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Zerain.com: Cultural landscape as a framework for integrating sustainable economic futures, heritage and language preservation.

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ABSTRACT: The Basque Country has been the locus of great interest in the preservation of rural communities as well as Basque language revitalization. To date, however, these projects have evolved quite separately from one another, both in theoretical frameworks and in practice. Our paper takes the case of “Zerain.com,” the website name for a project created by residents in the rural town of Zerain (pop. 250). We examine the way the notion of cultural landscape has been defined and implemented in ways that emphasize sustainability and active participation. While preserving Basque, the everyday language of local residents, was never an explicit aim of this project, we argue that the framework of cultural landscape, and the commitments to sustainable development and fostering community cohesion, offer a promising model that can address some of the thorniest issues that currently face the language preservation movement: promoting natural contexts for language use and ensuring intergenerational transmission.

HITZA, HARRIA, HERRIA

HITZA BERRESKURATU/ HARRIA BERRERAIKI/ HERRIA BIZI

Preserving the world’s linguistic diversity has been declared the “greatest conservation challenge of our generation” (Harrison 2007:20). Predictions are that over half the world’s languages will lose their last remaining speakers by the end of this century. Scholars and policy makers have not remained indifferent to this looming loss of intangible heritage. In the last two decades we have seen a very noticeable growth in research examining the causes of language shift as well as new policy instruments and organizations dedicated to protecting endangered or minority languages (Fishman 1991; Harrison 2007; Maffi 2000; Grenoble and Whaley 2000). UNESCO’s 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention dedicates a section entirely to endangered languages indicating to us the growing recognition of the value of language for a widening group of policy makers.

Amidst the impassioned call to “save dying languages,” it can be easy to forget that it is not languages per se, but *communities of speakers* that need to be the focus of our efforts. Documenting and archiving languages are important tasks and in some cases that may be the only thing we can do. But, if our aim is to ensure the continuity of a living language the best way we can do this is by creating the means by which its speakers can thrive in sustainable economic development. In this paper we wish to illustrate the validity of this claim through a case study of rural community development from the Basque Country. The Basque Country offers an interesting site for this exploration as it has been the locus of great interest in both the preservation of rural landscapes and the revitalization of Euskara, its unique non Indo-European language. To date, however, these preservation projects have evolved quite separately from each other, both in theoretical frameworks and in practice. We come together as a professional in cultural landscape development and as an anthropologist who studies language revival, to show how it is that language revival and sustainable development can work synergistically. For this, we focus on

language revival and sustainable development can work synergistically. For this, we focus on the small rural town of Zerain (pop 250), a predominantly Basque-speaking community in the province of Gipuzkoa. We will begin tracing the conceptualization and distinctive features by which cultural landscape conservation is being carried out in Zerain and then discuss how these very same methods align with what experts know to be positive factors in language preservation.

Making Zerain: Preserving cultural landscape

Zerain Pasaia Kulturala [Zerain Cultural Landscape] is the phrase residents now use to describe a project in heritage preservation and community development that began in the nineteen seventies. The end of the Franco regime was in sight and prospects for regional autonomy and democratic freedoms were opening the door to many forms of social and political organizing in the Basque Country. The previous two decades had seen very rapid industrial growth in and around the capital cities of Bilbao and San Sebastian, as well as the river valleys of Gipuzkoa. Large waves of monolingual Spanish labor migrants had come to the area to find work in the burgeoning factories resulting in profound transformation of the cultural, linguistic, and demographic features of many Basque towns. In Zerain, however, the problems were different. With an economy still tied to family farms and small-scale animal husbandry, the problem Zerain faced was not in-migration, but stagnation, lack of housing, lack of services, and a moribund town hall. Outmigration for jobs, schooling, and housing seemed the inevitable fate of its young people. Residents worried that Zerain was headed to become a virtual ghost town.

