



Demographic Change and Local Community Sustainability: Heritagization of Land Abandonment Symbols

Ivan Murin, Jan Horský, and Ján Aláč

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we bring the reader to the village and municipality of Horný Tisovník in the south of Central Slovakia. It was here, from 2016 to 2020, that a number of anthropologists and their students worked with the people of this and other villages to understand their connections with the land, the community, and each other. These connections were reflected in the local culture. As local populations disappeared in the twentieth century, the local forms of arable land, settlements, terraced fields, grasslands,

I. Murin (✉) • J. Aláč

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
e-mail: ivan.murin@umb.sk

J. Horský

Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
e-mail: honza.horsky@seznam.cz

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and orchards quickly vanished along with them. Some of their remnants, such as walkways, roadside marks and crosses, and cemeteries, which we refer to as “land abandonment symbols,” are a foundation for the *heritagization* of this and similar communities. Here we argue that the depopulation of large areas and subsequent changes in landscape and community culture can be reversed by turning to traditional eco-social activities and family farming as a foundation for establishing more sustainable communities.

The sustainability of communities like Horný Tisovník began to deteriorate in the first half of the twentieth century, when there was a dramatic reduction in birth rates. As a consequence, the local traditional communities began to experience a decline in population, which in turn caused extensive environmental and social changes. Because there were fewer community members, beneficial activities were neglected. In the short term, the shares of land ownership for individual families increased, benefiting innumerable families with one child. Later, with the advancing loss of workforce, only the most viable land was cultivated, in the end almost none. All the energies of the declining communities were focused securing their livelihoods. The smaller communities could not perform the activities necessary for the smooth functioning of the local government and the maintenance of roads, public spaces, and buildings. The only solution seemed to be to rent or sell land. Respect for local authorities, undermined by loss of vitality and depopulation, declined. Much farmland could not be managed, and so saltbush returned to places that had traditionally been open landscapes.

This historical example of a local community’s decline is one of many in recent European history. Its impacts on the landscape, however, are only now being recognized. By following local cultural and natural trajectories of vitality, anthropological findings constitute a salient narrative in environmental discussions. Analyses of complex local culture–nature connections offer an alternative type of support for argumentation on global issues. In environmental communication, translocal elements are thus significantly represented, creating a new argumentative space for predicting future impacts.

THE DEPOPULATION OF CULTURAL REGIONS IN EUROPE

Although the world population is experiencing constant growth, concerns related to the loss of diversity of residential areas and culture, as well as the loss of vitality of populations in individual regions around Europe (The Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape, 2020) are gaining priority in public and academic space. Depopulation of certain areas has multiple causes, which are often mutually connected, and that can lead to serious consequences. One trend is that particularly young generations of productive and reproductive age leave for urban and suburban areas, and while this migration generally causes dynamic growth in certain conurbations, it nevertheless has a disturbing regressive effect on rural residential areas. It is mainly the countryside, or the village areas of certain regions, which are most affected by depopulation (Gajdoš, 2016). Populations which have formed distinctive cultural configurations have been declining and dying out. In relation to other problems, population decline creates a vicious cycle known as *circular and cumulative causation* (Moravčíková & Fürjészová, 2018), which is very difficult to break (Massey, 1990). The main structure of cultural configurations is easily replicated without enriching selections and innovations of individual elements. New, equally stagnant structures are bundled into non-adaptive strategies. From an anthropological and ethnological point of view, the process of depopulation plays an important role in cultural diversity loss. Long-existing strategies and rich contexts of multigenerational adaptation to specific past and future environments accumulate and contain important material and spiritual cultural messages.

The future of the cultural landscape should be perceived as linked to current global challenges, and this holds a significant place in contemporary anthropology's research agenda (Stoffle et al., 2020). Among the main challenges facing rural areas in the twenty-first century are climate change, migration, population aging, depopulation, technological innovations, and urbanization. Rural areas are heterogeneous, and it is important to realize that some rural settlements are located near urban centers, within larger integrated areas, while others are extremely distant and often have to fight for survival. Life in the countryside and cultural identity are closely connected, and it is clear that various changes have an impact on local rural communities, which leads to them taking irregular development trajectories (Murin & Kandert, 2018).

