet remains, such as a large concrete ex-kolkhoz building. Incidentally, building regulations now apply to all buildings, old and new alike.

Recently, a new kind of building added to the architectural variety of Grybija, and one of the very few that passed the strict "ethnographic" regulations. The house is owned by a well-off middle-aged family from the capital city that bought a piece of land in Grybija three years ago with an intention to build a house and move in permanently. They appreciated the complexities involved in building new houses in an "ethnographic village": "no problem, the restrictions are great. It means the village won't change too much, it won't degenerate, no absurd buildings will be built, no ugly roofs and that. Not anyone can move in here". Their house is nearly finished now, complete with Scandinavian factory-cut wood and plastic windows, as well as running water and plumbing, which is found nowhere else in the village, and not exactly "traditional" as they are supposed to be. Locals often referred to this house when generally asked about the building restrictions:

"Restrictions are fine when they apply equally to all. And now look - the new house, if you have money you can do whatever you like. And apspirkį, they buy within regulations, they say they'll keep the village as it is, and then do what they like because they have money. If the government wanted to conserve the village they could, and now [restrictions] are there for some and not others. So what can you do, what?"

In this excerpt, a village resident Marija expressed distrust in both the state that is corrupt and unfair and *apspirkį* newcomers who seem to be the only ones financially and bureaucratically able to deal with construction regulations. The state is seen as working against people who belong to the place: not only does it re-distribute the land to those not entitled to it; it also turns a blind eye to well-off newcomers while restricting locals' rights.

Turnbridge and Ashworth argue that in any heritage project disinheritance is inevitable, since all heritage is by definition someone's and not someone else's (Turnbridge and Ashworth, 1995, p. 21). In this case, the "ethnographic villages" project allows the state to claim Grybija as its own – national – heritage, consequently causing disinheritance on the side of the villagers and taking away their power to manage it. Villagers do not see the state institutions as entitled to control local property and, since local ideas of heritage differ from institutional ones, sabotage and alternative heritage practices are employed. These include occasional building renovations (such as instalment of plastic windows) without informing officials, selling a house to a museum and a local man's plan to establish a lived-in farm museum.[5] Thus, state control over property that it is not righteously entitled to is condemned in both discourses and practices.

Local implications

By enforcing certain restrictions and regulations on the private property of Grybija's residents, officials favour certain groups over others in that only financially capable people may live comfortably in the heritage site. The oldest houses which form the core of Grybija's "ethnographic" architecture - one of which I lived in during my fieldwork - are mostly in an alarming condition and either unsuitable for living in or inhabited by those financially incapable of institutionally approved renovation works, as they imply hiring architects, buying legal (rather than smuggled or foraged) materials, and so on. Thus being a heritage site in Grybija is often perceived among locals as a burden on the poor - those *apspirkį* who are better off can comply to the regulations and maintain their ways of life, while locals with fewer financial capabilities are forced to live "in the past", unable to manage even their own private property.

The situation is exacerbated since heritage is often the ultimate luxury item consumed by the middle and upper classes (Graham et al, 2000, p.42). Both Skultans (1998 pp.142-149) in Latvia and Rausing (2004, p.51-56) in Estonia argue that peasanthood is seen as a core of national identity in the Baltic countries, it is romanticised and celebrated by urban middle classes and intellectuals alike. Thus peasantry and idealised rural images played a large role in the middle- and upper- classes imagining a national community of each of the Baltic countries, with similar trends apparent in Lithuania.

Urry (1990) uses the term "tourist gaze" to refer to a tourist engagement with a site that perceives the place as cut off from the "real" world and emphasises the exotic aspect of it and of the experience. Combined with the class distinctions mentioned above, the tourist gaze results in exotification and thus distancing of the Grybija villagers, who live daily in "the past" that is gazed upon. The supposedly "ethnographic" properties of the village are valued and admired by tourists,

and perceived as pristine and archaic, and essentially Other. Nash similarly argues that "pre-modern" non-European cultures were simultaneously desired and degenerated as primitive by Europeans of the Enlightenment period (Nash, 1999, p.22). Oppositions and contradictions are projected on the category of the Other, thus both distancing and admiring it.

The case of Grybija "ethnographic village" is thus complex and ambiguous. The village is exoticised, "othered", denied coevalness (Fabian, 1983) by means of heritage discourses and practices. Moreover, the village is enclosed in a defined space distinguished from the surrounding environment and other villages by means of signs, texts, notice boards and the like. It therefore becomes a variety of a "historical non-place" as defined by Augé, where links between a visitor and the non-place are established through mediation of signs and texts, guiding one's engagement with the non-place and explaining its significance (Augé, 1995, p.94). The village is marked out and spatially separated, thus denying a shared space with the rest of the country, as well as a shared time, forcing them to live "in the past". At the same time, the village is esteemed as an authentic and fragile embodiment of Lithuanian national identity, attacked but unbroken by the Soviet regime.

While Grybija is a *lieux de memoir* (Nora, 1989) - especially for the urban middle classes romantically gazing upon it - and an embodied interpretation of history, it is crucially also a home to dozens of people who face restrictions to their livelihoods for reasons largely unclear to them. As a local elderly lady Laimutė put it, smiling and shrugging shoulders, "There's no antiquity left in Grybija, nothing to be preserved". Adding to the confusion and ambiguity, local ideas of entitlement are vastly at odds with not only the restrictions and regulations of residents' private property, but also with local understandings of entitlement since wealthier newcomers are seen as bypassing both moral and legal regulations. The "ethnographic villages" project is therefore problematic in Grybija, and currently seems more effective and relevant as a source for discourse studies than as a functioning heritage site.

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Notes

1. Names of the village and its residents are changed in the article to ensure anonymity.
2. In Lithuanian, "ethnography" (*etnografija*) has several different meanings. According to the Dictionary of Contemporary Lithuanian Language, it is "(1) study of material and spiritual ethnic culture; ethnology; (2) features of lifestyle, customs and culture of people". The word is used to describe "traditional" and "unique" qualities of a certain ethnic group, usually associated with the past.
3. Etninės Kultūros Globos Taryba (2003), Lietuvos etnografinių kaimų išlikimo ilgalaikės programos projektas (2004), Bučas (2005), Dėl Etnografinių kaimų išsaugojimo 2011-2013 metų tarpinstitucinio veiklos plano patvirtinimo (2011).
4. I translated this and other excerpts from interviews, documents and books from Lithuanian.

5. A local family in the late 70s sold their late 19th century house to a museum of ethnic culture (Rumšiškės). It was taken apart and re-constructed in the museum 200 km away, where it now represents architecture of the region. The previous owner of the house reflected on this saying deemed it appropriate to display their old lifestyles in a museum, and they received financial compensation.