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A new perspective on the Walser community: mobilisation of symbolic resources in an INTERREG project

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Abstract : This paper focuses on an INTERREG IIIB project to conserve and promote the so-called Walser culture. The case study shows how different stakeholders are involved in a network that transcends national borders. First, the paper analyses how the stakeholders, who previously had no reason to interact with one another, come to work together in constructing common attributes

of the Walser heritage, attributes that justify this cooperation. Second, the paper looks at the different ways used by project partners to conserve Walser culture. The role of such a network of partners in social cohesion and economic development is also underlined.

Keywords : identity, attributes, network, heritage, Alps.

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Cross-border cooperation programmes, known as INTERREG programmes, sometimes bring together local communities and create networks between spatially non-contiguous partners. This article focuses on an INTERREG project in cultural heritage management. The project set up a network of communities that are working to conserve the vestiges of the so-called Walser culture. The Walsers are the original settlers of the Haut-Valais region who colonised certain high valleys of the Alps in the 12th and 13th centuries.

This case study illustrates how symbolic attributes are mobilised in a project aimed at conserving an identity known as Walser. It examines the process of constructing attributes that are shared by communities whose members do not normally interact with one another. These common attributes, which justify such cooperation, define the “Walser identity”. While agreement may be observed within the network concerning what attributes are common and specific to the Walser people, several differences are also observed among project partners as to how to conserve the symbols and emblems of this culture. These different positions, sometimes ideological other times pragmatic, have motivated action carried out within the framework of the project. They reflect the different interests of associations, individuals and political institutions, each with their varied representations of the Walser heritage. The perspective of the French commune of Vallorcine (Haute-Savoie) and that of its Swiss partners in the project will be examined in more detail.

The study is based on a discourse analysis using data obtained from interviews with key stakeholders, study reports, the minutes of meetings, newspaper articles and other sources. These discourses express ideologies, in other words representations of the world that are presented as being true (Prieto, 1975). The identity displayed may thus relate to these ideologies. These convey a rather essentialist conception of identity (in this case Walser), which in turn is reinforced by a territory that is also naturalised (that of the community in question and that of the entire Walser settlement in the Alps). However, from a constructivist point of view, it can be said that identity is forged by the actions that individuals and groups undertake together (Castells, 1999; Polletta & Jaspers, 2001; Snow, 2001). The unifying elements would, from this perspective, pertain less to historical traits than to the projects to be carried out. In both cases, identity markers (or attributes) help to “objectivize” the identity of a group (Bromberger, Centlivres & Collomb, 1989: p. 142). However, in the essentialist meaning of identity, these emblems are only the signs brandished by the group to reflect an identity that exists in itself. On the other hand, for the constructivists these emblems construct the identity concerned, by expressing it.

In these discourses constructing identity, it is the arguments that are identified and analysed. In the project studied here, the arguments are meaningful in the sense that the stakeholders constantly have to justify actions taken (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). The bases of the arguments must therefore be examined. Proof of compliance with so-called tradition or assertions by experts are some of the means of justification. Actions may also be justified rationally by demonstrating that the desired effects of the project have been achieved (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Contemporary recognition of Walser questions

The term Walser is a contraction of the adjective Walliser, meaning Valaisan. The Walser settled originally in the Haut-Valais (and more specifically the Conches valley). From the 12th to the 13th centuries, the Walser emigrated into several high alpine valleys along three fronts (Rizzi, 1993; Zinsli, 2002 [1968]): to the south, along several valleys to the south of Mont Rose in Italy; to the east, along certain valleys of Grisons and Vorarlberg, in Austria; to the west, into the Bernese Oberland and the French Alps (with Vallorcine). Social mobilisation concerning the Walser culture dates back some forty years. Numerous scientific documents on the Walser have been produced since the beginning of the 20th century (Waibel, 2007). This interest, at first scientific, heralded a more marked infatuation after the 1950s that led to the creation of different Walser cultural associations (Loretz & Simonett, 1991; Arnold, 1998). The activity of the Walser cultural associations has been largely dependent on this scientific literature, consisting of work on language, history, and questions of local heritage. However, very little of this work gave rise to cooperation among all the Walser communities throughout the Alps before the project of the INTERREG IIIB¹ cross-border cooperation programme. A first attempt to link up the different Walser communities in a network took place in 1962 with the organisation of the Walsertreffen, a folk meeting held every three years that

brings together all the Walser sites. Following this initiative, the International Walser Association (IVfW) was created in 1965.

