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## **THE “MACEDONIAN VILLAGE” PROJECT: AN EXAMPLE OF AN INVENTED TRADITION IN SKOPJE**

**Abstract:** It is known that the former socialist societies tend to make major changes in appearance and to forget the socialist past, while turning to a distant past. Skopje is the leader when it comes to promoting the distant past. Thus, the newly built “Ethno Village” or “Macedonian ethno - village” in Skopje is among the many monuments that were built in the last decade. The idea behind the building of a dozen houses that represent copies of former habitats located in several Macedonian regions was to promote the Macedonian tradition and architecture among the Macedonian citizens, but also among the foreigners visiting Skopje. The complex is a result of the predator economic liberalism whose goal is not a good quality culture, but rather to profit from culture. The transformation of culture into merchandize means managed culture or culture not as a way of life, but as a way of consumption, i.e. a market commodity.

**Key words:** Ethno village, Skopje, economy, museum, politisation.

### **Introduction**

During the course of the history of their existence, human tirelessly created and crafter works valued today and defined as cultural heritage, as well as classified in various categories and areas, subareas, sub-subareas etc. Still, humans throughout did not intend to create cultural heritage, but to create, primarily to improve the conditions they lived in and they did that in different ways harmonious with the environment in which they existed, the climate characteristic for area where they lived, the building materials prevalent in that area etc.

The formation of modern states in Europe often features attempt to construct a *societal memory* referring precisely to *cultural heritage*. Namely, both of these categories in modern society represent close and interconnected practices related to the reproductive societal life. Both create emotional and cognitive traits which mutually share historic change and continuity. Frequently people aggrandize the events of the past, even reaching what Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbaum 2002: 5-6) calls “inventing tradition”. This author suggests that nothing appears more ancient and linked to an immemorial past. The term “inventing tradition”, according to Hobsbawm is used in a broad, but not an inaccurate sense. Certainly, such creations do necessarily require specific cultural elements within the cultural heritage, i.e. elements comprising the so called *cultural capital*. Still the idea

of heritage means that both capital and culture do not intend the cultural capital concept, elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (Graham 2002: 1004). Namely, Bourdieu established this concept ruled by the elite which, as a result of its power can grab certain cultural products of society and also controls the criterion for testing, selection and valuation of some of the products which it uses for its own purposes, indeed if the products exert sufficient legitimacy, influence and strength. Hence, this may prove that dominant ideologies create specific regional and local identities, strengthened with the support of state structures and the other politically close ideologies. Therefore, we can say that heritage is so powerful that dominant ideologies “battle to control” it and different cultures and different periods interpret heritage differently.

In addition, for the past few decades, people created a society of shameless consumption and they began seeing themselves primarily as consumers. The term “consumerism” or “consumer society” became redundant, since a different type of society cannot even be imagined. The mystified free time became consumption time and people became slaves to freedom and victims to the long promised better life. People began to strongly believe that technology will resolve all problems, because that term most closely resembled the imposed notion of wellbeing. Therefore, profit ideology became one of the more significant remaining ideologies, acquiring an ever greater global identity and strongly influencing museums. The unrelenting growth of production and consumptions created new demands. Anything could become goods, which meant that it could be produced, bought and sold. Thus, “free market economy” became the new syntagm of capitalism. In this regard, culture could also be produced as goods. It could also be sold for a price. The commodification of culture, i.e. its transition into goods is not a new process, but it has never been as big as it is today. Part of that production relates to the knowledge and entertainment industry. The traditional museums active in this environment try, consistently with this concept to attract consumers and give them information and knowledge either freely or for a small fee (Šola 2001: 7).

### **Context: “Macedonian Village” in Nerezi**

“Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past“, (Hobsbaum 2002: 5) corroborates the idea to create something completely new, which, in fact, should seem old and remind us of some Macedonian tradition. This relates to the Macedonia’s Government project to create a Macedonian ethno village in Nerezi above Skopje, right above the St. Pantelejmon monastery, a famous picnic area on the slopes of Vodno. Initially, the authorities responsible for the creation of such a complex in Skopje announced that “it will be similar to that in Stockholm (Sweden) which brings in 26 million EUR and about three million tourists annually” (Utrinski vesnik) and that it will aim solely at promoting and affirming the Macedonian cultural heritage and the Macedonian culture in general. Although the project was announced in 2007, then as a public – private partnership, construction began on 2011 and ended in 2015, spending about 5.5 million EUR of the taxpayers’ money. Although constructed, still the Macedonian Government did not open it to the public, explaining that they have not found a concessioner for the complex, because the planned called for transferring the completed project to a private entity for a monthly fee. Firstly, the initially selected concessioner “Trend Plus” quit, and

