

Coping with two World Heritages. The two UNESCO declarations and local identity in Elche.

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ABSTRACT: Elche is a 230,000 (2009) inhabitants city with a formerly very strong shoemaking industry located in the province of Alicante (Spain) and, most important for a comprehensive analysis, in the worldwide known tourism destination of the *Costa Blanca*. Besides, it is one of the few cities with two UNESCO World Heritage declarations (UWH): the site *Palmeral de Elche* (included in the World Heritage List as ref. nº 930 in 2000) and the *Misteri d'Elx* (included among the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2001). The Palmeral is a landscape of groves of date palms, formally laid out, with elaborate irrigation systems, during the Muslim period in the Peninsula. The *Misteri* is a sacred musical drama of the death, the passage into heaven and the crowning of the Virgin Mary. Since mid-eighteenth century it has been performed in the Basilica of Santa Maria and the surrounding streets. Despite these UWH declarations, the most highly considered identity symbol for the citizens of Elche is the Iberian bust known as the *Dama de Elche*, exposed in the Archaeological National Museum of Madrid. The authors trace a brief history of these three cultural elements and their relation with the construction of an *identidad ilicitana* (identity of the inhabitants of Elche) in three different historical periods marked by the economic flourishing and decay and of the city: since the discovery of the *Dama* in 1897 until the industrialisation and the flows of Spanish immigrants during the sixties; after the industrial crisis in mid-nineties and the political shift towards a *cultural* tourism development strategy. Combining historical and survey analyses, it is shown how these three cultural elements have been appropriated (and used) by different actors and social groups both in daily practices and in policy-making.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

We insist²: *tourism* is one of the names of power. The noun *tourism* is the discursive form given to the complex set of symbolic and technical *dispositifs* (devices) that, linking the visible and the expressible (Deleuze, 1986), allows certain groups of people to spend their leisure time away from their quotidian, including what they do at those places and the processes induced. Anthropology should then allow for an important distinction in the way of approaching that complex set of *dispositifs* that have been textually reduced to one term: *tourism*. Tourism has been basically approached as a 'business' or as a 'phenomenon' and, still, the issue about its precise meaning remain unsolved (Burns, 1999: 23-37). However, in many territories, this complex set of practices that we label *tourism*, it is not only presented as the sole way for development, but it is also one of the most powerful mediator in meaning production. Actually, given

¹ Published in *Proceedings of Heritage 2010. Heritage and sustainable development* (Évora, 2009). Pages 769-776. R. Amôeda, S. Liria y C. Pinheiro (eds.) Green Line Institute, 2010.

² In our most recent texts we usually start with this paragraph. It clarifies our starting point and underlines the close relationship between tourism, power and the production of meanings, mainly in the cultural heritage sphere.

this capacity to re-signify culture, we can refer to tourism to be the most perfect refinement of capitalism, since it does not only consume material and tangible elements by means of territorial occupation and commoditisation of certain cultural expressions, for instance, but it also make use of intangibles and re-signify culture.

Within this conception of tourism as a contextual agent that re-signifies culture (Nogués, 2003), researchers may find interesting to privileged two lines of research among some others. On the one hand, as Boissevain's edited book ethnographically demonstrated, to understand what is tourism, how intercultural processes work, social research should focus on one pole of the host-guest tourist continuum: "in the so-called hosts, the people who both service tourists' needs and are the object of their attention" (1996:1). The second line of research would overcome the sterile debates on definitions. In its place researchers should devote their analytical efforts to comprehend those practices that give meaning (content) to the labels and to the labelling process itself. The latter is the research line followed in this article. Hence, applying a definition of culture as that compound of manifestations, modes, what is said, what is done, circumstances and contexts that *acquires its sense* within a specific group and *gives sense* to the social life (Nogués, 2008), the central question to be analysed in this text is how objects acquire their meanings and give sense to social reality in tourism contexts through practice?

