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## **The Role of Cultural Heritage for Local Communities: Insights from Recent Research\***

**Key words:** local communities, cultural heritage, role of heritage, importance of heritage, Lithuania

### **Summary**

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the paradigm of heritage protection changed significantly. At the same time, the idea took root that it is important to include communities (heritage protectors ‘from below’) in heritage preservation processes, and not only include them, but treat the communities as an equal – or even the most important – factor and actor in heritage protection. What exactly those communities are, which in this context are sometimes called heritage communities, is open to broad interpretation and can be defined in the context of specific countries and cases. The subject of the present study is those local communities which are officially established and registered in Lithuania and which operate in accordance with the Law on Associations. This is probably the largest group of official communities in Lithuania. They are not usually established for the purpose of heritage preservation. However, this study aims to establish to what extent theories or assumptions about the importance of heritage for the sense of community within groups or for their identity are well-founded. And also to what extent heritage is important for their self-perception and their activities in general, and to what extent they naturally have the potential and will to be heritage communities. The findings of this research question the importance of heritage for local communities and reveal a specific perception of the benefits of heritage, when action within the sphere of heritage is primarily related not to the preservation of the heritage itself, but to the benefits of the heritage to the community. Heritage is not a value in itself. It is important to the extent that it can contribute to the realisation of the basic needs of the community.

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\*This research was conducted within the framework of a project “Enhancing Lithuanian Society through Heritage Communities: Challenges and Opportunities” funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (programme “Strengthening Public Resilience and Crisis Management in the Context of Contemporary Geopolitical Events”; financing agreement No. S-VIS-23-13).

## **Kultūras mantojuma nozīme vietējo kopienu skatījumā: jaunāko pētījumu atklājumi\*\***

**Atslēgas vārdi:** vietējās kopienas, kultūras mantojums, mantojuma nozīme, mantojuma vērtība, Lietuva

### **Kopsavilkums**

20. un 21. gadsimta mijā mantojuma aizsardzības paradigma mainījās. Parādījās ideja par nepieciešamību iekļaut kopienas (mantojuma sargātājus “no apakšas”) mantojuma saglabāšanas procesā; ne tikai iekļaut, bet uztvert kopienas kā līdzvērtīgu vai pat svarīgāko faktoru un aktoru mantojuma saglabāšanā. Kas tās ir par kopienām, kuras šajā kontekstā bieži vien tiek sauktas par *mantojuma kopienām*, ir interpretācijai atvērts jēdziens, kura skaidrojums ir atkarīgs no konkrēto valstu un piemēru konteksta. Šī pētījuma objekts ir tās vietējās kopienas, kuras ir oficiāli dibinātas un reģistrētas Lietuvā un kuras darbojas, pamatojoties uz “Likumu par apvienībām”. Iespējams, tā ir lielākā oficiālu kopienu grupa Lietuvā. Šīs kopienas parasti netiek dibinātas ar mērķi saglabāt mantojumu. Pētījuma mērķis ir noskaidrot, cik lielā mērā ir pamatotas teorijas vai pieņēmumi par mantojuma nozīmi grupu kopības izjūtai vai to identitātei, kā arī cik lielā mērā mantojums ir svarīgs pašuztverei un aktivitātēm, kāds ir potenciāls un vēlme būt par mantojuma kopienām. Pētījuma rezultāti liek apšaubīt kultūras mantojuma nozīmi vietējām kopienām un atklāj īpašu izpratni par kultūras mantojuma priekšrocībām, kad aktivitātes mantojuma jomā pirmām kārtām tiek attiecinātas nevis uz mantojuma saglabāšanu kā tādu, bet uz tiem labumiem, kurus kopiena saņem no mantojuma. Mantojums pats par sevi nav vērtība. Tas ir svarīgs, ciktāl tas var veicināt kopienas pamatvajadzību apmierināšanu.