Inspired no doubt by the end of the dictatorship and sense of an historical new beginning, residents came together to attempt to resist this fate. Young people from farm houses, *baserriak*, were the catalysts and they explicitly invoked Basque rural traditions of voluntary mutual aid known as *auzolan*, as a means of drawing people together. Residents joined together to oust the Francoist mayor. They created a construction cooperative and ushered in a new town hall that would now begin to act in partnership with residents to find ways to sustain a viable community.

Thus began three decades of increasingly more self conscious plans to secure the future of Zerain. They conceptualized community development in terms of three central goals each building upon the next: 1) Improvements to the material infrastructure; 2) Enhancing community integration and social life; 3) creating a viable economic future.

Improving the physical infrastructure of the town was seen as the first step. It entailed such things as repairing roads, the provision of adequate electricity and water, new housing, and later on, providing internet access, all of which were steps seen as ensuring a better quality of life for residents. Activities in this domain were seen to be one of the central duties of the town hall. Next came efforts focused on meeting needs for social cohesion and an enriched community life. Under this rubric, residents had to ask themselves what kind of community they wished to have and what they needed to sustain a sense of community and cohesion. Beginning around 1982, their first actions were to create a pre-school in town, a library and a recreational center. The primary agent for social and cultural life is Zerain's cultural center, known as the *Kultur Etxea*. The town hall allocates a budget for their activities, but lets this voluntary organization of local residents decide what projects to carry out. Here too, the tradition of *auzolan*, mutual aid, was a concept residents mobilized for carrying out these projects.

The third pillar of community development was added in 1997 with the creation of the *Zerain Dezagun Fundazioa* [Making Zerain Foundation] – an entity created by the town hall and the Cultural Center and charged with planning an economic future for the town. Errekondo, a landscaper by training with long-term interest and involvement in Basque rural life and culture, had already been working for Zerain in cultural patrimony conservation. He was now hired to begin working full time for the Foundation. Since its creation, the Foundation has been concerned primarily with preserving and building upon Zerain's tradition of *baserriak*, family farms, and developing their own rather unique form of rural heritage tourism.

Although they were conceptualized as sequential stages, these three areas of development (infrastructure, social/cultural life, sustainable income generating tourism) are inevitably intersecting projects. And while they have been successful in tapping into funding from regional, state and European agencies, the direction of projects has remained in the hands of local residents.

Let us turn now to look in more detail at some of the distinctive features of Zerain's way of conceptualizing and implementing these objectives.

Located in the foothills of the majestic Txindoki mountain, this landscape and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, has been regarded as the community's central resource and source of identity -- something to cultivate, preserve, and market -- but also a fountain of ideas and methods for building community. One of the first steps locals took to preserve their community was to create a school in town for their younger children. Keeping children close to their families and neighbors during their early socialization was regarded by residents to be essential for the transmission of local culture, language, and customs as well as the formation of closer life long bonds with their peers. In addition to the school, the Kultur Etxea has promoted a variety of projects in cultural heritage conservation: restoring their abandoned mines, recording elders, collecting stories about customs, folklore, and history of the town.

The Kultur Etxea has been a mechanism for the definition, recovery and dissemination of local heritage. Notable, however, is the highly participatory nature of their heritage work and the attention to involving individuals of varying age groups, a feature of great significance for both community cohesion and language maintenance. One of their earliest projects of the Kultur Etxea was to create a museum to display local farming culture. But rather than have outside experts select the items for the museum, residents were invited to participate in formation of the exhibit by bringing in items from their family farms, tools, or other pieces of material culture. In this way, the exhibition, which now resides permanently in the local museum, has both pedagogical and social value in promoting a sense of local authorship in defining their heritage (Ziarrusta 2010). Most recently, they have just completed a two-year project to recover local placenames that had been forgotten, never recorded, or deliberately changed into Spanish by the state. Here too, the project involved local volunteers conducting countless interviews with older residents and reviews of archival documents. In the process of this research, stories they collected led to the discovery of a hermitage and the documentation of religious practices that had fallen by the wayside.