The next paragraphs follow a diachronic presentation. First it is offered a general overview of the city of Elche, so to proceed into an historical and description of the three cultural elements to be discussed mentioned in the abstract. At the end some conclusions on how different meanings of these three cultural elements are being mediated by tourism are drawn up.



Illustration: Billboard at one of the entrances to the city. It says: *Elx, two world heritages*. The images show the main tourist attractions. From left to right: Dama de Elche, Palm Groves, Misteri d'Elx, Beaches and the new Congress Centre.

2 SKETCHES OF A CITY

Elche is a middle size city located in the South East of Spain in the autonomous community of *Comunidad Valenciana*. The city is located in a plain near the coast, which in fact is the flat down part of the Vinalopó Valley (*Baix Vinalopó* area), within the currently called *Costa Blanca* by the Mediterranean coast. Its 230,000 inhabitants makes of the third most crowded town in the region after Valencia and Alicante. Despite this new interest in the tourism industry, Elche can still be defined as an industrial city with some remainders of the former agricultural production. Actually the city's economic basis had been strongly dependent on the shoemaking industry since the end of the 50's. During the 19th century Elche was an agricultural and commercial city, but by the end of that century it was developed a shoemaker industry focusing on an *esparto* (specie of Spanish grass, *Macrochloa tenacissima*) shoe called *espardeñas*, commonly wore by peasants. Elche went on its industrial development during the beginning of the

20th century, but after the Civil War and the postwar period, the shoemaking industry strongly reemerged. Elche's growth was unprecedented since the population increased from 35,000 inhabitants to 75,000 during the 60's. Indeed, Elche was known as "Little Barcelona".

Present day city is the result of that swift but unbalanced growth, typical of the historical period known in Spanish historiography as "*Desarrollismo*" ('developism') A peculiar urban landscape, which combines an extended urban weave of small flats blocks with few distinctive landmarks and a vast forest of palm groves (*huertos de palmeras*). The social stratification is characterised by strong middle and working classes: a direct consequence of the peculiar work system defined as "the scattered fabric" (San Miguel, 2000). This system combined the fabric production with the production at the workers houses in order to reduce cost by avoiding taxes and social security expenses. Indeed Elche was considered to be "the city of the black economy".

As one of the most distinguishing cultural features, it is important to slip here some traits on the uses of language through time, so to understand a little bit better the cultural and social processes that have shaped Elche up. The *Comunidad Valenciana* has got a distinctive language called *valenciano*, although most philologists think of it as a dialect of catalan, one of the official languages of Catalonia, another autonomic community situated in the North of the *Comunidad Valenciana*. Despite the increasing use of the *castellano* --Castilian is the constitutional name of the language internationally known as Spanish-- since the 18th century, the *valenciano* still was the most used language in the city of Elche at the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays, the *valenciano* is just spoken by a minor part of the local population given that the majority of *ilicitanos* (the term referring to the inhabitants of Elche) have come from nearby Castilian-speaking regions such as Murcia, Castilla-La Mancha or Andalucía as immigrants during the 60's. Despite of the efforts of the autonomous government to promote the use of the *valenciano*, Spanish is the common language for ordinary life and, surprisingly, many *ilicitanos* think that *castellano* is the original and most characteristic language of Elche.

Though the most important shoemaker producer centre in Spain, Elche name was specially known after the *Dama de Elche* (the Lady of Elche), the *Palmeral* (the Palm Grove) and also *El Misteri d'Elx* (The Mystery of Elche) These latter, the *Palmeral* and the *Misteri* were declared as World Heritage by the UNESCO at the beginning of the 21st century. The *Palmeral* was included in the World Heritage List (ref. nº 930 in 2000) and the *Misteri* a little after, in 2001, included among the Intangible Cultural Heritage. On the other hand, the *Dama* --as it is locally referred to-- is an Iberian bust found out at the end of the 19th century in the site of *La Alcudia*, the Elche site during Roman period. Though the *Dama* immediately became very popular among the *ilicitanos*, it was sold some days after the discovery to a French antiquarian with the premonitory name of Pierre Paris, who rapidly took it to the Louvre. After some vicissitudes the *Dama* ended up in Madrid, where nowadays it is exposed in the Archaeological National Museum. The mysterious bust, whose historical meaning remain unknown, has been away of Elche since the very moment it was discovered and has been brought back just twice.