### **Introduction**

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, alongside other fundamental issues, paid attention also to the field of culture. The document declared that ‘everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community’ (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, article 27). This provision perfectly corresponds to the principles of a modern democratic society and pluralism. At that moment of its adoption, it was an ideal that was ahead of its time, but since then, at least in some places, it has gained an increasingly solid foundation. Almost 50 years later, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, this ideal also came within the ambit of the discourse on heritage, when it was recognised that ‘every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice, while respecting the rights and freedoms of others’, and ‘the need to involve everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing the cultural heritage’ was affirmed. At that time, the concept of heritage

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\*\*Pētījums veikts projekta “Lietuvas sabiedrības stiprināšana ar mantojuma kopienu palīdzību: problēmas un iespējas” (*Enhancing Lithuanian Society through Heritage Communities: Challenges and Opportunities*) ietvaros, kuru atbalsta Lietuvas Zinātnes padome, programma “Sabiedrības noturības un krīžu pārvarēšanas stiprināšana mūsdienu ģeopolitisko notikumu kontekstā” (*Strengthening Public Resilience and Crisis Management in the Context of Contemporary Geopolitical Events*); līgums Nr. S-VIS-23-13.

communities also emerged. However, when it comes to the implementation of these principles, the focus is more often on the state or on experts, raising the question how much they have created appropriate conditions for individuals and communities to participate in heritage processes (for example, *Calling on the Community 2023*). But in this context, it is important to see the other side – the communities themselves with their realities and expectations. To what extent do they have the desire and need to actualise heritage and take care of it? To what extent is this relevant to them? Otherwise, we may start speaking for them, and the discourse that seeks to open up opportunities for communities may become a discourse that imposes views and obligations. On the other hand, in the context of various contemporary crises and challenges, perhaps the appropriate interaction between communities and heritage can serve to strengthen society itself, thus giving relevance to this topic.

Thus, the aim is to explore the interactions between communities and heritage from the perspective of the communities themselves – their realities and needs. This means verifying the issue and trends ‘from below’. Key questions that are raised include – to what extent is heritage essential for the emergence and functioning of communities themselves; to what extent is it relevant to communities in general; and how do communities treat and evaluate officially designated heritage, which is identified by heritage experts and included in official lists? Answers will be sought through the milieu of local communities in Lithuania.

Accordingly, the theoretical basis and context of this research are best suited to a study whose object is not to ask how to better involve communities, or how to create more suitable or more equal conditions for them, but to ask whether they in principle want and are able to participate in heritage-related processes, or what motivates them to participate (for example, *Brumann 2015*). However, the present research focuses on the communities of a specific country, and in this case, broader contexts or trends do not always help to identify and understand the subtleties and local specificities which arise from local contexts. In this case, the research presented takes on an additional set of issues or meanings by, in the process of trying to verify established theories, identifying to what extent they are suitable and applicable in specific cases. And, as we will see, local cases can change such theories or encourage us to reconsider their absoluteness. If we talk about the research conducted in Lithuania, it is also more focused on the issues of the exclusion or inclusion of communities from heritage (*Daubarytė 2016; Ščiglienė 2017*). The main source of this research is the material produced by the project ‘Enhancing Lithuanian Society through Heritage Communities: Challenges and Opportunities’, which commenced in 2023, and mainly the interviews with local communities themselves (discussed in more detail below).

### **Steps towards heritage communities**

Since, in principle, any group of people whose members are connected at least by a common interest can be recognised as a community, we will, in our case, understand this phenomenon as it is defined in the contemporary heritage discourse. The focus has shifted from state institutions and heritage professionals to groups that can be called simply interested publics or those concerned with heritage ‘from below’. So, first of all, we are talking about groups or communities that are interested in

heritage but are not heritage professionals or specialists. Usually, these are formations which are smaller than states or whose borders do not coincide with those of a state, but do not grow into international transboundary institutions. The emergence of this entity in heritage discourse only became possible at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. In a broader social context, and from an academic or theoretical point of view, the corresponding perspective is considered as the overcoming of the discourse of power or the overcoming of the authorised heritage discourse (in the sense of the approach proposed by Laurajane Smith; Smith 2006), where more power is given, or acquired by those at the ‘bottom’. This is also known as the democratisation or liberalisation of society (for more about these processes, see: Poškienė 2025, 17–22; Kulevičius 2009).