the government issued a new bid where the company “Tinex” applied and at it finally started the “Macedonian Village” Project. In addition to this company, hotel “Queens”, owned by the “Tinex” company, also applied on the tender. According to the criteria of the Government, only the “Tinex” company, owned by the family of the former mayor of the municipality of Center, Vladimir Todorovic, fulfilled the requirements to run the Macedonian Village complex in Nerezi. The media suggested that the company should pay the state a monthly rent for running the complex, in the amount of 3,500 EUR for the next 20 years.

## **Museum installation in the complex**

The postmodern society or the consumer society has its own rules that we cannot ignore. Museums are looked upon merely as “tourist spots” and not as discrete institutions that collect, maintain, research, and present artifacts (Mat, Flac, Lederer 2002: 10). The museums no longer represent places where people can learn more about a culture or someone’s past, but people also see them as venues for entertainment. In such a state of affairs, traditional museum administrations cannot battle the decline in revenues and the pressure of the new problems of political nature. The museums are so vulnerable that once faced with changed economic circumstances and a new political milieu, their administrative structure crumble like a house of cards (Anderson 1992: 159). These may have been the reasons for incorporating in the “Macedonian Village” Complex, an ethnographic museum that would fill the gaps in the entire complex. Thus, the reports of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, the “Macedonian Village” Project stretches over 12,000 square meters where 16 authentic houses have been built. In addition to the houses, the complex also features a museum, an amphitheater, a souvenir shop, a workshop, pens etc. The ethnographic museum installation which occupies the central position in the complex, according to the authorities from the Ethnological Museum in Skopje and the Ministry of Culture, exhibits more than 150 ethnographic artefacts, displayed here for the first time. Most of them consist of women’s folklore dresses and jewelry originating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dnevnik).

Years went by between the announcement and the final realization of the “Macedonian Village” Project and still we do not know whether the overall design of the project included ethnologists or not. Having in mind that this is a rather specific profession, we rapidly came to the conclusion that the project implementation completely neglected the profession and no one sought a professional opinion about the entire concept of the envisioned project. In the last stage of the project implementation, which planned for a museum installation in some of the buildings, the implementers consulted the Ethnological Museum in Skopje, asking them to provide 20 complete sets of women’s and 20 complete sets of men’s folklore dresses. The project designers were greatly disappointed when the ethnologists from the Ethnological Museum in Skopje explained to them that none of the museum installations in Macedonia possesses 20 complete sets of men’s folklore dresses because the men’s folklore dress elements were abandoned much earlier than the women’s one and, until the formation of the museum institutions in Macedonian in the 1920s and 1930s, they had virtually disappeared.

## Macedonian village, but with town houses!

Strolling along the cobblestone alleys of the Macedonian Village in Nerezi, one gets the impression that people lived well more than 100 years ago in Macedonia. The Macedonians had nice two floor houses, all made of carved stone using the so called post and petrail building technique. The entire “story” of the so called “Macedonian Village” absolutely omits the part corresponding to the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when most of the Christian population were serfs and lived in the villages and their houses were nothing like those presented in the “Macedonian Village” in Nerezi. In fact, most of the people at that time lived in dwellings called “tronjs” (in the flatlands) and earth shelters (in the hilly and mountainous regions). It is not that the dwellings in the “Macedonian Village” Project did not exist, but they represented a significantly smaller percentage of the total number of living quarters in Macedonia, and in our case we get the impression that these were the most common dwellings.

On the other hand, we are dealing with houses “brought” from other areas to Nerezi, near Skopje in order to create some kind of a village which will represent Macedonia. However, the houses are only virtually “brought”, i.e. only the idea to build such houses was brought here. In most of the similar examples from around the world, specific structures from the area are disassembled and the closest possible ambient is created for them and these buildings are then built anew using the original materials. This means, in that case, the houses are transferred from one context to another (which we can call museum). From what was realized in the Macedonian case, we may infer that, when implementing the “Macedonian Village” Project, the designers carefully included houses or dwellings from multiple regions of Macedonia, but they did not care or did not know that the Macedonian building tradition includes also has specific house typologies, namely village and town houses. At first glance, in layman terms, it almost does not matter whether the houses belong to a village or a town. What is important, but only for the project, is that, sometime ago Macedonians lived in such houses and that after the realization of a context such as this one, these houses would present the Macedonian tradition from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea to create a museum ethnographic context from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is quite fine, but one must point out that, during that period, places like Bitola, Kratovo, Tetovo and some others included in the project were typical townships subject to completely different rules and principles, from a cultural point of view, in ethnology than those that apply for the Macedonian villages.