The *Palmeral* is the most peculiar landscape of Elche. An oasis landscape, made up of groves of date palms (*palmeras datileras*), lay out in rectangles and with elaborate irrigation systems. The palm groves were a part of an agricultural system distinctive of the North Africa and can be also found in countries like Egypt or Syria: a distinguishing heritage from the Muslim period in the Peninsula that was brought in when the city was moved to its present setting during the 10th century. Although there are palm groves all around the municipal district, only a small portion of the city is labelled as the Historic Palm Grove (*el Palmeral Histórico*).

The *Misteri d'Elx* is a central celebration to the local festivities calendar. It is a sacred musical drama of the death, the passage into heaven and the crowning of the Virgin Mary. It is believed to have a medieval origin in the 13th century, though the most ancient libretto (called *Consueta*) is a copy dating back to the 18th century which, supposedly, reproduced an earlier version of the 15th century. The *Misteri* was exclusively conceived for Elche and, until the most recent years, it could only be played by Elche-born people. As a matter of fact, as some members of the organising committee had expressed, "the *Misteri* can only be performed in Elche because of its palm groves and the scenery". However, since the mid-15th century the performance has been carried out in the Basilica of Santa Maria and the surrounding streets.

Still, for the vast majority of the *ilicitanos* the symbol of their city is the *Dama of Elche* and, according to our research, the World Heritage declarations do not seem to have altered this relevant position too much yet.

3 THE DISCOVERY OF THE DAMA

La Dama de Elche means to the city as much as the *Menneke pis* is to Brussels or *Den lille havfrue* to Copenhagen. As mentioned before, the statue had a fleeting stay in the city. After its discovery on August the 4th 1897, the bust remained in Elche 26 days. Just the necessary time for the owner of the site where it was found, the Alcudia, to sell it to Pierre Paris, a French antiquarian who bought it by 4,000 francs, about 5.200 pesetas at that moment, and who deposit it in the Louvre Museum where it was called “*Dama de Elche*”. However, during those 26 days the bust was publicly exposed on a balcony so to allow everyone to watch such remarked discovery. The response from the *ilicitanos* was immediate: an absolute rejection in press articles followed and demands for a solution to the seizure of the ‘national’ artistic heritage. From the factories to diverse local collective everybody demanded the return of the bust which had been baptized as the *Reina mora*³, and extended the claim to the rest of Spain. Monsieur Paris himself was deeply moved and explicitly noted in his writings that he had known very few cities having so much sensitivity for their own heritage and past times (Ramos, 1974: 10-13).

The Dama become a major milestone not only for Elche but also for the national heritage. Neither before nor after such a concern had been manifested towards any cultural heritage element, especially in the archaeological level. Actually the archaeological site of the Alcudia where the Dama had been uncovered remained as an uninteresting place while the Dama reached to be the symbol of the Iberian culture.

However, what certainly made it to gain its status within the heritage as the symbol of identity was the fact that the selling to Mr. Paris was presented as a national tort of its spoilage. His sudden and rapid abduction to France clearly manifested the weak position of a Spanish government that was not able to avoid it. Spain was confirmed as the peripheral country that it was, exactly in the vertex of the decline of its imperial glorious past, pushed into the background of history and turned into a mere provider of historic-artistic treasures to mighty industrial potencies such France. This feeling of tort, Elche was seen as a victim of certain type of cultural colonialism. However it was also the moment when a general claim for the history and the identity facing the foreign pillage woke up. As a result, the “Dama affaire” triggered a legal process to protect the national historic-artistic treasures which led to a law to forbid the antiquities’ exportation⁴ (Ramos, 1974: 7).