We are talking here about a fundamental shift from heritage as a kind of sacrality or ‘value in itself’, entrusted exclusively to the domain of ‘priests’-experts, to a reversal of power, where the ‘ordinary’ person no longer has to obey the authorised discourse, but heritage and experts have to obey this person. Or at least the heritage system and the experts have to take them into account as an entity, and thus create the environment and opportunities for them to participate in the field. And this involvement can range from recognising the ‘ordinary’ person as an important or equal partner to transforming them into a key factor and actor. In contemporary heritage discourse, this actor is referred to in terms of community, group, or culture.

Let us trace how the content of these concepts has evolved over the past decades, and maybe this will help us to understand even better what kind of communities we are considering.

The concept of community was already used in 1972 in the famous UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. And here it is used in several senses. It appears in contexts such as ‘all the peoples of the world’, ‘humanity as a whole’, ‘the international community as a whole’, and essentially refers to the whole of humanity. It is quite an abstract concept. And the main actors with real powers are UNESCO itself and the specific states. In one case, the wording ‘international community’ refers to UNESCO itself. In another case, the term ‘community’ is used as a synonym for the state (?) and refers to the efforts of states to ‘to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community’. Until the term community began to be applied in the plural, it was used to refer only to official institutional entities and rhetorical concepts.

It took about 20 years for this plurality to appear. In 1994, through the efforts of the same UNESCO, the Nara Document on Authenticity appeared, challenging ‘traditional thinking’ about heritage. In particular, it challenged the dominance of experts and Eurocentric thinking on heritage, opening the way for new heritage actors, no longer just international and national institutions. As heritage came to be understood through the lens of diversity (a key innovation and challenge to traditional thinking), heritage entities became plural – as equal communities, each with their own culture, values, needs and concept of heritage. The previous two-entity scheme (UNESCO – political state) has been replaced by a different scheme (expert – community). The concept of community is not specified, but it is clear that it is no longer just a political

state or UNESCO. Another important change is that communities have been included in the decision-making sequence, where decision-making goes beyond the experts and requires them to take into account the values or concepts of authenticity attributed to communities.

The Council of Europe is another international organisation trying to develop and implement its own heritage doctrine. While UNESCO uses heritage as a tool to promote a culture of peace, the Council uses heritage as a tool to achieve greater unity among its members, to shape European identity and culture, and to promote European values (such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law). The Council of Europe, like UNESCO, brought communities to the forefront of heritage discourse. The key document of the Council on this issue is the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the so-called Faro Convention; 2005). The provisions of this document seem quite radical or revolutionary:

(1) The understanding of the relationship between society and values (heritage) is changed, as the elitist or sacralised concept of values is abandoned and priorities are accordingly reversed. If previously a person had to obey values (heritage), now a person themselves acquires the right to create values. The value of heritage is no longer considered as certain or unquestionable. It is replaced by a human being with their own values and needs, and heritage is treated as a tool to ensure the quality of human life. Now heritage is subservient to the human.

(2) In the relationship between society and man, even greater individualisation occurs, and the central actor or entity becomes a distinct person – the individual. The scheme – heritage and society – is replaced by the scheme – heritage and the individual.

Perhaps in an attempt to soften the transition from heritage as a collective phenomenon (which is how it had been treated before) to heritage as an individual matter, and to make these innovative attitudes more practicable, the Convention invents an ‘intermediate’ or ‘more flexible’ entity – the heritage community. As defined in the Convention, ‘a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations’ (Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society 2005, article 2).

To summarise the trends in heritage discourse over the last 30 years, there is a clear will to distinguish and establish communities as actors or entities in the heritage field. Whether they intend this or not, these documents create the image that communities are conscious, with their own identities and value systems, and that they are willing to act on heritage. And in all cases, the new discourse speaks for the communities themselves. This raises the question whether the desire to ‘help’ communities and to see them as heritage communities is not imposing on them something they are not or do not want to be. To what extent is there a need and will in some communities to participate in heritage, and to what extent is this an expectation imposed from above? Do communities want it and what benefits do they receive? Given the diversity of community forms themselves, the answers may be quite different.