BACKGROUND

Small local communities in Central Europe have always played an important role in the transformation of cultural landscapes, while their extinction is closely connected with concerns about whether cultural and natural identity in Europe is sustainable. From the anthropological point of view, the link between the culture of local communities and the environment can be seen within the complicated processes of cultural adaptation. It is a paradigm of anthropology that adaptation processes are continuous, and thus form cultural mechanisms maintaining the sustainability of both humankind and the environment. Dialogues on the topic often speak to the need to define our environment's human-carrying capacity. The concerns regarding the growth of the human population are considerable. Slightly less do we encounter studies that deal with environmental problems with the opposite cause, that is, those that concern the depopulation of landscape. There is a consensus among anthropologists that people constitute a land-forming factor, and human populations diversify culture and nature by way of their long-term activities. Environmentalists and anthropologists give numerous examples of the optimal coexistence of humans and nature. In a case study based in south-central Slovakia, examples can be found of degradation of the landscape and the local community (Ustaoglu & Collier, 2018) caused by the depopulation of local communities (Westhoek et al., 2006) through consciously reduced birth rates among women (Andorka et al., 1998). This has been a reaction—a maladaptive human behavior (Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Lawson & Borgerhoff Mulder, 2016; Sear et al., 2016)—to reduced work opportunities in the traditional agricultural landscape (Špulerová et al., 2016).

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Geographically, locally distinctive rural communities in Central Europe are not linked to larger geographical units. Their relative seclusion during their development has meant that for a long time they have functioned as a somewhat closed distributive model of their own culture. The relatively common physical and cultural environment was shared, a place where shared cultural meanings were selected, passed on, and accepted. Local culture is, therefore, based on real, adopted meanings, which are, to some extent, understood by all its members. Appadurai (1986) describes performance, representation, and action as the means through which people

socialize the landscape. He proposes the term “ethnoscape” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 64) to refer to villages, communities, localities, societies, and so on.

The knowledge of each local community is documented in the local collective, individual, and these days also technological, memory, which represents the community’s “database.” This knowledge’s distribution depends on changes relevant to the community’s location. If a change in community localization occurs, for example, the population moving out or decreasing, the decoding of local meanings decreases. Without interaction, direct contact with the environment, social learning, and generational transmission, the symbolic meanings that relate to individual cultural phenomena and information cannot be grasped correctly. Those that are shared indirectly and acquired by new experience are highly innovative but culturally less stable. Symbolic meanings of culture emerge from the thinking, actions, and communication of an optimally populated group of people. This logic of reproductive behavior develops in close interaction with the time and stability of the environment.

Due to depopulation, these ordinary ways of being in the landscape (Ingold, 2000), the building of a sense of locality (or knowing of the landscape) has been interrupted.

Central among these facts is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. (Appadurai, 1996, p. 48)

The degradation of the landscape “erases” the supporting information of the cultural memory in local communities. Ethnoscapes, as places of community identity, are deterritorialized (Appadurai, 1996, p. 52) into barely informative units without the lived experience of humanity.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN MIGRATION AND DEPOPULATION

If we define historical “Central Europe” as the area bounded by the Alps, the Rhine, the Baltic Sea, and the borders between the West and East of Christianity, the migration processes from the sixteenth century to the present can be typologically classified as follows (Kárníková, 1965):

1. Migration (population transfers) associated with wars and political changes. The largest of these are mostly (ethnically motivated) one-off movements of millions of inhabitants associated with the end of World War II. Other such cases of migration include more gradual processes, such as state-organized relocation of populations to open spaces.
2. Urban migration in the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries to large urban centers (Vienna, Buda-Pest) and industrial city centers. Despite the rapid population growth from the eighteenth to the first half of the twentieth centuries, this migration led, though only in some areas, to the depopulation of certain rural regions (Zeitlhofer, 2006, p. 127).
3. Emigration from the poorer regions of Central Europe to North America.
4. Steady economic migration from eastern to western Central Europe. In the past 30 years, Central European countries have been the beneficiaries of not only unskilled labor via east–west migration but also doctors and other medical staff.
5. Frequent, abundant seasonal economic migration is well established throughout Central Europe.
6. Long-term small-scale migration within individual regions has long been abundant. For example, there is evidence of marital migration reaching as far back as the sixteenth century (Grulich & Zeitlhofer, 1998).
7. Depopulation and related migration caused by a conscious reduction in reproductive behavior.