Regardless of the fact that this idea targets the Macedonian or the foreign tourists, who have a whole host of unknowns, still, in addition to the authentic appearance of the house, the project should also present the authentic ambient where such a house existed in the past (in the primary context), unlike the example featured in the “Macedonian Village” Project which presents a typical lowland house from Prilep in a completely mountainous ambient. Furthermore, the idea to present appropriate traditional handicrafts, practiced in and characteristic for that period, in the project is a good idea, but attention should have been paid to, at least, present them appropriately and not to put the pottery handicraft in a Bitola house when a Veles house stands nearby. A completely different

issue refers to the level of development of handicrafts in the Macedonian villages – very low. The towns were the important handicraft centers and not the villages. It is not that the villages did not have any handicrafts, they did, but on a very rudimentary level. Here, we have a village, but with exceptionally prominent handicraft characteristics! It features a dozen handicrafts, especially emphasizing the goldsmith and filigree handicraft which, in reality, absolutely did not exist in any village in Macedonia in the period presented by the “Macedonian Village” Project. Nevertheless, the average Macedonian or foreign tourist will absorb the information presented or provided to him or her.

All of this would not have mattered had it stayed there. A market oriented complex attempting, in its own way, to present the Macedonian culture and tradition, turned into a room that it wants to sell and make money. However, as I already mentioned earlier, the “Macedonian Village” complex also involves one particular institution, i.e. the Ethnological Museum from Skopje who, within the Macedonian Village, has its own section, i.e. its own museum installation with its own professional staff. All of this provides legitimacy for this entire complex and, indeed, guarantees the genuineness of the “story” it “tells”. If we accept the vernacular of the postmodern society and free market economy, the “Macedonian Village” complex in Nerezi near Skopje, together with the ethnographic museum installation of the Ethnographic Museum sell very well their merchandize intertwined with a series of invented and vague instances from the Macedonian tradition. The fact that, out of the six employees in the section of the Ethnological Museum in the Macedonian Village, only two are ethnologists and the others are archeologists, make the whole idea of the project seem even more grotesque.

## Instead of a conclusion

We have a museum within a larger economic complex; a hotel with a fictitious “traditional and old” architecture, with restaurants and cafes that do not correspond at all to the ambient. The existence of the complex supports the notion that the consumer society represents a society of the culture of consuming, but not a cultural society. The complex is a result of the predator economic liberalism whose goal is not a good quality culture, but rather to profit from culture. The transformation of culture into merchandize means managed culture or culture not as a way of life, but as a way of consumption, i.e. a market commodity. Postmodern consumerism finally reached for the symbolic and the conceptual as if they were mere commodities. This explains why, in spite of all the institutions and sources of knowledge, we still experience a growing cultural illiteracy. The market economy run amok offers limitless legitimacy to every outreach where profit is the expected result. This makes it possible to “put the past for sale” (McLean 1997: 143-153).

In addition, the complex helps construct a new truth, i.e. invent a new Macedonian tradition. Here, “the invented tradition” is used in the form of specific activities of ritualistic or symbolic nature, oriented towards the openly or latently accepted rules, aspiring to instill specific behavioral values and norms through repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbaum 2002: 6). In fact, they usually tend to establish continuity with the suitable past. Such examples also exist in the “Skopje 2014” Project, when many buildings built during the socialist period get new eclectic facades.

The historic past in which new tradition is inserted need not be long, it only needs to stretch as far back to the time vaguely envisioned. As long as there is reference to historic past, the particular trait of “invented” traditions is that the continuity they provide is mainly artificial. The activities implemented as part of such invented traditions represent a wig or a robe, i.e. ritualistic activities that follow their concrete actions (Hobsbaum 2002: 7-8). At this time, I should also mention the engagement of the folklore ensemble “Macedonia” from Skopje which complemented the overall ambient. There is no time or place considered by researchers, without “inventing” traditions, in this or some other similar forms. However, we should expect that this will occur more frequently when the rapid transformation of societies significantly weakens and destroys the social patterns.

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