**Lithuanian perspective: a case study and contexts**

As concerns the Lithuanian perspective, first, a brief introduction needs to be given explaining what local communities are in Lithuania. In the cases mentioned above, the concept of communities has been used in the most general sense. In Lithuania, groups of people with a common interest can formalise themselves by acquiring the status of a juridical person. The reason for this is that legal status opens up more opportunities. Legally, they are associations and operate in accordance with the Law on Associations (2004). Associations include organisations such as associations, public organisations, unions, societies, and others. However, local communities are probably one of the most common type of associations in Lithuania. It is estimated that there are currently about 2,200 of such organisations in Lithuania (Bendruomeninės ir savanoriškos veiklos Lietuvoje tyrimas, 2020, 4–5).

Local communities are established as official legal entities on the initiative of residents themselves, based on a territorial principle. What establishes the principle of defining a community/area varies: it can be a community of a single settlement (village, town), a community of a part of a settlement (a city microdistrict), a community of several neighbouring settlements, or a community of settlements of the whole eldership (seniūnija). The boom in the establishment of such communities in Lithuania started around 2001-2003. This was related to the efforts of state institutions to establish such entities in Lithuania, to the possibilities of getting funding for projects, and to the improvement of the local infrastructure, which was the most important issue for communities at that time.

Next, we will present the generalisations formulated after conducting interviews with 50 local communities (their representatives) and for better understanding, as an example, we will use one specific case. These interviews were conducted with local communities that have a longer-standing or more consistent connection with cultural heritage, that is, they carry out activities or projects of this type. And the purpose of these interviews was to identify the role that heritage plays in communities. Only in this case, we will no longer rely on the expectations of dominant heritage discourses, but rather look ‘from below’, trying to grasp the concepts and meanings of the communities themselves.

The ‘Alantas’ community of the Kuliai region of Plungė district (Plungės rajono Kulių krašto bendruomenė ‘Alantas’) is chosen as an illustration. A brief résumé of this community (association) is as follows. It was founded in 2003. The area of the community is the whole Kuliai eldership, which consists of one town (Kuliai) and 13 villages. In the whole eldership, there are 962 residents, of which 526 live in Kuliai (according to 2021 data). And the community currently has about 70 members, or about seven percent of the total population of the eldership.

Around 2016, a new phase of the community began, when ‘mothers who had raised children and wanted to be active’ joined its activities (Source, here and below: Interview with Agnė Alčauskienė). As a result, one proactive representative of this group was offered the position of a community chair. The main motivation for this group of women was the welfare of children. This was the direction in which the whole community was heading at the time: a children’s playground was built, a pumpkin

lantern festival was organised, Užgavėnės (a pre-Lent festival) was celebrated, the edges of the town's ponds were adapted for recreation, and so on. In the previous phase of the community's development (up to 2016), there were also important achievements in relation to the well-being of the community or area, but the heritage appeared only in this new stage of the community and not immediately.

In general, it is rare to find a heritage factor or aspect present at the origins of local communities in Lithuania. Heritage usually enters their horizons later and through other routes (if at all). In the search for what mobilises the members of a group to be a community or in the explanation of the mechanisms for the functioning of a community, again heritage will be the exception rather than the norm. The main driving force behind the existence of communities is its core – a group of a few proactive individuals. And the core itself is brought together by (1) the challenges facing the community and their solution, and (2) the close camaraderie between the members of the core ('it is nice to be together'). Making heritage a challenge for the core is only one possible (and rare) option. Another possibility is that, among the friends of the core, there will be a heritage enthusiast who might involve ('infect') others with it – this again just among the rare coincidences. So heritage is not written into the nature of communities and is not an existential necessity.

In addition, there is statistical support for this thesis. In this research, we are talking about communities that have stronger connections with heritage, but such communities make up at best up to 20 percent of all official local communities (associations). In practice, heritage does not fall within the horizons of other local communities, or these connections are random and episodic. The existence of communities without heritage would contradict a number of academic theories that argue about the importance of heritage for identity or memory, and thus for the communities themselves (for example: Lowenthal 1985; Lowenthal 1996; Tunbridge, Ashworth 1995; Smith 2022). But this now seems to be the case for larger communities such as the nation.