With funding of more than 1 million Euros for the period 2003-2007, the Walser Alps project brought together 11 partners: cultural associations, communes (municipalities) and provinces from the five alpine countries. For Italy, the partners are the autonomous region of the Aosta Valley, the *Comunita Montana Alta Valle del Lys*, and the provinces of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola and Vercelli; in France, the commune of Vallorcine; in Austria, the *Vorarlberger Walservereinigung (VWV)*; in Liechtenstein, the commune of Triesenberg; in Switzerland, the commune of Bosco Gurin, the *Internationale Vereinigung für Walsertum (IVfW)*, the *Joch-Susten-Grimselfpass Vereinigung (JSG)* and the *Walservereinigung Graubünden (WVG)*.

In the INTERREG IIIB project database, the objectives of the Walser Alps project are stated as follows:

“The main objective of the project is pondering on the traditional culture in order to bring to light those social, cultural and technical values that could be appreciated in a modern post-industrial society. It means also rediscovering the local identity as the starting point toward a sustainable local development”.

Based on this general framework, the project was divided into work packages (WPs), as required for the structure of an INTERREG project. The first three WPs concerned the launching and management of the project. The other five dealt with different themes:

- WP 4, on communications: the aim was to strengthen the links between Walser communities and in particular to provide an effective communication tool. A web site was thus set up in 2006.
- WP 5, on culture: a database was established to make an inventory of museographic objects on all the Walser sites, the aim being to conserve the Walser heritage.
- WP 6, on everyday life: solutions to conserve and revitalize the Walser language were researched.
- WP 7, on landscape: scenarios for the future development of the landscapes of the communes concerned were formulated.
- WP 8, on identity: projects (for example, in primary schools and certain secondary schools) were carried out to promote greater cohesion among generations and to question the Walser identity.

It can be seen that identity is a key term used by the project initiators themselves, who most certainly have an essentialist conception of it. But at the same time, this conception is accompanied by a very introspective attitude, as we shall see. The project partners, from five different countries and working in quite different cultural, economic and social contexts, must share the attributes that define what it is to be Walser.

1 • The INTERREG programmes were started in 1989 as part of the European Union's regional policy. Their aim is to promote greater integration between regions situated on either side of national borders. The section INTERREG IIIB, which corresponds to trans-national cooperation, concerns predefined areas of cooperation. Within the framework of this section, a specific area for the alpine region was established. The Walser Alps project is part of this programme.

2 • Web site of European INTERREG III B Alpine Space Programme, www.alpinespace.org, 2001-2006.

“There’s a specificity, meaning that those Walser settlers, they colonised land that nobody wanted, that is the highlands, land that was isolated. They were really clearers of the highlands. That was their speciality. They were said to be proud and courageous. Those were really their characteristics”³.

Defining the Walser identity: The search for common attributes

The partners of the INTERREG project start from the principle that they share common characteristics, or at least common historical characteristics. They use a definition of the object on which they are working (the Walser), very naturalistic and strongly based on scientific justification, and which could be summarised by the following causal chain: late migration – high altitude – difficult environment – specific society. The first outlines of the INTERREG project logically went through this stage of definition:

“With their unique and very special traits, the Walser are part of the history of Europe and, more generally, the history of civilisation and represent a very special human story. For the last three centuries of the Middle Ages, they were the colonisers “par excellence” of the alpine highlands [...]. Descendants of tribes of German-speaking origin, [...] the Walser lived for four centuries in the upper Valais region (Wallis: hence the name Walser), gradually becoming accustomed to altitudes where previously man had never learned to live. From the 13th century, they were the protagonists of an extraordinary story of colonisation that saw them deforest and clear still virgin land in the high mountain areas”⁴.

