

## **IDENTITY ENCOUNTERS. HOST-GUEST INTERACTIONS IN THE LAND OF MOȚI (ROMANIA)**

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to make a regional analysis of the community of Moți (residents of the mid Western Carpathians) and to spotlight the way in which tourism relations are established between the host and the guest communities. The concept of staged authenticity, front stage and backstage relations are also debated in the case of old festivals, customs and traditions where authenticity and unnaturalness intermingle. For the regional analysis tourist statistical data referring to the accommodation supply in the Land of Moți were carried out. The study methodology relies on target sampling-questionnaires applied to former miners to understand which the identity features of the community are and how the former can influence tourism development in an ex-mining region, but on the brinks of regaining this status. The respondents indicated that local identity stems deeply into history, the harsh times and land morphology having polished their strong character and Christian faith. Another sample questionnaire (30 respondents) was also applied to tourists in the Arieșeni local resort to highlight tourism motivation drivers.

**Key words:** back/front stage relations, tourist, host community, the Land of Moți

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### **SPATIAL AND MENTAL PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LAND OF MOȚI**

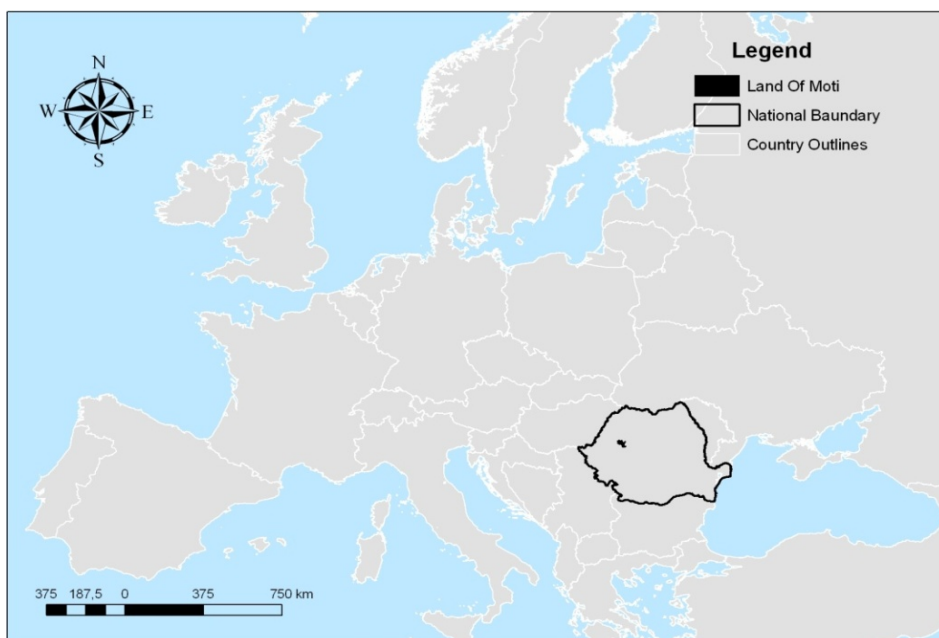
The Land of Moți represents an important landmark for the population residing in the Apuseni Mountains, located in the midst or central part of the latter (Ielenicz & Comănescu, 2006), centered on the upper part of the Arieș Valley catchment area, circumscribed from an administrative and territorial viewpoint to Alba County and comprising two polarizing urban settlements (Câmpeni and Abrud), 14 communes and their subunits and stretching over 1068,89 square km (Boțan, 2010) (Figure 1).

The Land of Moți is a mental space, aligned to the other 18 such land-type units which exist on the Romanian territory, not necessarily delineated by administrative borders but rather determined by the inhabitants' common behavior and features,

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position, territorial structure, economic specificity, mentality, social and historical background (Boțan, 2010). These common traits have shaped a deeply-rooted into history community much attached to its land, nonetheless challenged by the modern society's needs for travel. In this context the relations established between the incoming quest and the local resident pertaining to the Moți community were analyzed.