Meanwhile, in the Louvre, the Moor Queen turned into the Lady of Elche, exactly at the time when of first scholars disputes about whether the bust could represent a goddess, a priestess or a high-ranking lady. Still, there is no general agreement about the identity of the *Dama*, but this name provided world relevancy to the city. Nevertheless the majority of the experts recognised an unquestionable Greek influence in the Dama. In this regard is important to underline that at that moment this influence made possible that the bust could enter the recently created category of artistic-historic heritage. To be included in this category prevailed, apart from the aging parameter, some ethnocentric aesthetic and artistic considerations were required. Accordingly, not all the ancient cultures were having the same ‘value’: surely, a “Moor Queen” would not have been important enough to be exposed in the Louvre, but an Iberian statue sculpted by a talented Greek artist or an Iberian sculptor following the Greek way was something completely different. In fact, no other similar Iberian statue has become so popular and relevant, though there are some other “ladies” such as the “Dama of Baza” or the “Dama of Guardamar”.

Ever since the *ilicitanos* have been waiting for the bust to come back definitely, for as Mr. Paris himself said: “the bust had been uncovered to become the local idol” (Ramos, 1974: 9)

³ The *ilicitanos* named the bust as “Moor Queen” because it was thought that all of the remains that were to be found belonged to the Moors period. A period that from the mid-19th century onwards, and in the local imaginary, had replaced the Romans as the original ancestors.

⁴ On July 7th 1911 the Law, about Archaeological Excavations and Antiquities was approved.

4 SHOEMAKING AMONG PALM GROVES

The palm groves form the landscape that characterises Elche; it is the most distinctive visual hallmark of identity. Originally spread over left bank of the river *Vinalopó*, and to a much lesser over the right one.

The species of palm that makes up the Palm Grove in Elche is called *Phoenix dactylifera*. Since the specie is not autochthon, the explanation of its presence has raised a debate between those who advocate a Phoenician or rather a Carthaginian origin (Ramos, 1989: 31), and those who defends the Islamic origin. In the end, and without rejecting a possible Punic origin, it is generally admitted that the Historic Palm Grove was laid out during the Islamic foundation of the city in an indeterminate moment between the 9th and 10th centuries.

The whole Palm Grove is an agricultural system that uses the palm trees to eases both the excessive sun on crops and the evaporation of water, besides the dates. This is the reason the palm trees were planted in rows shaping rectangular plots that shelter irrigation canals dug out of the ground and ditches. In Egypt and Syria it can still be observed in use.

Moreover, the palm leaf itself has been object of exploitation because of their braiding for the Palm Sunday parade in Holy Week, a tradition dating back to 1429 (Ramos, 1989: 85). The care and exploitation of the Palm trees as well as this ceremonial use of the leaves, have produced both an enrichment of vocabulary in *valenciá* (Salvador, 2002) and some professional specialisations such as the *palmerer* and the palm weavers.

Thus, the city and the Palm Grove are interlaced one to each other. A conglomerate of palm trees orchards hugged an eminently agricultural city. Since the Christian conquest back to the 13th century any urban expansion has been irretrievably done against the Palm Grove, being the earliest examples the formerly outskirts quarter of *Puebla of St.Jorge* and the *Rabal*.

Romanticism provided the Palm Grove with another meaning: it became a landscape. This movement attached special significance to the appearance of the territory. Whether it was natural or artificial was not important indeed, for the central issue was that landscapes were the visual expressions of the different faces of Nature. Visiting distant places in order to discover exotic landscapes become very attractive during Romanticism. The *Grand Tour* used to last for years and the travellers had time to experience the notion of distance and otherness. And *el Palmeral de Elche*, with its clear Muslim reminiscences, could not go unnoticed for these emotive people. Thanks to the vision transmitted by travellers as Alexandre Laborde in *Le voyage pittoresque in Espagne* (1802) or Emile Begin (1852) in *Le pittoresque voyage in Espagne et Portugal*, the Elche's landscape became a curious attraction. It was so famous that in March 1871, the newly crowned King Amadeo I of Spain decided to go for walk among the palm trees and –probably as a result—he granted the village of Elche the title of city.