The character and dynamics of these processes vary locally, depending on the economic character of the particular Central European region, with respect to inheritance law and their prevailing cultural type, or *marriage pattern*. When distinguishing cultural types in Central Europe,

anthropologists use Hajnal's Saint Petersburg–Trieste line (Hajnal, 1965), which corresponds (approximately) to the historical internal border between Austria and Hungary. Northwest of this line, local communities strictly adhered to the principle of neolocalism (where marriage meant a new household, i.e., a new “locality”), or to the principles of inheritance law. In the countryside, the preferred practice was impartible inheritance, that is, inheritance by only one heir, who then paid the other heirs a sum equivalent to their share of the estate (Laslett & Wall, 1972). Southeast of the Hajnal line, marriage was not so consistently linked to obtaining the existing locality or building a new estate, and therefore the land was divided and the area was populated more densely.

LAND DEPOPULATION: LIMITED FERTILITY AS A MALADAPTATION

One of the most significant features of modern European culture is the decline in marital fertility. The fertility ratio has decreased from its traditional rates in two transformational waves. The traces of Europe's first, “big transformation” (Livi-Bacci, 2000, pp. 154–198) could be observed in the mid-eighteenth century, continuing through the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries. This first demographic transition was caused by a decrease in the death rate, particularly that of babies and children. During this transition the population rose quickly, which in turn led to a subsequent use of birth control and lower birth rates for married couples.¹

The second demographic transformation was observed in the 1950s, becoming more apparent in the 1960s (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this transformation significantly impacted Central Europe (Pavlík, 2018).² Those local communities of Central European countries that had seen sustained population growth in the previous two centuries began to stagnate and age, due to the significant decline of the fertility/birth rate, which manifested itself in the growing percentage of elderly inhabitants in the overall population.

¹ In France in 1900, for example, one woman had 2.79 children on average, while in other European countries, this average was still between 3 and 5 per woman.

² The average number of children per woman fell deeply to under 2; in Italy of 1995 it was 1.17.

THE INCREASING CONTROL OF BIRTHRATE AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

The area of Central Europe that most exemplifies the impact of the strictly upheld one-child practice on the depopulation of land is the area stretching along the northern banks of the Dráva and Danube rivers. The westernmost such area is the Somogy region of Hungary, south of Lake Balaton. Approximately 300 km to the east, the Krassó-Szörény region represents the end of the one-child area (Vasary, 1989). The northern parts of this area are comprised by the southern Slovak Carpathians. The whole area is now divided among Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the one-child practice reached its peak, this area had approximately three million inhabitants and was mainly characterized by a predominantly agrarian way of life (Buday, 1909). The one-child norm did not arise from social and economic modernization in the area, but rather from the inability to establish independent households, especially outside the agrarian systems.

Fertility limitations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were first accepted on an individual level, later spreading throughout the stabilized restrictive social norms of the local community (Botiková, 2016). The land properties of the individual families were too small, hovering around the subsistence level in certain types of settlements (Holec, 2003, p. 222). At first postponing the birth of the first child prevailed, and only later was there a decrease in the total number of children. Reduction of the population caused an increase in farms' revenues in a very short period of time.

The one-child practice contributed to the accumulation of land ownership, and very quickly—over the course of two or three generations in the early twentieth century (Fig. 1) the material benefits of having one child became clearly apparent. Due to the consistency with which the one-child practice was adopted, as well as due to the local endogamy, the land was merged into larger units, owned by a decreasing number of families. Arrangement of potential marital partnerships was done from a very early age, and it was not always successful. Consequently, there was a general lack of single men, while young women remained single and without children. This led to fundamental changes in the localities' social climate. Formerly hardworking people and modest farmers began to succumb to excessive consumerism. The farmers, whose parents and grandparents lived in small traditional dwellings were building large, monumental