**Figure 1.** Spatial representation of the Land of Moți

The Lands have shaped the mental territorial distribution of the Romanian territory and more authors (Oancea, 1979; Cocean, 2007; Ilieș, 2007; Dezsi, 2007; Ilovan, 2007) who have approached the issue emphasized the historical political and linguistic role assigned to them for the accomplishment of the Romanian people and language. As portrayed by Ilieș (2007) they stand for genuine natural fortresses or living bodies with a tangible contemporary reality. A further definition resides in the more recent statement that *the lands* refer to *"a certain territorial organization of the population in a certain geographical space and from a certain historical period"* (Josan, 2009). Furthermore Cocean (2007) defined the lands as mental spaces which evolve historically and should be delineated according to how a territory is lived and perceived, the lived space referring to a territory which a community or an individual pertaining to it incorporates into the scale of own existential values (Boțan, 2010), a concept also strengthened by Waldren (2010) who states that *"a lived space is phenomenological, emphasizing individual experiences of the world"*. Another view of the mental space can be assigned to Rodrigues et al. (2011) asserting that it is imbued with mental images also *"originated" through perceptions based on man's experience"*.

In the same context *the lands* are also referred to as *open mental spaces* (Boțan, 2010) given by the community members' mobility to the fairs and markets at the foot of the mountains to trade woodcraft for food (mainly cereals). Therefore the image of a coherent and homogeneous mental space is blurred and diluted by the communities which the Moți came into contact with during his descent from the mountain to the valley for food provision.

In the case of the Moți community, the lived experiences and perceptions rely on common traditions, habits, occupations, lumbering, mining, the negative social-historic circumstances (which have created a social cohesion), the landscape's difficult morphology (the slopes which need to be climbed up and down on a daily basis) and religious and laic holidays (Boțan, 2010). A mental image which has been created in people's minds when referring to the Moți are the villages' small scale fragmentation, namely the scattered hamlets of 2-3 or 5-6 settlements, a fact which triggered the highest values of the rural settlements' density of Romania, namely 29 villages/100 sq km versus the national average of 5,5 villages/100 sq km, as emphasized by Boțan (2010). This type of villages can be encountered at altitudes ranging from 1000-1400 m and spread over valley corridors and pasture plateaus (Ielenicz and Comanescu, 2006). These mountainous small-scale villages are very fragile; a recent study (Boțan, 2010) highlighting that out of 320 existing localities (both urban and rural) in the Land of Moți, the settlements with less than 50 inhabitants are prone to certain extinction and target 113 localities and settlements on the brink of extinction (with 50-100 stable inhabitants) target 92 localities. The dissolution processes of the land-type territories have been emphasized by Cocean (2007), some reasons deriving from allochtony, lack of borders, substitution, while Boțan (2010) asserts that in the case of these small communities from the Land of Moți lack of technical infrastructure and harsh life conditions are the main reasons for future depopulation.

Other defining features outlining the Moți identity are listed in the seminal work of Boțan (2010) such as rotacism (letter n is replaced with r, nonetheless an ethnic feature only preserved among the elderly); archaic model of agricultural exploitation – culture on terraces; exploitation of timber; the house design with a high tapering/conic roof (archaic shape, Thracian origin); traditional occupations: grazing and timber processing; attachment to the land property. These elements are part of the community's heredity, its in-built characteristics (Gunn & Var, 2002) and its particularization renders it more prone to tourism. *Much then depends upon what is done with and to these important factors. If a region has a strong DNA [i.e. above listed heredity elements] for future development, it has more opportunities for a competitive edge than other regions* (Gunn & Var, 2002, p. 158).

#### **DEEPLY-ROOTED VS. VULNERABLE IDENTITIES' ENCOUNTER WITH THE INTRICATE RELATIONS OF TOURISM**

The community's mental images and space overlap with identity elements, a fact highlighted by the interviews carried out among the former miners residing in the Land of Moți on June 2011. According to the qualitative sample survey the 10 respondents asserted that the Moți identity equates to being *"a genuine Romanian; honor, power, virtue; strong people with the fear of God; it means own customs, birth places; traditions and customs from our forerunners; we have Avram Iancu, Horea, Cloșca and Crișan"*, iconic figureheads of the peasantry, associated with the uprising of 1784 when they revolted against the feudal constraints of the time. When asked about what they most value in life the three hierarchical values are religion (mostly Christian Orthodox), family and friends, providing some hints to a traditional type of society. Their main occupations envisage a daily routine as most breed cattle, take them to pastures and undertake logging. Some other former miners sought alternative incomes becoming tourism entrepreneurs, once mining was losing ground. With reference to tourism the respondents replied that times are a bit difficult for tourism entrepreneurship with the economic crisis installed, the positive aspect highlighted by the respondents is that it would create workplaces, nonetheless the feeling is that tourism is not fully capitalized, sensing that authorities do not get sufficiently involved, therefore the community expects