Returning to the community of Kuliai region, today it owns (on a leasehold basis) part of the church complex of Kuliai, which has an official heritage status: the former rectory, the former servants' house and the park. In 2021–2024, the community carried out the project 'Open Community Creative Space in Kuliai', funded by grants from Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, 968,400 EUR altogether. The aim of the project was to improve the cultural entrepreneurship skills of the community, contributing significantly to the strengthening of the local cultural-historical identity. The main result was the restoration and adaptation of the former servants' house. It was previously called the 'White House' by locals (because of its colour), but was renamed the 'Kultūros virenė' ('Culture Kitchen') during the project (Picture 1). The educational programme prepared by community and named 'Tales from the Pastor's Kitchen' is now running in the Kultūros virenė. The community also offers excursions (on seven different themes) introducing visitors to Kuliai and its history (see: Kultūros virenė). And right here, we would propose to call this community not only a local

community, but also a heritage community. But what made the ‘Mothers’ club’ initiative expand into heritage?



1. Picture. The church servants’ house in Kulai, built in the 17th or 18th century. Later called the ‘White House’ by the local community, and today known as the Kultūros virenė. Photo by Salvijus Kulevičius, 2025.

Before the project began, Kultūros virenė was known to the locals as a canteen. It operated in the building during the Soviet era, but over time became its main feature. It was only around 2016 that the community discovered this building as a venue for events, which were organised here whenever there was bad weather outside. It was then that the building also attracted attention for its more interesting spaces, like vaulted cellars. A pumpkin lantern festival, Užgavėnės, and a concert were organised. The community also arranged collective voluntary help, which created more suitable conditions for the events just mentioned. And yet this was not the main impetus for the community’s turning to heritage. If the community had done anything in this direction, then as the community itself admitted: ‘We might have done it in small steps. Little by little.’ The community itself was not prepared, morally and practically, for such a large project. They were frightened by the mere thought of such ‘millions’ of funds and how to manage them.

As the analysis of various cases reveals, heritage initiatives rarely come from the communities themselves, as focused and targeted action. In the first case, the push towards heritage might occur due to external factors or a rather random set of circumstances. Alternatively, the root cause of such initiatives is often not the heritage itself, although it seems to be influenced by heritage. For example, a hillfort is cherished by a community, but not because it forms part of the archaeological heritage, but simply because it is a traditional or attractive venue for community events. Or such initiatives are driven by the interests of one particular person, using the name or capacity of the community to implement them. The story of Kultūros virenė belongs to the former case.



2–4. Pictures. Signs of heritage, memory and culture in the Kultūros virenė. Photo by Salvijus Kulevičius, 2025.

Around 2017, Valentinas and Raimonda Masalskiai moved to Kuliai. Valentinas Masalskis is an actor, and also founder and director of Klaipėda city Youth Theatre. Raimonda Masalskienė is the head of the creative industries incubator ‘Kultūros fabrikas’ in Klaipėda. Since 2017, they have been organising the ‘Sofia Festival’ in Kuliai (see: Sofijos festivalis). It was Raimonda Masalskienė who took the initiative and prepared the project application for ‘Open Community Creative Space in Kuliai’. The community was plagued by doubts and fears about the possibility of organising and implementing a such big project. However, this barrier was overcome and the application was submitted on behalf of the community. The credit for the actual implementation of the project goes to the community itself, together with the goodwill of the other institutions involved. If we were to put everything into a clearer (and simplified) cause-and-effect chain, this story might look like this:

(1) thanks to the impetus from Raimonda Masalskienė, a building of interest to the community is renovated; the ‘White House’, a Soviet-era canteen and simply an exotic place, becomes the Kultūros virenė;

(2) during the renovation, unknown and quite impressive historical elements or layers of the building are uncovered, giving the building itself new meanings and values; the uncovering of a previously unseen element of the kitchen also gives a new name to the object – Kultūros virenė;

(3) the grand project-challenge, its successful implementation, all of which is immortalised or materialised through the renovated building, and the impressive

building itself, provide a very important stimulus for the community, namely pride and confidence; visitors gasp when they learn about the ‘million-euros’ project and see the renovated building;

(4) when applying for funding, the community has to take over the building from the diocese (under a loan for use agreement). However, circumstances develop in such a way that additional elements of the complex are offered and transferred to the community; and thus, quite unexpectedly, the community becomes the manager of a bigger heritage complex than anticipated;

(5) the community is faced with the challenge of finding the funds to maintain the renovated building and has to take on the additional activity of creating an educational programme presenting the history, personalities and heritage of the town – a new experience for the community, but one which it is very happy about.

