HERITAGE AND THE MAKING OF (TRANS-)LOCAL IDENTITIES: A CASE STUDY FROM THE CURONIAN SPIT (LITHUANIA)

Anja Peleikis
Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Introduction

In the context of globalisation debates, the examination of local spaces has also received new meanings. While ‘locality’ has been generally understood as a social space defined by direct face-to-face relations, by physical proximity and a form of everyday routine in the ‘here and now’, this equation has been called into question more and more. Locality in the sense of physical proximity is no longer the only model based on which local community is conceived. Empirical case studies have shown that social groups are also constituted beyond local, regional and national borders, a result of the reduction of geographic distances owing to new global information and transport technologies.\(^1\) Locality is imagined less and less as a static unit with clearly defined borders to the outside or as a ‘container’ in which local life manifests itself, but as an object of social practice and construction. Thus, it has become necessary to give up fixed and stable conceptualisations of ‘locality’ and follow more dynamic and flexible concepts.

Appadurai has suggested asking how locality is in fact produced by different social actors at different points in time.\(^2\) He states that locality is always context-generative as well as context-driven.\(^3\) Context-generative images of locality are formed by local actors themselves, who in rituals, rites of passage, by way of festivals and shared work for example, generate their understanding of local identities.

---

\(^1\) See for example Anja Peleikis, *Lebanese in Motion: Gender and the Making of a Translocal Village* (Bielefeld, 2003); Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, 2001).


\(^3\) Appadurai, “The Production of Locality,” p. 211.
'from below'. At the same time, local actors are also context-driven by forces 'from above', for instance by powerful national or global actors. By now it has become obvious, however, that a dichotomising contrasting of constructions of locality as 'from below' or 'from above' appears ambivalent. In many cases of constructions of locality originating 'from below' it can be observed how local actors take up global conceptions and ideas in order to integrate them, localise them and make them into components of essentialist definitions of local culture and identity. Thus, it has become a commonplace to say that global processes are expressed in the local, and local ways of life, on the other hand, may spread globally. Producing locality has actually become in many places a constant struggle where different social actors mobilise and combine different local and global resources creatively and strategically to stabilise their influence or obtain new power resources.

Mobilising diverse interpretations and representations of the local past and heritage has actually become one important resource and instrument in negotiating local identities in times of globalisation. While until only a few decades ago the word 'heritage' was commonly used to describe an inheritance that an individual received in the will of a deceased ancestor or bequeathed when dead to descendants, the range of meanings attached to this formerly legal term has recently undergone an expansion to include almost any sort of intergenerational exchange or relationship. Following Graham et al. I will use the term 'heritage' to denote the contemporary use of the past. Hence, people are at the focus of this definition. They are the creators of heritage, and not merely passive receivers or transmitters of it. People create representations and objects of heritage as they require it and manage it for a range of contemporary purposes. Two of these purposes will be delineated in more detail in the following, namely how creating heritage can serve economic interests in the context of tourism and how the making of heritage serves identification processes at the local and national scale.

---

4 Ibid.
7 Graham et al., *A Geography of Heritage*, p. 1.
8 Ibid., p. 2.
9 Ibid.