The partners (some of whom are scientists themselves) systematically refer to the work of historians and linguists to justify the creation of the network.

However, beyond this common definition that appears relatively consensual and naturalized among all the partners⁵, the work carried out as part of WP 8 resulted in the questioning of this notion of Walser culture or identity. In fact, it is presented as an equivalent of the term “alpine or mountain society”⁶:

“The Walser identity [...] is more an identity of alpine regions in general. You cannot really speak of just the Walser, because the things we find have 95% or 100% the same identity as all the valleys or all the regions in the mountains have at that same time”⁷.

The partners do not want to base their project solely on historical destiny, but to look at material or immaterial attributes, such as farming techniques, architecture, tools, the

3 • Interview with a project partner in Vallorcine, December 2006.

4 • E. Monti Foundation, *Kuratorium Walser project*, 2002

5 • In a document presenting the Walser Alps project to the Regional Council (Conseil Régional), the project initiators in Vallorcine state that they have adopted this definition: “Settled in highland areas, the Walser have learned to survive in extreme environmental conditions [...]. The story of the Vallorcin people is similar to that of other minorities, and Walser architecture is still found in this commune (translation)” (*Rhône-Alpes Region, INTERREG IIIB European Alpine Space Programme. Participation of French partners in the projects*, p. 95).

6 • Note that in this extract the terms “mountain” and “Alps” are strictly interchangeable.

7 • Interview with a Swiss partner in the project, November 2006.

mentality, place names or the language⁸. The latter attribute has frequently been used to qualify the Walser, particularly where the encompassing linguistic environment is different (in Italy, for example). However, over the course of the project and different meetings, the partners, particularly the Swiss, realised that the language could no longer be a unifying attribute for the Walser. German-Italian translations (and French for the people of Vallorcine) were thus necessary at project meetings. This can be explained by the substantial decline of the Walser dialect in the Italian valleys over the past twenty years (Zurrer, 1993; Dal Negro, 2004), despite the repeated preservation measures introduced by associations and regional and local authorities.

The absence of such an attribute in Vallorcine (the language was replaced by the Franco-Provençal several centuries ago) was nevertheless seen as a hindrance to Vallorcine's adherence to the Walser community⁹. Local project managers therefore looked towards undertaking concrete projects rather than seeking to affirm the indelible hypothetical traces of the Walser character of Vallorcine¹⁰. Vallorcine thus attempted to acquire legitimacy in defining itself as Walser by carrying out numerous actions: meetings with school-children and crafts people, support for the activities of a pastoral association, studies of inhabitants' perception of the landscape, extension of a hiking route, the "Grand Sentier Walser" (Great Walser trail), as far as the commune's territory, were among the most notable measures. All these actions enhanced the status of the more or less symbolic identity attributes of a Walser character (crafts, a particular type of land use, typical migrations of the Walser). These actions illustrate the reinvestment in local areas by the European project, a project that provides not only financial assistance but also a relevant and suitable framework for such actions to be implemented.

The Grand Sentier Walser reflects the will to provide the commune of Vallorcine with a Walser identity. It was announced as "*a very symbolic geographic link with the other Walser communities of the alpine arc*"¹¹.

Craft objects or tools, such as the "hotte", a sack carried on the back, were also considered by project initiators as attributes linking Vallorcine with the Walser entity¹². At the local level, the "hotte" acts as the prototype of a craft industry believed to be a specific characteristic of Vallorcine. Vallorcine sought to promote and conserve something specific to the commune in relation to other Walser communities.

"We said to ourselves 'on each site there's something very special, something that is very strong.' Here, for me, it was obvious, maybe because everyone knows it ... the Vallorcine people have developed a unique know-how in crafts"¹³.

8 • The "Walsertitsch", which is close to the Haut-Valais dialect.

9 • Very few place names in the commune in fact reveal traces of Walser settlement.