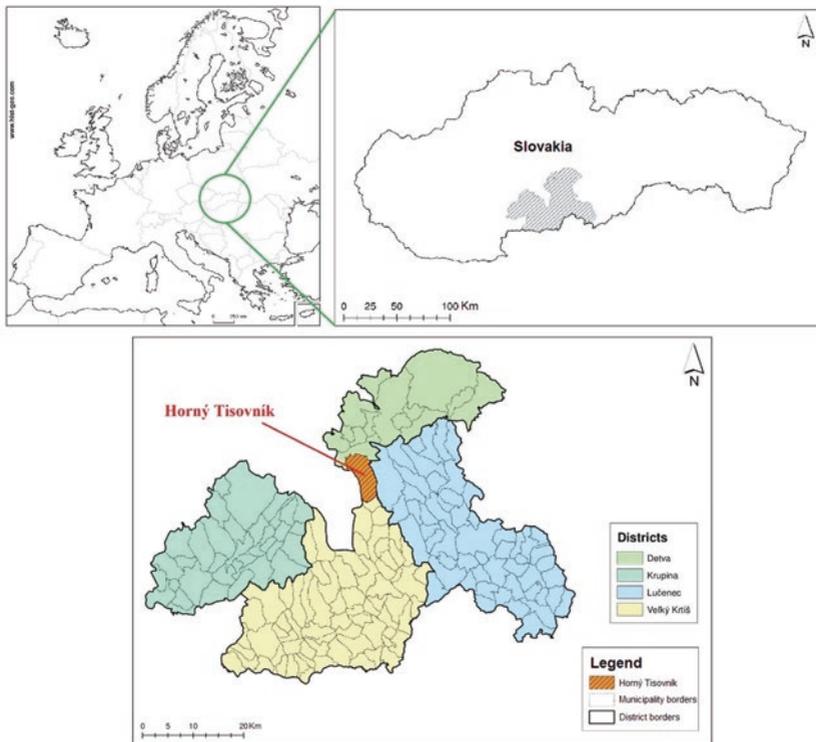


Fig. 1 The spread of the one-child practice in regions of south-central Slovakia (maps above) and the location of the Horný Tisovnik research locality (map below). (This image used with permission of Pavol Midula)

houses in order to impress their neighbors and peers, and losing their vitality in the process.

Later, after approximately five generations of reduced birth rates, the local communities began to experience a disproportionate fall in their numbers, which reflected the emptying of remote places in the land. The reduced population started to neglect communal activities that were beneficial to the locality. They avoided participating in those activities that were necessary for the smooth functioning of the local government, road maintenance, and maintenance of public spaces and buildings.

HERITAGIZATION AS THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LOCAL MEMORY

In the nineteenth century, when the decision to have only one child was widely accepted, the land of local communities in southern Central Slovakia was very diverse. Small-plot farming of arable land was typical—it has high biodiversity and a diversity of relief forms—while various small, traditional buildings were present, such as scattered farm buildings, seasonal dwellings, wine cellars, roadside crosses, and small symbolic objects and artifacts, the architecture of which reflected the tradition of cohabitation, living with adversity, as well as faith in people to do what is right.

[...] with the gradual loss of population, municipal buildings, schools, and parishes, which were until 1918 the centers of cultural life in every village, gradually disappeared. After 1918, the birth rate temporarily rose. Many schools were repaired, only to be gradually closed again in a few years. Professions such as village teacher, priest, registrar, and mayor gradually had no one to do them. As a result, cultural and social events declined in the villages. New generations were not created, the demand for activities outside land renting ceased to exist. (man, Závada locality, Novohrad region, Slovakia, 2018, transcription & translation Ján Aláč)

The implementation of the one-child practice changed the social roles of the local community members. The eldest women became most important, their dominance hinging upon the accepted norms of reproduction, as they were the main guardians of the one-child practice in families. If daughters or daughters-in-law became pregnant, it was mostly the eldest women who made decisions regarding the unborn. Their roles grew in importance, especially when the second child could endanger the wealth prospects of new families. Supported by other women, the eldest shaped and influenced the opinions within the local communities. These continued reductive habits and accumulation of inherited farmland among a small number of heirs contributed to the continuous degradation of traditional farming.

If a single child has left for a better life, work, education or self-realization, he hasn't returned to his parents' farm. Many dwellings in the village have remained abandoned and redundant. Here in our villages, where a one-child custom has been adopted, we still have a high number of abandoned, run-down homes and entire farms compared to other regions. (woman, Závada

locality, Novohrad region, Slovakia, 2018, transcription & translation
Ján Aláč)

In general, during Slovakia's massive industrialization in the second half of the twentieth century, family farming was replaced by state-run large-scale agricultural production. New generations did not acquire the virtue of sharing the land or maintaining an austere way of life, nor did they learn to understand the role of sociability, which was essential to traditional farming activities. The offspring did not see any reason to remain in the rapidly declining peripheries, and began to move into cities, or to areas of developed industrial production.