some orientation in this scope; a systematic top-down approach. As highlighted by the respondents' replies the community's self-perception image is embedded into history, on whose course a few remarkable figureheads stand out. Therefore, until 1848 the Moți community consisted of yoman of the village, who enjoyed some privileges, which were nonetheless taken away in turn by the Austrians and the Hungarians, a fact which triggered more uprisings. It is from this area that a peasant army has erected in 1784, led by Horea, Cloșca and Crișan (Boțan, 2010) as well as by Avram Iancu (a revolutionary lawyer) who mobilized 60,000 peasants (Free Encyclopedia Wikipedia) of the Land of Moți in 1848 to fight for the community's rights to property and freedom on the background of the civil war of Transilvania. It consisted of two parties: on one side, there were the Hungarians who claimed their wish to join Hungary and on the other one were the Romanians (who saw their national being, threatened) and the Saxons (who saw their Empire being threatened) (Briscu, 2011).

From an economic viewpoint an identity element for the Land of Moți community is mining, but from a social perspective the identity elements were challenged along with the incoming outsiders for work, rendering the Land of Moți a note of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. Mining has occurred since the late Neolithic (Boțan, 2010), has been drastically reduced at present, a fact which triggered a high unemployment (roughly 70%) (Boțan, 2010). Nonetheless former interviewed miners (cf. qualitative questionnaire applied to 10 ex-miners) seem to be far less nostalgic about this activity, associating mining with hard labor, commuting, and tiredness, stating that they enjoy the peaceful life they are presently unfolding. In order to counterbalance unemployment, tourism seems a more sustainable option (with a proper planning strategy) versus mining which a foreign investor is trying to restart at an industrial scale in the area (i.e. at Roșia Montană quarry). As any gold mining, it involves the "*removal of vegetation, topsoil and rocks from the earth surface in order to get the resources underneath [thus] disrupting habitats, disturbing surface and subsurface drainage systems*" (Getis et al., 2000, p. 168). Such economic-driven activities will impact negatively tourism in the Land of Moți, especially for the nature lovers and as former studies highlight (Ilieș et al., 2008) the natural setting and landscape are prime motivators (out of 12 motivators) for travel in the area for the overwhelming majority of urbanites.

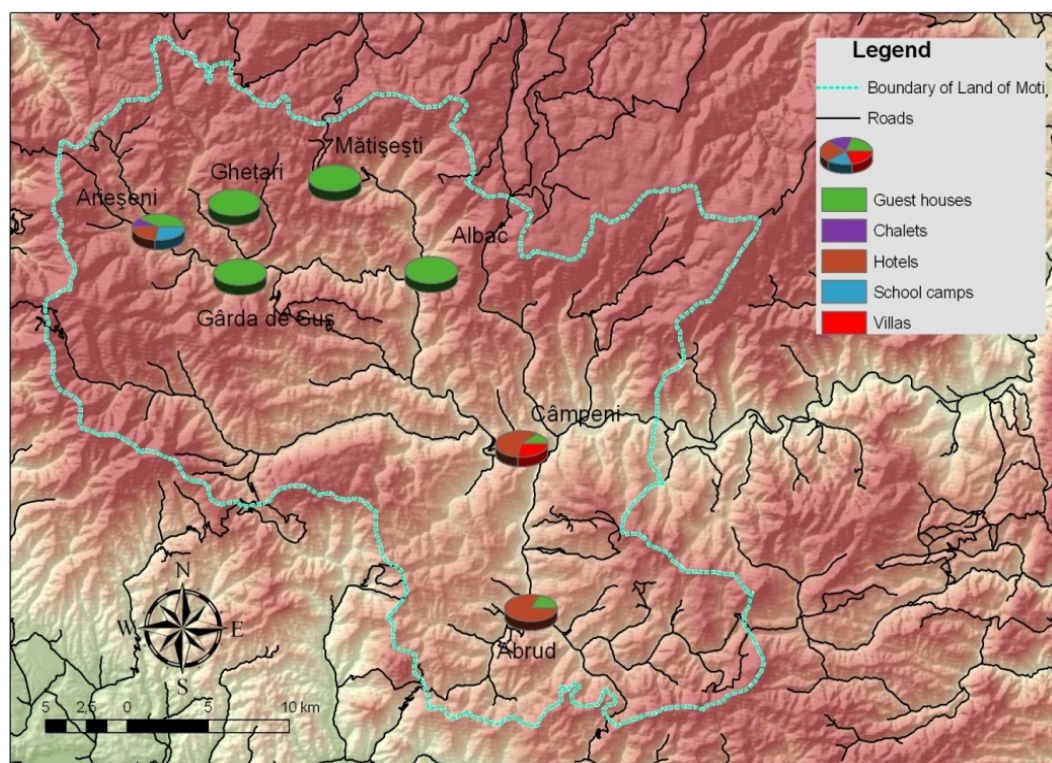
Another important identity element is the family (ethnicity); customs (habits, traditions, folklore), the latter strongly connected to two festivals *The Fair on Mount Gaina (Hen)* and *The Fair on Mount Călineasa*, both held yearly during summer time and whose collective gazes (Urry, 2011) of both mixed original and staged authenticity are enriched with laser and disco shows staged recently at the venue. Both events rely on mythology and tradition and have contributed to promoting the Apuseni Mountains to domestic and international tourists. Therefore the former festival is enriched with symbolism and refers to a golden hen which used to come out of the mountain during the mining period in the Biharia Mountains to settle on the mountain top where she laid golden eggs. The miners tried to catch it but it flew away taking the gold along with it (Boțan, 2010).