10 • At the beginning of the project, among inhabitants, it was accepted that remarkable objects were likely to be considered as attributes proving the Walser character of Vallorcine. Particular buildings, known as "regats", a type of granary unique to the French Alps and common in the Valais, are considered as remarkable elements of Vallorcine architecture and characteristic of the agro-pastoral economy of the Walser (Guichonnet 1991).

11 • Ancey D., N. Devillaz, 2006 – *Exhibition of 15 August 2006 devoted to the European project "INTERREG III B - Alpes Walser"*.

12 • Representations of these tools have been included in the Walser virtual museum, designed by the Swiss partners during the INTERREG project.

13 • Interview with project partner in Vallorcine, December 2006.

The inclusion of Vallorcine (as well as other sites) in the network has thus been exploited as a means to promote the special character of the local area.

A trans-national network: utopian idea, difficulties and differences

Because of the type of funding provided, the Walser project could only take on the form of a network. This is because in choosing to submit a project to the INTERREG IIIB programme, project initiators, and to a certain extent the different partners, had to adopt a certain philosophy from these programmes, which of course favour the network structure. One of the objectives of the Alpine Space programme is to “promote a sustainable spatial development of the Alpine Space [...] by putting in place trans-national activities” (Leitz & Fleury, 2005: p. 8). It is clear that a network structure provides the basis for such a programme.

The Walser Alps project probably represents a turning point in the history of the Walser people in that it has established, at least for a limited period, relations of unprecedented intensity between all the Walser communities. It was the first time that these communities (principally the associations) went beyond a simple folk festival or specialist publication, for example the Walsertreffen and the different Walser journals. Two major changes may be identified: each association was to some extent able to move off-centre from its own region or area. Association representatives assisted by different institutions (such as the Région autonome de la Vallée d’Aoste) were able to build a project together for the first time.

The project initiators examined the issues without adhering to traditional spatial frameworks. The aim of this type of network is in fact to try to transcend national borders and to become established without any reference to the national scale. When the project was presented in Vallorcine, this idea of transcending borders was palpable:

“The Walser communities link up and work together beyond frontiers in order to strengthen their position as a minority within their environment.”¹⁴

In October 2006, a meeting of the project steering committee in Vallorcine gave concrete form to the principle of a network for exchanges among partners. An article on this topic that appeared in the *Dauphiné Libéré* indicates that for the Vallorcine group this was an important event:

“This two-day meeting provided the opportunity to make substantial progress in the programme and also to consolidate the links established outside geographical borders, particularly with Vallorcine, the only site to represent France in the project.”¹⁵

The dialogue concerning the transcending of national borders in fact concealed the difficulties that existed in overcoming the distance separating partners. According to the interviews we conducted, distance was seen as a real disadvantage from two points of view. Distance is both geometric (difficulty in organising frequent working meetings,

14 • Ancy D., S. Monfleur, 2004. – “Walser de Vallorcine” Project. Report for Conseil Général. June 2004.

15 • Devillaz N. – « Walser de tous pays... », *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 2 November 2005.

hence difficulty in exchanging information) and cultural (communication difficulties linked to different languages and national mentalities).

The influence of the individual countries in this type of project, which is supposed to be trans-national and trans-border in essence, is all the more important since European funding in fact only covers half the project in cases such as this, the remainder being the responsibility of the individual states. This type of funding arrangement can only reinforce the feeling that interests are fragmented.

Apart from the impossibility of erasing national cultures, there was no agreement in the Walser Alps project on the direction that the project should take. All the partners agreed that they were concerned with working on Walser heritage, but there was no consensus on methods or objectives. Several ways of understanding the cooperation between partners and several ideas on how to conserve and promote Walser culture can be identified. There was no kind of confrontation or clear opposition; the different partners joined the project and carried out actions in accordance with their own perspectives.

It is possible, however, to detect a dividing line between the partisans of an historical and museographical approach on one side, and those of a more pragmatic approach, oriented toward regional planning and development, on the other.