In looking across the three last decades we see that a key concern of residents has been to build a future premised on recognizing and valorizing the diversity of their cultural heritage. The agricultural lifeways of the town are celebrated in the museum, while the recent restoration of iron mines speak to the industrial heritage of the Goierri region. Every year the Kultur Etxea organizes a cultural week that includes lectures on local history and culture that regularly attracts audiences of close to 70 people. At the same time, the Kultur Etxea is clearly attentive to the ways that residents participate in a global culture. Thus they also organize an eclectic range of events, from internet and exercise classes for the elderly, pilates for women, to lectures about customary ways of naming sheep. Guiding the Kultur Etxea's approach is a view of heritage as a means of creating community cohesion, self-esteem and sense of a distinctive identity, while also valorizing the changing interests and connections locals have to the larger world. What we see in the various projects is not so much a desire to *preserve* the past, as it is an attempt to increase community knowledge and appreciation of the richness of their shared cultural heritage. For groups like the Basques whose language and culture had long been eclipsed from state-sponsored national narratives, this has special importance.

Local media have also played a role in the project of community building. Residents created a modest four page monthly magazine that carries a calendar of events, extensive weather reports, of great interest to this community of farmers, as well as articles of local interest. The magazine's name, *Saguartea*, is a compound word that plays upon the nickname for Zerain residents, *saguak* (mice), and *arte*, (among) to evoke the meaning of local communication. Both in the creative repurposing of words as well the content of the magazine stories themselves demonstrates a concern with strengthening community solidarity in ways that reflect the identities, interests and needs of locals.

Summing up, we can identify the following features as distinctive of the "Zerain Cultural Landscape" project:

- *participatory
- * attentive to including people of diverse ages
- *use of *auzolan*: mutual aid strategies found in rural Basque culture
- *open ended and evolving notion of cultural heritage
- *emphasis on building community cohesion

Cultural Landscape and Sustainable Development

As noted earlier, the Zerain Dezagun Foundation was created to work specifically on securing new forms of income generation. Most farm families had long subsisted through a mixed economy of farm and wage labor. But finding a paid job had always meant leaving town. In the past thirteen years, the Foundation has been able to increase the number of local jobs from 5 to 35. As we noted, locals saw their landscape – farmsteads set against some of Gipuzkoa’s most beautiful mountains -- as a resource to exploit. They were not alone. The rural farmhouse has long been an iconic image of Basque culture. Beginning in the late eighties, the Basque regional government began promoting what they called agrotourism providing farm families with subsidies to preserve their farmsteads by turning them into rural bed and breakfasts. But Zerain’s Foundation saw the need to think in broader terms. They wanted a plan that went beyond preserving the farmhouse structures themselves. They wanted to integrate agricultural production with tourism, not surrender it to it, nor transform it into a simulacra for the entertainment of outsiders as is so often the case with rural tourism (Crumbaugh 2008). To signal the broader aims of the project, Errekondo, as the consultant for the Foundation, deliberately chose not to use the term agrotourism and in its place introduced at first the term “Cultural Park” and then settled on “Cultural Landscape.” At the time a term newly adopted by UNESCO, use of the term cultural landscape was seen as potentially giving their project legitimacy and legibility to external audiences. But, more than that, it was useful in helping the residents to conceptualize heritage preservation in a way that recognized the integral link between the natural environment, cultural traditions, agriculture, and patrimony. Errekondo felt the term landscape was preferable as well for the way it conveyed the idea of nature as an evolving environment more clearly than the word “park” which connoted something fixed, set apart and preserved.

Cultural landscapes are defined by UNESCO as physical settings that are produced through the interaction of human beings – their belief systems, social structures and economic activities -- and their environment. In adopting the term cultural landscape in 1992, the World Heritage Committee sought to transcend the assumed division between artifacts of human genius and works of nature. As a concept, cultural landscape broadens the horizon of heritage preservation beyond material artifacts, buildings, or monuments, to include ways of using and circulating through an environment. Such things as fence and field patterns, shepherding routes, cultivation methods, landforms, and the variety of social relations and knowledge that people have developed over time for living in a place are all part of the cultural landscape. Looking at environments as cultural landscapes thus asks us to consider human beings, their cultural beliefs and activities as part of an ecosystem they have fashioned over time (Longstreth 2008). Thinking of Zerain as a cultural landscape prompted residents to think of heritage in much broader terms: about material culture, the build environment, folklore, modes of tilling, distinctive ways of pruning, social customs and practices as a part of an integral whole, reflected in the landscape in which they lived. As a landscaper and a cultural activist, Errekondo saw this as a good term for describing the close integration of culture and nature that characterized agricultural communities. Cultural landscape captured the multidimensional collective entity – Zerain -- that were trying to sustain.