This new conception and view of *el Palmeral* finds its epitome and most popular icon in the orchard known as “*El Huerto del cura*” (The Priest's Garden) because of the peculiar male Palm that sprouted 11 shoots in a symmetric form. This natural caprice increasingly attracts the gaze of both local people and visitors. In 1873 Elisabeth of Wittelsbach, the Empress of Austria-Hungary, casually visited the famous Palm Grove where she was shown the rarity. The Empress, impressed, suggested that it deserved to be labelled so to reflect the notions of "power and force". From then on it is known as “the Imperial Palm”. A new symbol had born and the “Priest's Garden” became the ornamental garden *par excellence* that had attracted hundreds of regular visitors and celebrities

At the end of the 19th century the town began its urban and industrial take-off with the arrival of more than 10,000 immigrant workers who were to produce 800 thousand pairs of *esparto* shoes (Ramos 1989: 381). The urban expansion was, once again, carried out facing the Palm Grove. The urban speculation grew so much during the first decades of the 20th century that in the 20's the local chronicler Pedro Ibarra had to promote a campaign to protect the Palm Grove. His endeavour ended up with the first set of protective legal measures taken by the City Council in 1933. This was the turning point for the Palm Grove. As the Palm Grove was becoming the image of Elche as Europe's oasis, it was losing its traditional function as agricultural system in an increasingly more industrial city; and the Palm Grove become just a big palm garden.

After the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) and through the post-war period (until 1950), the shoe industry was arousing and in the 60's would lead to the second urban sprawl, fed by enor-

mous population quotas from nearby territories such as Alicante, Murcia, Albacete or Andalucía.

The process substantially changed the social structure and cultural composition of the city, and the Palm Grove could not remain aside. Both as a concept and as a tangible element, the local imaginary buried the *Palmeral* into the backwardness of the countryside (*Camp d'Elx*). In the city, the Palm Grove faded away among the new buildings and the new palm trees parks. The urban growth multiplied by three from the beginning of the century and triggered a process of constant and rapid growth. The urban speculation reached unforeseen degrees despite of some the protective measures taken by City Council. The main achievement at that time was to create the Municipal Park (a palm trees park, of course). As a result, and according to the survey we run in February 2009 among *ilicitanos*, only 19,77% could approximately delimit the Historic Palm Grove. But 15,12% which did not answer the question, the other refer to as *el Palmeral* to any group of palm trees in Elche.

5 THE UNESCO DECLARATIONS 2000 & 2001 AND THE SHIFT TOWARDS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Early the 90's it was clear that the Elche's shoemaking industry was declining and the local economy was dependent on it. The down cost production model based on cheap labour force was exhausted. The City Council faced the problem and tackled it in a Strategic Plan (Marchena, 2000). The main conclusion of this plan was to break the total dependence of the shoemaking industry by diversifying the economic bases and to approach a sustainable urban model. To reach these objectives the main policy strategy was to value (*poner en valor*) these cultural elements so to attract cultural tourism that could guarantee a sustainable development.

Though the strategy planned by the City Council did not want to dismantle the shoemaking industry. In fact the industry itself was going through deep structural reforms, with the main firms concentrating their production and capitalising their companies and the disappearance of the smallest manufacturers. This involved a significant reduction in the black economy and the home production model.