The Walser culture is firstly of scientific and museographical interest. This interest is in line with the task of objectively qualifying what the Walser are. The pursuit of this goal was helped by the work of WP 5, involved with setting up the “Walser cultura” database. This type of work resulted in the desire, expressed in 2002, to obtain recognition of the Walser minority on UNESCO’s world heritage list. Certain partners were thus tempted to seek special recognition for the Walser people at a scale other than that intended by the project (the Alps), that is, on a world scale with the UNESCO label. This particular idea was promoted mainly by an Italian historian and specialist on the Walser people, Enrico Rizzi, who was concerned with obtaining increased recognition for this group of people.

Secondly, the Walser culture may represent a potential for developing tourism. The Italian Walser sites have clearly understood the advantages of promoting the “traditions” (a term that is often used) associated with the Walser people that could meet the current aspirations of the tourist market. The Walser tourism agency project, managed by the province of Vercelli, is an example of this trend.

Reinvestment in Walser culture in tourism projects has been one of the main aims pursued by all the partners. Underpinning this development has been the realisation that Walser culture produces, in addition to a particular landscape maintained by agriculture, traditions that can only be incorporated in a tourism economy that is “sustainable” (Loretz 2006, p. 23). The partners representing small tourist resorts (for example, Vallorcine or Safiental in the Grisons) have been inclined to add this Walser “supplement” to boost their tourism offers.

Thirdly, the Walser may represent the opportunity for an identity celebration, as reflected in the proclamation of a trans-national Walser feeling. This sentiment, also prominent in the three-yearly folk gathering of the *Walser Treffen*, was very present among the Italian partners:

“All the Walser communities, wherever they may be, have the feeling that they are in

the process of dying out, because there are few of them left, they are weak, and their language is disappearing. I think that the real result of this project has been to change this feeling, because the Walser have felt they are a people ... divided by mountains, but a single people really [...] I believe this is a result. We have recognised that beyond the national borders, ... the Walser people are really linked by their history”¹⁶.

This lucid observation represents a celebration of identity, which consecrates the union of “a single people”. It reflects a quasi-ethnic conscience that transcends national borders. According to one of the project leaders, this conscience has also enabled certain threats that hung over the Walser people to be removed: Walser communities have succeeded in overcoming their weakness.

Finally, the Walser are a pretext for seeking practical solutions for the populations living in these communities. In this context, and here too in line with numerous studies on the subject, Walser society represents the quintessence of all alpine societies; it could serve as an example for other “minorities” or for other mountain regions. On the one hand, the Walser example raises questions concerning the attraction that Walser sites may hold, particularly for young people living there. On the other, it suggests the need to examine the notion of “sustainability” for other mountain regions and other linguistic minorities. Numerous measures undertaken by the Swiss partners in the project (WVG and IVfW) relate to this tendency to make the project operational. WP 8, which concerns the inter-generational link, corresponds particularly well to the project’s philosophy in that the older generations were interviewed about their memories of the past with a view to providing a starting point for discussion on the region’s future.

“Fifty years ago, it was the community that counted for people, and not individuals. Now, it’s everyone for him or herself. I think that here, for example, the old values could provide a starting point for (reflection and) discussion for the young”¹⁷.

In 2006, as part of this inter-generational project, the pupils of a middle school in Brigue, a small town in the Valais region of Switzerland, visited the village of Gressoney in the Aosta valley and met some of the young people there (their “alter egos”).

“They were impressed by some of the younger people of Gressoney who said that they really liked living there, that living in the mountains had a certain quality; and some of them also said that they didn’t want to live in a town. They were impressed because for many young people, living in the Lötschental or in a village, is not an option. Everyone wants to live in Brigue [...]. We carried out a survey among the thirty pupils in my class and one of the questions was “do you intend one day to work in the Valais region?” and 28 out of 30 said “probably not”. So the vision of the future is not to live here [...]. However, we hope that with the interviews, with the work we are doing, they’ll change their views a little. Because for us, for the Valais, it’s really catastrophic when the young people say they want to work in Geneva, Berne or Zurich, but not here”¹⁸.

16 • Interview with one of the project managers, October 2007.

17 • Interview with a Swiss partner in the project, November 2006.

18 • Interview with a Swiss partner in the project, November 2006.

The creation of a link between two mountain alter egos, materialised here by the Brigue pupils visiting Gressoney, was aimed at transforming representations and, ultimately, at keeping the population in the region.

