

The Sense of property, deprivation and memory in the case of

*Obstea Vranceana*¹

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The system of collective property over forests that we find in Vrancea Region, obstea, has participation as fundamental principle. Each member of the obstea has the right to participate in the village assembly, in the voting process, equal right at the distribution of revenues. In this context, the sense of property that the members of the entitled communities manifest towards their collective forests is an element that becomes important, beyond any other elements like institutional arrangements or economical issues. This article tries to grasp the affective and material elements that form the sense of property on one side, and, on the other side, the sense of deprivation in the case of obstea vranceana. Moreover, it offers theoretical insights for the study of these "hidden transcripts", the less obvious part of property, which is not sufficiently treated in the sociological and anthropological literature.

Background information²

In Romania, the immediate property reform in 1990 did not consider the restitution towards former juridical owners, such as villages. The restoration of *former village forests* did take place very late after the fall of communism, in 2000, when the newly elected right-wing ruling coalition had as a declared target to undo mistakes of the law 18/1990 and to do 'more' justice for the former owners, be they individuals or groups.

Of great importance in this discussion is that forests in pre communist times were mostly owned by juridical bodies (48.5% of total forest property, according to Cartwright 2001, 115), like villages or common-descent groups, named *obsti* or *composesorate*, who dissolved under the communist rule, becoming merely state property.

The subject of my paper is one of these collective private forms of property over forests, *obstea*, recently re-established on a decentralised foundation. My focus is on the communities from Vrancea Mountains (eastern part of the Carpathians) which have a particular evolution of property rights, comparing to other communities in Romania.

The ownership of forests in Vrancea Region might be called the 'most collective' form of property in Romania, since there is no account for an individual precisely measured share, the village being the only entity that holds rights. The institution of *obstea* is the actual juridical owning body (from a legal point of view it is not clear what the obstea actually is – the most common juridical denomination is that of an association). It operates through an elected administrative structure, the obstea council and the periodical village assembly (*adunarea generală*), though being a participative self-governance institution.

In brief, this institution has as operational task the management of the common property (mainly forests and pastures), aiming to raise funds for the local development (through investments in infrastructure, small business or tourism activities). Invested profit

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² For a detailed descriptive discussion see Vasile 2006a, Vasile 2006b and Măntescu 2006.