Nonetheless these stories do not seem to endure the test of time and many of the community's youngsters are not aware of them anymore therefore the festival is enriched year by year by state-of-the-art laser shows and a staged authenticity displaying peasants and craftsman at work in mobile workshops (both producing and selling their casks, scythes, rakes, alphorns) amid an atmosphere of feasting, eating and dancing. Nonetheless, a habit which has been perpetuated and endured the test of time relates to the alphorn (a Dacian musical instrument) blowers who open the festival as they have done since the fair has first taken place.

The surveyed literature revealed that such deconstruction examples of traditional events can lead to unwanted results as it was also the case of the Amish community from the USA, which after having developed an aversion towards tourism, has willingly created a staged authenticity by designing an Amish Farm and House along the main highway to satisfy mass tourists' curiosity of their traditional lifestyle and therefore releasing pressure on the Amish community. *"These attractions gave many tourists a quick front stage experience of some aspects of Amish culture without the Amish themselves being present"* (Hovinen, 2006).

As past experience suggests locals' and tourists' encounter and relationships are very intricate and delicate therefore their approach needs great attention, planning and vision of all members of the community before tourism reaches undesirable turnouts.

In the case of the territory of the Land of Moți tourism has not yet reached such an intense tourist traffic, the polarizing tourist site being the local tourist resort Arieșeni which features an increased seasonality, with the peak season in winter, for skiing. The accommodation infrastructure provides a short hint related to the incipient stage of tourism consumption in The Land of Moți (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The accommodation infrastructure in the Land of Moți  
(Source: data processed from Boțan, 2010)

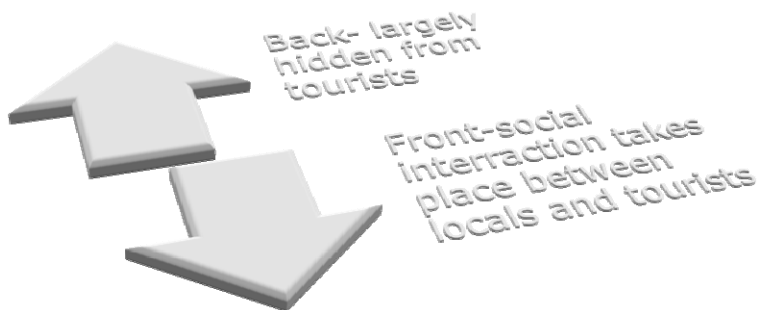
### TOURISM PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION TRENDS

According to an interview carried out in the summer of 2007 most tourists in the region are incoming urbanites, therefore their predilect type of accommodation resides in guesthouses which abound in the Land of Moți with a share of 454 beds, followed by hotels (280 beds), camp sites (30 places) and villas (65 beds). This supply-related basic inventory can trigger some hints related to the tourism activity of the area, demand (i.e.

arrivals, overnights) on the other hand was more difficult to get access to due to the unavailability of statistical data, the latter also constituting research limitations. Nonetheless given that the overall accommodation capacity amounts to merely 829 beds we can infer that tourism hasn't reached its climax when we compare it to the 44636 local residents registered at the 2006 census (Boțan, 2010). Tourism overburden occurs during winter in the local skiing resorts (i.e. Arieșeni).