This is how a local community became a heritage community without even planning for it (Pictures 2–4).

### **Cultural heritage and its perception in communities**

At the beginning, we considered the dominant heritage discourses and their trends. These discourses have brought communities into focus. But through whose eyes do the communities themselves see heritage – through the same dominant discourses or do they have their own systems? The emphasis of the Nara Document on Authenticity on the existence of multiple concepts rather than a single concept, and on the idea that values attributed to heritage may vary from one culture to another, encourages us to look at the perspective of the communities themselves. ‘Cultural heritage diversity exists in time and space, and demands respect for other cultures and all aspects of their belief systems. In cases where cultural values appear to be in conflict, respect for cultural diversity demands acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the cultural values of all parties.’ (The Nara Document on Authenticity 1994, article 6).

Let us try to understand how communities see what is or might be considered as heritage in formal heritage discourse. We are talking about what incentivises communities to act on heritage and what makes heritage meaningful to communities. Summarising the experiences of the Kuliai region and other communities, the following scheme can be drawn.

Beauty and order. Essence of the incentive: Communities want what is in their environment to be beautiful and orderly. This also applies to the heritage that enters their spaces. Expression: When something lacks this quality (beauty and order), it becomes an incentive to act – to make it beautiful. In the case of officially designated heritage, due to heritage protection requirements, heritage protection requirements make the undertaking of conservation or restoration work inevitable.

External recognition and internal pride. Essence of the incentive: For the communities themselves, the success of a heritage project is not to be judged by the fact that it has been properly or improperly restored, but rather by external recognition – whether it is visited, admired, mentioned, and so on. External recognition generates within communities a sense of pride, and this feeling is very important for

strengthening the community spirit of the communities themselves – the very existence of the community acquires meaning. Expression: External recognition becomes an incentive for the development of community activities and the initiation of new projects. In respect of heritage, the community's perception that heritage is important and that it can be beneficial becomes stronger, which raises the community's awareness of heritage protection. The community's ties to a specific heritage also becomes stronger. A desire to do more emerges.

Action. Essence of the incentive: What sustains the focus and efforts of communities is what ensures action (activity) for their members – whether permanent or periodically recurring (e.g. annual celebrations). And the opportunity to act creates interest in what is related to it, even in static things (e.g. buildings). Expression: If something is to remain relevant or important to the community, it must provide opportunity for the community to have permanent or periodic activities carried out through it or within it. Heritage in itself does not have much value or significance for the community if no action takes place through it or within it. For this reason, communities often readily draw on intangible heritage, which is by nature a heritage-as-action.

**In summary, the heritage that is significant for communities is:**

- (1) that which is beautiful and has become so through the efforts of the community itself or with its participation;
- (2) where this effort (the result of the improvement) is seen and appreciated by others who are not members of the community; and
- (3) in which the community is actively engaged, and where that activity is permanent or periodic.

This is probably what the ideal model of heritage would look like according to local (village and town) communities in Lithuania.

**Conclusions**

When speaking about small territorially based communities or local communities, their origins and existence usually have nothing to do with local or other forms of heritage. If a sense of community in such formations is created through a shared identity, then such identity is not based on heritage (contrary to what is often claimed in various theories – that heritage is an important factor in shaping identities and a sense of community). Heritage, at least as it is understood and defined by heritage experts and specialists themselves, is not necessary here.

What nevertheless brings such communities to heritage usually does not result from interests of heritage protection or heritage awareness (except in cases where such an initiative comes from a community member with a clear interest in heritage), but rather from the benefits which the communities themselves understand and value, such as the desire to have a well-maintained environment around them, prestige, employment opportunities, and so on.

However, turning to heritage can provide additional values to local communities, when, in cases of successful activities (such as those introduced by the Kuliai region

community), heritage becomes a catalyst for the community, giving it additional inspiration, self-esteem, and feelings of pride. Although the same can be achieved by carrying out other activities, in the general context, heritage projects are still a relative rarity and therefore they receive greater and broader attention in society.

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