HISTORICAL CEMETERIES AND TOMBSTONES: PLACES OF CULTURAL MEMORY

In the south-central Slovak regions of Hont and Novohrad, field research has been conducted regarding the impact of one-child practice on local cultures.³ Since 2008, along with the inhabitants of the Horný Tisovník locality, we have been trying to revive the local cemeteries, which, in their symbolic beauty, also carry the painful legacy of the collective memory inherited by the remaining local population, which does not exceed 180 today (in 1910, the local population was 1464). As the decrease in the permanent population continues, one of the ways to stabilize it is by creating an eco-museum focusing on revitalizing traditional farming.

The first step toward the revitalization of local communities should be the heritagization of symbolic localities and sites, the majority of which, however, were not preserved due to neglect. Part of the proposed heritage site falls under the authority of the current Lešť Military Training Area. Despite this, in the surviving, as well as the abandoned, localities, various elements can be found that could constitute a basis for the proposed musealization. Although incomplete, they still serve as concise and accurate testimonies about a vanishing culture.

Old cemeteries appear to be highly symbolic places, while the richly decorated and shaped tombstones may serve as a testimony to their times.

³This fieldwork has been conducted by Marta and Ján Botik (Botiková, 2016). Ethnographic findings from older research by Soňa Švecová are reflected in work of Ľubica Volanská and Juraj Majo (Volanská and Majo, 2016).



Fig. 2 The renovation of decorated wooden grave markers. (Photo: Ján Aláč)

In the 1870s, the inhabitants⁴ began to decorate the graves of the deceased with richly decorated tombstones and wooden grave markers of distinctive shapes.⁵ The altar-like tombstone design is typical of the 40-year period between 1870 and 1911, while the shaped and decorated wooden grave markers are characteristic of the following 20 years (Fig. 2). The graves from this period (1911–1930) provide testimony to the impact of the one-child practice in the locality: they are characterized by a greater proportion of young women’s graves.

The project is based on the transformation of the burial site at an old cemetery in Horný Tisovník, and later also in Dolný Tisovník, both of which have gone unused for 100 years, into symbolic places. They should serve as examples of the skill, artistry, and esthetic sensibilities of their creators, a tribute to traditional stonecutting, but also the decline of

⁴ Evangelicals of the Augsburg Confession (a Lutheran denomination).

⁵ They only occurred in the following villages: Horný Tisovník, Dolný Tisovník, Červeňany, Madačka, Nedelište, Šula, Senné, Ábelová, Polichno, Praha, Velký Lom, and Suché Brezovo, as well as Lešť and Turie Pole—villages that have since ceased to exist.

communities in Novohrad. This kind of in-situ heritagization element is an ideal way to commemorate the ancestors of the current inhabitants. With regard to the one-child practice, paradoxically although logically, these cemeteries testify to the dense population of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, and the ways in which the area was subsequently depopulated (Aláč, 2007).

The renovations of the symbolic space included cleaning up the area, uncovering and stabilizing the tombstones, and complementing the space with replicas of wooden tombstones. These were followed by other acts of uncovering the memory of the land, as well as the fates of the local community members, in the form of placing additional elements typical of cemeteries in this place, as well as musealizing elements such as wooden fencing around the graves, symbolic glass balls installed onto graves, carved wooden boxes with accompanying texts, and information boards. The oldest burial site in Horný Tisovník, the so-called pandemic cemetery, where people stopped burying the deceased after the cholera outbreak in 1873, was also made accessible.

REVITALIZATION OF SYMBOLS, COMMUNITY, AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The feedback, or response, to the implemented restoration projects, heritagization, and revitalization of the historical cemeteries and tombstones in Horný Tisovník and Dolný Tisovník was seen almost immediately. Only a year after the project had been implemented, flowers and lanterns began to be placed on the graves, which were previously inaccessible, and not only on All Hallows' Day. This illustrates the response from the family and relatives—descendants of the buried people. The direct positive response was also a result of involving the inhabitants in the project's implementation, which—given the small number of residents of the municipality—meant that a substantial part of the local population was involved, directly or indirectly (Aláč, 2011). The relatives and descendants thus found their way to the eternal resting place of the deceased.