A controversial situation emerges as the Land of Moți is a historical region with a shared lived space and mentality which is opening toward tourism. The heavy-load tourism traffic can be sensed on the winter resort Arieșeni which is extremely dynamic in terms of accommodation infrastructure building (presently with 146 ANTREC-affiliated guesthouses), namely whether to only allow tourists a rather superficial front stage relation with their community or to allow them a glimpse of their genuine behavioral authenticity (Yang & Wall, 2009).

Therefore it emerges as a dilemma whether to have front or backstage experiences with locals (Figure 3). The former displays a certain artificiality which eases locals' psychological carrying capacity whereas the latter makes the community more vulnerable to external changes, naturally perverting to a certain extent the local lifestyle. As in the case of the Amish community who also provide backstage experience for tourists by selling fresh farm products or craft items (Hovinen, 2006, p. 84) the same way the Moți community sell pies and craft items (the locally branded alphorn). These back stage experiences and exchanges are favored by high altitudes and a rough landscape morphology especially in the case of mountain trekkers where the specific high altitude secluded households of the Moți is where the host-tourist encounters occur. Such seclusion (both of the individual trekker and isolated household members) creates even stronger bonds between the two actors and thus set up the optimum premises of backstage relations.



**Figure 3.** The front/back stage dichotomy  
(Source: Shaw and Williams, 2004)

Under the present circumstances tourism occurs randomly, the tourist flow undirected towards certain tourist attractions, the tourists that seek backstage relations with locals have easy access to it, all these render a certain vulnerability to the host population. This behavioral authenticity is hard to maintain in the Land of Moți as both domestic and international (Hungarian, French according to the questionnaire) tourists prefer to see "*local culture in its natural setting*" (Yang and Wall, 2009, p. 250). Such is the case of a few French tourists seeking authentic experiences (or a behavioral authenticity as referred to by Yang & Wall, 2009) in this remote mountainous location and after having found it in the Land of Moți, they militated and helped that residents' households connect in a tourist network (viz.OVR) with the purpose of preserving and

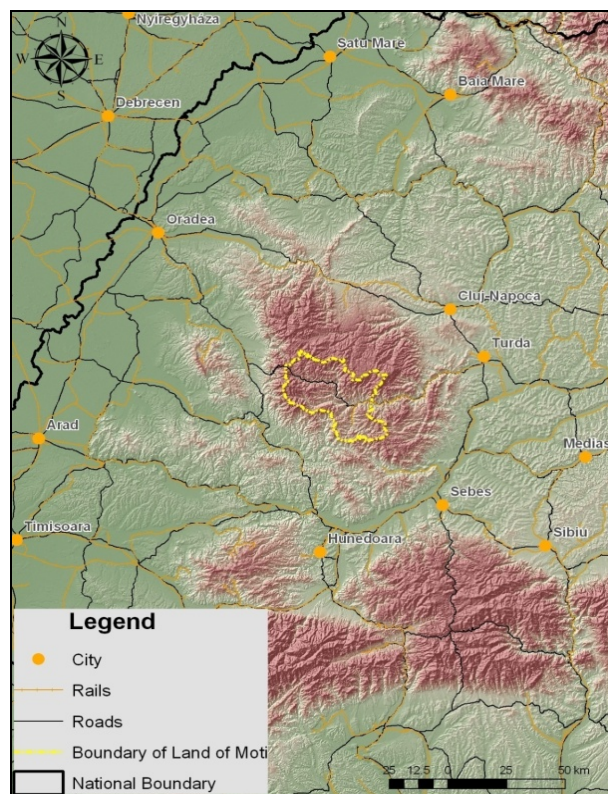


meanwhile promoting the Land of Moți as a tourist destination, a project petrified in the inception stage (according to interviews carried out with the locals). The motivator of this enterprise was the fascination of a few French tourists with the unstaged authenticity, as most people are looking for authentic experiences and opportunities in societies that are less developed than one's own society (Heitmann, 2011). As a result, tourists display a fascination for other people's real lives. Heitmann (2011) stresses this idea, stating that *the more alienated from modern society and a shallow existence, the greater the desire that drives the search for authenticity*, tourism being able to offer a temporary release from the inauthenticity of everyday life (Brown, 2013:176). Nonetheless growing tourism in vulnerable societies needs a certain supervision (top-down approach), due to the fact that, as it has also been highlighted by the specialized literature, such brusque intrusions into the society's behavioral authenticity can have unwanted side effects and sociocultural processes such as acculturation (voluntary adoption by local residents especially of younger people of some of the consumption patterns of tourists (Rivers & Sharpley cited by Shaw & Williams, 2004), cultural borrowing and cultural drift (temporary transformation in local behavior, esp. in destinations with increased seasonality, Shaw & Williams, 2004). Such yet small-scale effects are burgeoning in the rural landscape of the Land of Moți as new allohtonous (non locally-owned) tourist accommodation units are built which provide accommodation in some more, others less successful replicas (few successful ones, others do not have any affiliation to local architectural style) of the peasants' houses, built by industrious external entrepreneurs with very low financial impact for the residing community. The tapering roof is an architectural identity feature of the area and in order to preserve it, newly-build accommodation units (even by allohtounous enterprisers) should bear this landmark