Zerain’s success in avoiding the common pitfalls of many tourist development projects can be attributed both to its epistemological grounding in the concept of cultural landscape as well as its methods. In planning their projects, three principles have guided Errekondo in his work with the Foundation. 1. A commitment to sustainability and resilience. 2. A commitment to local ownership and control. 3. A commitment that the needs and interests of locals take primacy in creating any development project.

In Errekondo’s view the primacy of local control and needs are an indispensable part of achieving sustainability. The latter is classically defined as production that leaves the next generation with sufficient primary resources with which to live and reproduce their lives. In Errekondo’s view, sustainability is mostly likely to be achieved when, as in Zerain, local residents are in decision-making positions. As Buggey and Mitchell write, “some type of community-based governance for decision making is ... a key ingredient for the success and sustainability of conservation” (2008:173). Although there is no guarantee of this, it is more likely that people will be concerned about sustainability and use local labor and products when they and their

children's lives are at stake. Linked to local control are values that place priority on benefiting residents' needs and interests in whatever project they undertake. As we know, too often mainstream or commercial tourism is indifferent to needs or desires of locals, seeing them at best as service providers. The Zerain Foundation, however, has been vigilant in developing forms of tourism and delivering services that will simultaneously facilitate tourism and the quality of life of Zerain's residents. Providing access to the internet, for example, was a good example of a project in infrastructural improvement that served multiple aims. Having a presence on the internet has been vital to expanding sales of farmer's local products: artisanal cheese, marmalade, beans, honey and other items. Internet allows sales to continue in the absence of visitors. But access to the internet is also important to the social and cultural life of its residents, particularly young people for whom surfing, skyping, and downloading movies and music are important parts of youth culture. The town hall has been concerned to make that resource available to the whole community by organizing courses on how to use the internet and making free wifi accessible for the whole town.

In general, Zerain's economic development has aimed for small-scale, locally run family-based businesses that are consistent with the size of their community and familiar forms of work. But their small-scale aims should not be seen as insularity. Zerain's forward-thinking approach has led them to be one of the first communities in the Spanish state to successfully win EU Economic Regional Development Funds (ERDF) and to create partnerships with other communities in Greece and France through which they can share expertise and experiences in heritage development. They aim to develop sites of interest and locally produced artisanal products the sales of which help to maintain a cultural landscape in the broadest sense of the term. The goal is to create a feedback loop, as it were, between the primary and tertiary sector so that each sustains the other. Thus instead of turning farmhouses into bed and breakfasts, as is done in rather narrow conceptions of agrotourism, Zerain's projects aim to use the tourist as a new market for the products of the farmhouse so as to sustain the practices of farming and local food production. As often as possible, projects seek to make producers the direct beneficiaries of tourist dollars. Thus they made their visitor welcome and information center double as a store for selling their brand name products so that, as Errekondo says, the first dollar a tourist spends in our town goes directly to sustaining the families whose labor, recipes, and wealth of cultural knowledge sustains a meaningful and evolving cultural landscape. In these seemingly small details, lies a great deal of thought about how best to promote a sustainable community-based tourism that integrates, rather than separates, the well being of the locals with that of the tourist.

Language Preservation and Sustainable Heritage Development

Although the recovery and maintenance of the Basque language is an object of social policy throughout the Basque Autonomous Community, language preservation was not the goal of Zerain's project. Nevertheless, we see plenty of evidence that the preservation of the cultural landscape and the promotion of community building have positive outcomes for sustaining Basque language knowledge and use. We will outline some of these and then discuss how it is that the premises of sustainable development used in Zerain coincide with current thinking about the factors that sustain language diversity.