The media continues to show great interest in the revitalization project, and the scientific community has also responded. The project was

presented to landscape, environmental, and other related institutions.⁶ Within the first two years of work (2009–2010), the character and implementation of the project were awarded with the 2010 Monument and Museum Award in the Restoration category. The informative value of the project in relation to the land was awarded the Special Recognition Award



Fig. 3 Involvement of the native population in a volunteer project in Horný Tisovník, 2017. (Photo: Ján Aláč)

⁶The project has earned the following accolades:

- The 2014 Slovak Republic Landscape Award (announced by the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, national coordinator of the award: the Slovak Environmental Agency) for the renewal of the historical memory of a locality; for rediscovering the historical memory, identity, and symbols of a locality in the countryside through the legacy of the past.
- 2017 Village of the Year, announced by the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic/Slovak Environmental Agency/Village Renewal Association/Association of Slovak Towns and Villages.
- Special prize for rediscovering and renewing the traditional tombstones, and for developing the spiritual legacy of the past.

in 2014, and Horný Tisovník was awarded for the project Restoration of the Historical Memory of a Locality in recognition of its “rediscovering the historical memory, identity, and symbols of the locality through reading of a message from the past,” and was renominated for the same prize in 2016. In the 2017 Village of the Year competition, Horný Tisovník was awarded a Special Prize for rediscovering and restoring the traditional tombstones (Fig. 3), as well as for enhancing the spiritual legacy of the past.

These awards and the publicity attracted by the project, which pointed out the distinctiveness of cultural elements independently or in their relation to the land as something exceptional, were passed on to the environment of Horný Tisovník and Dolný Tisovník. For the wider public, as well as the professional community, what was interesting was the contrast between the populated past and the depopulation of many settlements in Novohrad, which was difficult to understand at first glance. Questions as to why or where the population has gone, and the answer in the form of the one-child phenomenon typical of this region, make this issue and the place even more interesting, especially for those without any previous knowledge of the one-child practice. This cause remains known to a small circle of anthropologists, and a small number of the remaining population.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AND THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF CEMETERIES

If we were to look for a symbolic place—one that embodies the memories that communities and landscapes themselves possess—we would be hard pressed to find places more apt than cemeteries. When we work with the concept of cultural landscape heritage (Aplin, 2007; Stoffle et al., 2016), we imagine preserved manifestations of mutually balanced interactions of nature and culture. In the symbols decorating the tombstones, we see a close pan-generational connection with the environment; the birth and death dates speak to the cruelty of time, and the texts are often a testimony for future generations.

As Robert Cox (2010, p. 20) notes,

If we define *environmental communication* as simply ‘talk,’ or the transmission of information about the wide universe of environmental topics [...] our definition will be as varied as the topics for discussion. A clearer definition takes into account the distinctive roles of language, art, photographs, street protests, and even scientific reports as forms of symbolic action.

Cox proceeds to broadly elaborate the importance of symbolism in communication, referring to the Shannon–Weaver model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The lack of understanding of the symbolism and function of symbolic places in a cultural landscape is related to concerns that an uninterested observer will not understand the meaning of the frame of reference of the place to which the symbolic message is directed. Local communities influence an individual’s life cycle beyond the causal environment where the individual lived. Their responsibility and appeal to the wider community does not end with the biological death of individual actors in the dialogue between culture and nature. On the contrary, the talk of the dead is much more urgent. Their statements in the seminar bear a recognizable “anthropological trace” of successful or less successful adaptation strategies in space and time in the landscape.

As we can recognize in the human behavior in the restoration of abandoned cemeteries in depopulated areas, the primary anthropological function is no longer the survivors’ care for the graves of their ancestors, but the dialogue of the survivors with the deserted land. The displaced or forgotten heritage made visible by the cultural landscape and the culture of local populations thus communicates vividly and enduringly. Out of the tension surrounding the mysteries of death, the idea has been born of a soul that exists, can return to the living, and do good or evil. Therefore, tombstones are covered with symbols representing good, protecting against evil, symbols of the eternity of the world (the Sun, the Moon), life and good deeds (trees, branches, flowers, fruits), souls deprived of a body, symbols of dying young (birds, beetles), love, and grief (a heart, a dead dove).