An emphasized by the tourism output data, tourism production is easier to gain access to than tourism flow in the study area. Despite the lack of existing current data on the tourism flow, i.e. precise number of tourists in the Land of Moți, some characteristics can be detached with regard to the consumers' preferences due to a small-sample (30 respondents) survey among the latter applied on August the 15th 2007 in Arieșeni, which highlighted that during the summer season most undertake individual trips, the main 5 motivators (out of 12) for travel rely in nature, landscape, quietness, trail trekking, mountaineering, thus mostly appealing to nature lovers/ecotourists. According to Plog's typology this type of travelers would suit the *venturers, who are intellectually curious travelers who enjoy immersing themselves in other cultures* (Weaver & Lawton, 2010). Industrial scale mining (on an approximately 17 year time frame envisaged by the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation-RMGC foreign investor) would drive these ecotourists away toward other unspoilt nature destinations.

The surrounding cities of the Land of Moți provide a propitious generating tourist market. Gun with Var (2002) emphasized the importance of proximity markets for increasing demand to a tourist destination in the scope of achieving a proper regional development. Therefore the most productive markets are the ones that are closer to the destination zone, or in other words the shorter the distance from the destination zone the more prone to visitation the latter, this concept is known in the literature under the term distance-decay effect (Weaver and Lawton, 2010). Keeping in mind this time-distance relationship, The Land of Moți which is located in the heart of the Apuseni Mountains (viz. western range of the Romanian Carpathians) and is surrounded by a road network connecting the most important cities from western Romania (i.e. Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Timișoara, etc) creates favorable premises for access to the region, the volume of traffic being proportional to the size and prosperity of the origin region market (Weaver & Lawton, 2010) (Figure 4).

The predilect type of tourism concerning this clientele from the proximity market is short-break tourism followed by adventure, leisure, as revealed by the sampled respondents, nonetheless despite the short distance (in terms of kilometers) from large connecting cities, the time allocated for the trip is higher than expected. Road infrastructure improvement could atone for this drawback and catch the interest of affluent urbanites as they are *"the driving engine of ethnic [rural] tourism market"* (Yang & Wall, 2009,).



**Figure 4.** Generating tourist market for the Land of Moți

## CONCLUSIONS

The Land of Moți is faced with the intricate relations which a new sector of economy (i.e. tourism) is currently developing in the area. The community's identity elements are deeply embedded in this ancestral community's existential values and behavior, a fact which individualizes this community mentally and spatially within the Romanian territory. The Land of Moți as a mentally perceived territory and concretized by the community's common customs, values, beliefs, occupations, linguistical patterns has generated a tourist destination region facing the dilemmas, intricate front and backstage relations, socio-cultural processes which a more developed society (viz. guests – affluent urbanites, international tourists, etc) can trigger on a less developed traditional community (viz. host – community of Moți), the pressure being higher on the latter, as modern societies (esp. urbanites) are in a permanent quest for authenticity. This authenticity is challenged by depopulation in high-altitude remote settlements, a unique feature which entices tourists and creates the unspoilt background for backstage relations with the host community. As revealed by international tourism researches, some



traditional communities have willingly tailored front stage relations in order to keep tourists at bay. In the Land of Moți the front and back stage relations with tourists intermingle, the residents feeling that despite the existence of genuine community assets (heredity elements such as folklore, immaterial legacy, etc.) tourism is not fully capitalized, and requires the support of a systematic top-down approach so as to gain a more competitive edge. A rather “*unsustainable guest*” (the Canadian RMGC foreign investor) represents a great menace to the region’s identity features (allohtonous enterprisers unaware of local community’s former mining practices and existential behaviors) on the one hand and to tourism (spoiling the natural environment) on the other hand with the project envisaging the restart of the industrial-scale gold mining.

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