First, we see that community efforts in heritage marketing and preservation have been attentive to projecting the Basque language as a feature of Zerain's identity to the larger world. Located as it is in the Spanish state, all of Zerain's residents know Spanish, but Basque has long been the primary language of daily life in the community. Their web site, zerain.com, can be accessed in Basque as well as Spanish, and Basque is visibly present in labeling for local products and other marketing materials. Second, the development projects can also be seen as indirectly facilitating the expansion of registers and vocabulary for residents, some of who may have never studied Basque and know it primarily as a language of the home and informal sphere. By hiring Errekondo, a native speaker of Basque with high level literacy skills and technical vocabulary in Basque, they have also made it possible to carry out much of the discussion and document writing involved in development planning in Basque. Basque has expanded into new formats of circulation, most particularly via the creation of the monthly magazine, *Saguarte*. For many older Basques, this may be one of their first experiences in reading Basque. In keep-

ing with their interest in recovering local patrimony, the magazine also runs a column written by two residents, specifically about local speechways. The magazine, written and edited entirely by local residents, thus creates a new domain for intracommunity communication in Basque.

In situations where a language and culture has been marginalized or restricted in domains of usage, heritage recovery can lead to recovering language: forms of naming and classifying animals, rituals, the vocabulary of cheese making, unique names for farmtools, or other objects and associated folk knowledge, expressions, and ideas that have faded from memory. Heritage development has involved language preservation but also a significant amount of linguistic invention. Here too, we see an interest in producing language that is meaningful to residents – as in the adoption of the term *Saguarte* for the community magazine. Language is an outcome but also a tool for carrying out and communicating the project of community-building. Errekondo notes that the Foundation was quite deliberate in selecting active verbs for some of their new key phrases: *zerain dezagun*, which is the name of the Foundation, and *Zeraintzen S.A.*, the name of the holding company they created. Both of these can be translated roughly as “making Zerain” and thus convey the community’s vision of heritage as an evolving process about making the future, not simply holding onto the past.

Zerain’s efforts in cultural landscape development mobilize the power of language as an instrument in the constructing the participatory future oriented community they wish to create. Their activities have worked to expand the knowledge and circulation of Basque without extracting language as a separate object of preservation. Quite the contrary, the integral linkage of language and other aspects of culture and social relations are repeatedly revealed in the projects they undertake. The toponymic map is a good example of this. The research on place-names, originally conceived as an exercise in recovering language, led to the documentation of a forgotten ritual of bread blessing among neighbors, and ultimately to the recovery of material culture. As anthropologists have shown, places often serve as “mnemonic devices” through which people speak about and remember the past, pass on moral lessons and precepts for living with their landscapes (Buggey and Mitchell 2008:169; Basso 1996).

The interwoven nature of language, memory, tangible and intangible heritage potently revealed in the toponymic project, is conceptualized as we have said, not simply as conservation, but as a process of building and sustaining community. This linkage led a member of the *Kultur Etxea* to suggest to us the epigraph at the start of our paper: *Hitza berreskuratu/Harria berreraiki/ Herria bizi*. The phrase takes three key concepts that have iconic status in Basque culture: *hitza*, that means literally ‘the word’ or language; *harria*, which means ‘stone,’ a reference to the material traces of Basque culture that extend back to the Neolithic; and *herria*, a word meaning community, nation, or people. A verb is attached to each of these creating a phrase that can be then translated as *hitza berreskuratu* “recover the word”/ *harri berreraiki* “reconstruct material heritage”/ *herria bizi* “a living community”.