The Walser Alps project is also put forward as an example to follow in the search for both “sustainability” and linguistic diversity.

*“We can really say that we are stimulating discussion on the European Alps and areas that are suffering a lot from the current changes, [...] about surviving in places where it’s fairly marginal, because we think that here we’re learning a lot about sustainability, how European society should develop, and on what points it should remain attentive. And the other thing is the minority aspect. We’ve said we want to make the results available quickly and provide support for cultural diversity in Europe.”*¹⁹

According to project officials, the results could contribute to forging a model for “European society” and for other linguistic minorities. The Walser “traditions” are seen as guardians of “sustainable” knowledge about the environment, capable of being re-used today by other societies. The project has been designed as a contribution to the future of “remote regions.”²⁰

*“How can the cultural landscape with a Walser past be promoted on a long-term basis for the future? What development strategies are there for remote alpine regions? To what extent can the potential of the area’s young people be invested in the development of peripheral valleys?”*²¹ (Schmid, 2006).

The Walser Alps project was thus organised by people with somewhat divergent perspectives. On the one hand, there were those eager to help advance scientific knowledge about the Walser and provide an overview of this at the scale of the Alps, or to conserve that which is in the process of disappearing (the language). On the other hand, there were those who focussed on the Walser to encourage discussion on the future of the regions in which they live (or which they are defending, since they do not always live there). For certain partners, and the Swiss in particular, this pragmatic orientation, which is not ideological, has not gone far enough. At the last project meeting in May 2007, aimed at determining priorities for future cooperation among the partners, a proposal was put forward to encourage Walser associations to take an interest in the application of the Alpine Convention. It was not accepted, however.

*“The international Walser association is a symbolic organisation to celebrate Walser life and not to identify problematical issues”*²².

This quote reflects the lack of support for the partisans of a pragmatic approach. It is therefore just as much the will to work together, based on the consensus adopted on the “common destiny” of the Walser communities, as a shared identity that is capable of linking social groups that, a priori, had no reason to interact with one another. Indeed, before this project, it was probably inconceivable for the people of Vallorcín to work with the inhabitants of Klein Walsertal (Austria) or Gressoney (Italy). This was made

19 • Interview with one of the project managers, September 2007

20 • This term usually refers to the extended area of the Walser people.

21 • Originally translated from German by author.

22 • Interview with a Swiss partner in the project, May 2007.

knowledge about the Walser and provide an overview of this at the scale of the Alps, or to conserve that which is in the process of disappearing (the language). On the other hand, there were those who focussed on the Walser to encourage discussion on the future of the regions in which they live (or which they are defending, since they do not always live there). For certain partners, and the Swiss in particular, this pragmatic orientation, which is not ideological, has not gone far enough. At the last project meeting in May 2007, aimed at determining priorities for future cooperation among the partners, a proposal was put forward to encourage Walser associations to take an interest in the application of the Alpine Convention. It was not accepted, however.

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Such a project of trans-national collaboration between 11 partners will probably not be followed up in similar form. None of the partners had wanted to start up another ambitious project by responding to the call for a new generation of projects in the INTERREG IVB programme. To date, only two projects are really in the process of taking shape (a youth exchange project between Walser sites and an INTERREG IV A project between two partners on cultural thematic trails).

The insights obtained from these few extracts of discourses by project initiators show that some of the arguments are the product of ideological reflection. The position of an expert (when there is question, for example, of proving Walser settlement on a site), popular authority (when the project is said to be put at the service of the local population) or conformity with a so-called tradition (when singular objects and local values are promoted or developed) are evoked to justify the actions carried out and above all to make them coherent with one another. On other occasions, the justification is pragmatic, when the beneficial and indispensable nature of the project is put forward in its favour. In this respect, the study of the Walser Alps project shows that this type of network helps create a social link at the local level, as the work of B. Debarbieux and G. Rudaz (2008: p. 512-513) also reveals.

Translation: Brian Keogh

22 • Interview with a Swiss partner in the project, May 2007.

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