Local identity hallmarks such as the *Dama* and the *Palmeral* were not completely set aside. The *Dama* has been constantly demanded since 'its departure'. It 'came back' in several occasions to be exposed, the last one being in 2006. The *Palmeral* has been the City Council's competence and their main policies have evolved from the simplest preservation policy during Franco's dictatorship to the highest level of protection, the establishment of a research institute Phoenix Station, and the flourishing of handcraft activities around of the palm tree leaves. The third cultural identity manifestation is the *Misteri*, or *Festa d'Elx*, which is the main local festivity. However, the religious implications and certain high-class ambiance had avoided the weakening of the celebration, despite of the changes in meaning along history. As the *Dama* was not in the town, the City Council could only boost the candidatures as World Heritages of the *Palmeral* and the *Misteri*, which finally succeeded in 2000 and 2001 respectively. And our survey shows the influence of these declarations: as visitors are arriving to Elche, both *el Palmeral* and the *Misteri* have raised their status as the most important local identity markers. Rather than an exotic example of Orient that had attracted celebrities, entering the List of the World Heritage has been the international confirmation that the Palm Grove was something that deserved protection and a closer look, as well as transforming it into a basic resource for the local economy. Unlike the Palm Grove, the *Misteri* is not always available to the tourist gaze. Consequently, it had started to be performed twice a year instead of once: one during the *fiesta* in August and the other one in October, during a medieval musical festival specifically created for that extra representation. Moreover, the *Misteri* has been performed out of Elche in several occasions, and even it has started to be performed by people who weren't born in Elche.

After Unesco's declarations, both the *Palmeral* and the *Misteri* have got thematic museums, and in the case of the Palm Grove there is also a signpost route to visit it. Obviously, all these tourist policies have not forgotten the *Dama*, and a castle of the 14th century has been completely remodelled for its 'definitive coming'.

6 CONCLUSIONS

According to the local interpretation of history, the two World Heritage Declarations acknowledge the value of the *Palmeral* and the *Misteri*. The people efforts to preserve some distinctive features of its identity since the end of the 19th century were awarded, although these efforts have had different aims during the last hundred years. Actually, preserving the most distinctive features of identity has not been exactly the same than preserving the heritage as a whole, as clearly proves the example of the oblivion of the Alcudia, the archaeological site where the *Dama* was found.

When analyzing the preservation of the Palm Grove we realize that there were further reasons than the simple conservation of an identity feature. During the 60's the *Palmeral* became the alibi for segregation since the urban growth was planned exclusively on the right bank of the river Vinalopó. This urban planning kept apart the new neighbourhoods (Carrús, Rata, and Toscar) with the excuse of preserving the Palm Grove. Those neighbourhoods were not only weakly communicated with the old city centre, but also segregated by the river, the Municipal Park and the railway. Needless to say that in those neighbourhoods there were no palm trees at all, and consequently, nobody has ever claimed anything for them.

This spatial distribution was not only a way of social and economic segregation but also a cultural one: the participation in the *Misteri* was restricted to Elche-born people. Despite of the fact that the amount of native people has been lessening, nobody has officially changed this rule so far –although it has already been broken because otherwise it would be impossible to go on.

To value (*poner en valor*) the distinctive features honoured by Unesco can not be defined as a whole heritage policy. Along the declining of the shoemaking industry, the sole objective is to provide with new economic resources to a territory excessively dependent on the former. The Strategic Plan tries to turn the city itself into a resource not only to promote an economic sustainable development, but a better city to live in. The City Council has invested in improving urban communications and facilities. They have specially done a major effort to merge those “two cities”, the old and the new, and they work on a new model of urban growth. But there is a need a whole heritage policy not focused only on the distinctive features recognised by the Unesco, for the heritage can not be restricted to conservation (Larrosa, 2003)

To base a development tourist policy solely on the strategy of valuing has an adverse effect on the heritage and on the society because it favours only some selected elements against the whole set of heritage that gives sense to the territory. The commercial use of some heritage elements, far beyond commoditising or being profitable in the short tem, ignores the heritage as an historical product what lead to disruptions, such as the dilemma industrial city versus tourist city that Elche is facing. Thus, there is a need to look for another type of strategy that paying attention to the continuity in the production of sense and meaning, could be useful for social development. *Dar valor* “to give value” to culture as an anthropological concept is to consider not only what can be used to attract tourism, but to pay attention to what the people that inhabit and create society consider to be valuable.

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