In Zerain, language is conceptualized as a part of a cultural landscape that is inherited and continues to evolve. Language policy experts would probably agree wholeheartedly with this affirmation, but too often that linkage is not activated by the kinds of efforts that typically characterize minority or endangered language preservation. Language promotion ends up often enough reifying language, talking about and treating it like a thing. Joshua Fishman (2002) one of the leading experts in language revitalization calls this the inadvertent but pernicious “linguacentrism” that pervades most language preservation efforts as it does public talk about language in general. Language promotion, for example, typically use statistical counts of numbers of speakers, publishing, television programs, or percentages of written or spoken use of the language to measure their efficacy. The concept of “linguistic landscape” is a case in point. Linguistic landscape refers to the visible presence of a language in public space and it has become one of the latest in a battery of instruments for assessing the vitality of a language (Bourhis and Landry 2002; Gorter 2006; Shohamy and Gorter 2009). We agree that such measures can tell us something about the perceived status or legitimacy a language enjoys in a society. But we also know that signage and schooling in a language are not enough. Effectively promoting the continued use of a language, we believe, hinges on understanding it less as a set of visible linguistic tokens or competency a person possesses – i.e. a thing -- and more as a lived social practice through which speakers interact with each other and live their lives. As sociolinguist Sanchez Carrión (1986) has argued, the motivation to use, expand, or acquire a language comes when a language is a medium and gateway to participating in meaningful activities and social networks.

We need to ensure not the preservation of languages, but the continuity of engaged communities of speakers who will themselves sustain their language in natural contexts for its use.

This is why we believe that the model of sustainable cultural landscape preservation characterized by local participation and control holds great potential for language revitalization. This argument is very much in line with current thinking about language revitalization. In their highly influential book, *Vanishing Voices*, Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine argue persuasively that “the measures most likely to preserve small languages are the very ones which will help increase their speaker’s standard of living in a long-term sustainable way “ (2000:156). If for much of history people have abandoned their languages in seeking economic mobility, this is not, they argue, because of inevitable forces of nature, but rather due to unequal terms under which extractive economic development has been practiced. “Where people are given a real opportunity to set the parameters of development for themselves, they often find win-win strategies in which they retain the autonomy of their local communities, along with appropriate strategic involvement in the wider economic and political system” (Ibid: 147). When people are able to have decision-making power over resource use and styles of development, they are more likely to find continuing value in their cultural heritage, including the language or languages that make up their repertoire (Ibid 171). Contrary to what some detractors claim, language conservation does not lead to monolingual ghettoization, but generally encourages multilingualism.

In sum, experts’ study of language endangerment argue that what works for the sustainable conservation of natural environments and indigenous or local knowledge systems, also works in similar ways for the conservation of linguistic environments. It is not the case that heritage development per se promotes the maintenance of local languages. Quite the contrary, it ironically may lead to language shift at the same time that it may expand the commodification of the local language in marketing strategies—using words to “brand” products and places. Consequently, the impact heritage development will have on a local language is tied to the way in which heritage conservation is conceptualized and implemented. We wish to underscore this point and note its difference from language preservation achieved through documentation or classroom teaching. Zerain’s method of community-based cultural landscape preservation lays the foundation for rich, rather than tokenistic, language use and transmission. First, the involvement of residents in planning projects, rather than simply being the service providers, cultivates a stance towards their heritage as something that is an evolving, practical and meaningful resource for living. Second, by creating the contexts for residents to talk to one another about the practices of the past and to interact across generational lines in different kinds of activities – whether it be to record placenames or practice yoga – this form of community building creates contexts for the transmission and repurposing of varying registers and lexicon, the conveyance of all-important pragmatic features of voice and prosody typically learned through performance, as well as the development of new ways of using Basque all of which is crucial to its continuity. Such contexts of natural language use are precisely what grassroots Basque language advocates had increasingly come to recognize as a necessary element in language revitalization (Urla 2008). Zerain cannot, of course, be replicated, nor should it be. Every community will have to define its own vision of its cultural landscape. Its methods, however, hold lessons for language revitalization elsewhere. To the degree that sustainable community-based heritage development engages communities of native speakers in shaping their future, it holds promise for addressing one of the real challenges of language revitalization and the most difficult to address through language policy alone: that is sustaining the value and therefore motivation of speakers to continue to use and transmit their language.

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