During the cemeteries’ restoration, certain questions naturally arose: Who were these people? Where did they live, and why did they leave these places? Why are there so many deserted meadows and fields? The answers are found only in the symbolism of the tombstones. In poetic inscriptions, past generations encoded the loneliness and abandonment of their dead’s final days, their concern for abandoned homes, and the desolate landscape. The tombstones and grave markers are particularly remarkable in terms of art—they are a collection of signs and symbols of the traditional farming environment. They have anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs such as birds and beetles, but there are also rich plant and geometric ornaments. There are engravings of highly stylized round flowers, but



Fig. 4 Epitaphs on the Horný Tisovník tombstones. (Photo: Ján Aláč)

also more realistic images, such as shrubs with flowers, fruit, and branches. Other common images include stars, solar motifs, and depictions of human figures and heads. The symbol of the clock face speaks of the relative relationship between the time of human existence and the time of death. Symbolic inscriptions are a celebration of the simple man, his life and faith, a celebration of nature incorporating moments of death and transience, as well as hope, for example, in motifs of rebirth. Their aesthetic stems from the want and simplicity of the material world in juxtaposition with the richness of the spiritual world.

Folk taxonomy is also used in a symbolic appeal to future generations to act responsibly. Epitaphs (Fig. 4) of the dead, revealing the results of the one-child practice, speak for themselves:

“Here lies the flower that left the world abruptly and in haste.”

“In the spring of life, the morning of life, the beloved Rose withered and left.”

“Because they loved him and had him very much in their hearts, they adorned his grave with this rock, which stands here in that deed, in that temporality.”

“Like the withered flower of my youth at my most beautiful age, I lay my bones in the grave.”

(Turie Pole & Senohrad localities, 2019, translation Ján Aláč)

Contemplating the symbols of restored cemeteries inspires the imagination to reflect upon changes in the surrounding culture and country. The greater proportion of graves of young childless women and children corresponds to the gradual abandonment of the landscape. A syncretic idea of the effects of the loss of vitality of both culture and landscape is thus formed.

DISCUSSION: SYMBOLIC DIALOGUE IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

The collective memory of local communities is not formed by a mechanical sequencing of events, but by the enumeration of actions essential for lasting survival, a plan of symbolic links. Local arguments are subsequently based on such a perspective. In an effort to understand the complexity of the interconnection of communities with the landscape, the dialogical process of creating and understanding the completeness of meanings is revived, forgotten, and rediscovered yet again. We recognize this as Bakhtin’s model of dialogic interactions (Bakhtin, 1990). The meanings of culture in the local context are created through the experienced multiplicity of its members’ opinions, which are constantly being finalized and constantly coexisting in a continuous process. If this process disappears, for example, by depopulation as in this case study, the dialogue can continue, but only on a symbolic level, by transferring between new actors—heritage visitors. However, the knowledge contexts based on the experiences of these new participants’ cultural heritage are limiting. Anthropological approaches to improving perceptions of the problem of rural depopulation can still draw on Bakhtin’s original concept of getting to know the thing (landscape) and getting to know the inner world of the actors of present and past life. Therefore, to understand the relationship between culture and landscape, anthropologists need to communicate with native and local populations, enter into their worlds, and thus develop an active dialogical understanding.

Discussions about the demographic balance of the environment and the continuity of cultural values acquired through long-term adaptations of human communities—local and global—are reflected in the works of anthropologists and scholars of environmental communication. To understand the links between today's local communities and the changing environment, it is essential to clarify, in cooperation with scientists, the actions and behavior of local communities in times of scarcity, the motives for increased migration, the losses in social/ecological knowledge, as well as the perception of global changes. In field discussions, we—along with members of local communities—advocated for protection of historical landscape structures which serve as testimony due to the relation between their geomorphological conditions and farming techniques. To what extent, however, can the continuing depopulation of large areas and the change in landscape be resisted by turning to tradition?

From anthropological findings we can predicate that decline in local culture and landscape perception generally encourages symbolic thinking, while repeatedly referring back to the ideal or idealized world of the past. Through cultural, ecological, or environmental heritagization, individuals are capable of motivating their communities toward change and revitalization of seemingly lost values. These activities are noticed by more and more people from industrial and urbanized environments. We presume that these activities may help absorb a certain environmental contradiction felt by contemporary humanity. The question remains whether this distress is due to actual oversaturation of the physical or social space by psychological niches, or due to mental oversaturation, that is, regarding not our immediate experience, but rather our impersonal knowledge of global overpopulation.

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