

# The Difficulties of Interpreting Mediterranean Voices: Exhibiting Intangibles Using New Technologies

By

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## Abstract

The Mediterranean Voices Project subscribed by thirteen partners (Ancona / Bologna, Beirut, Bethlehem, Ciutat de Mallorca, Granada, Nicosia (North), Nicosia (South) Chania, Alexandria, Marseilles, Istanbul, Malta and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) and coordinated by London Metropolitan University within the framework of EuroMed Heritage II (EU) was designed to research the intangible Heritage of these cosmopolitan communities, the ‘glocalisation’ in globalisation, as made manifest through the oral testimonies of the ordinary citizens with respect to everyday life in the city. This paper investigates the tensions arising from (1) translating private interviews onto a highly public medium such as is the IT database without producing ‘reification’ and (2) the difficulties of exhibiting information based on implicit background knowledge to audiences lacking the requisite contextualisation due to the fact that they do not share the space (people from mainland Spain or other countries), the time (people of the younger generations who have not been exposed to the reality exhibited) and thus, the historical memory which is designed to be activated through the ‘triggers’ in the exhibition. Since the project is framed within the context of cultural tourism, this paper also analyses the new role to be played by the museum in the ‘Mediterranean’ context, combining the classic ‘red carpet’ culture with a new more accessible, street-wise approach, making culture more of an everyday, open air and community element.

Key words: ‘glocalisation’, Mediterranean culture, standardisation, dangers of reification, combining oral interviews and IT, Mediterranean Voices, EuroMed Heritage II, ‘red carpet’ culture and community participation.

## INTRODUCTION

The EuroMed Heritage II project ‘Mediterranean Voices’, a EU programme coordinated by London Metropolitan University and subscribed to by thirteen partners (Alexandria, Bethlehem, Beirut, Ancona/Bologna, Chania, Cyprus (Nicosia North), Cyprus (Nicosia South), Ciutat de Mallorca, Granada, Istanbul, Malta (La Valletta), Marseilles and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) is a study of the Intangible Heritage of these thirteen cosmopolitan centres based on the oral testimonies of the citizens and given structure in the form of an IT database ([www.med-voices.org](http://www.med-voices.org)). The project, which began back in May 2002 posed various problems for the participants, not least of which was the tension of exposing a private anthropological interview onto a highly public medium such as the Web, and avoiding the reification of the testimonies and the community involved as a result. Designed to promote a different type of cultural tourism from the ‘encyclopaedic’ and ‘red carpet’ versions in existence, based on governance and community participation, in the broadest possible sense of the word ‘community’, another of the products created was the exhibition as activator of debate and trigger for the establishment of a new role of the museum in the community, or rather, the re-discovery of the role of the museum as ‘stimulator and centre of creativity’ for the future rather than as passive caretaker of the past.

This was considered to be of particular relevance in the traditional tourist centres, such as the island of Gran Canaria, where visitors tend to ‘consume’ places and climate rather than to connect with the specific reality and different culture, to observe, to learn and to really ‘broaden horizons’. The ‘fast food’ cultural visit produces serious disadvantages for the local community, in the case of Real Las Palmas, the historical centre of the cosmopolitan city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in that it exacerbates existing traffic problems, it distorts municipal priorities (since tourism is accountable for 80% of the direct and indirect employment on the island), it produces the elimination of traditional forms of domestic consumption and trade in favour of outlets designed to cater towards the tourist (with as little interactivity as possible in order to increase speed of turnover and reduce the problem of communication) and, more importantly, has led to progressive ‘gentrification’ and ‘institutionalisation’ or ‘heritage-isation’ of the area, forcing the original communities out and

gradually destroying community bonds. The pay-off in terms of revenue created in the area by the tourism is minimal given that the visit is designed to take in only a few spots, considered to be key, with the Casa-Museo de Colón (The Columbus' House-Museum) figuring high on the list, in a one hour visit which is included en route to the hinterland of the island.

The exhibition of 'Voices and Echoes: Reminiscences of the Mediterranean in the Atlantic', housed in the Casa de Colón, was thus designed to achieve various goals and with various target groups in mind. The first goal, and the most important from the point of view of future sustainable development for the project, was to give visibility to the project of Mediterranean Voices and the vital part to be played by the community at large in the promotion and projection of their 'sense of identity', the 'glocal' aspect of enormous importance in creating 'sense of place' and avoiding the easy standardisation typical of a global economy. It was considered that information was necessary to this effect, but that formation or training in the use of said information was also required for any kind of 'reform' to be achieved. Thus, public participation was to be channelled first into the provision of information, then training or formation was to be given so that they could use said material efficiently to achieve set goals designed at reforming the shape of the cultural tourism on offer.

The information with respect to the themes of the database (Person, Living Together, Work, Play, Worship, Objects and Spaces) was designed to do different things for the different age groups within the community. The only people capable of reconstructing the physical reality of a city which has changed dramatically in shape over the last fifty years are the elderly. The historical memory of these informants is invaluable. Photographs were used to trigger memories and the interviews were recorded on video to be used in the exhibition as (1) complements to the original triggers, the photographs or images of the past, for the older generation, making the memories more vivid and participating the idea of shared history whilst (2) reinforcing sketchy visual memories for the generation in between and (3) to create memory for the younger generations for whom the photos alone mean nothing in that they are empty references hung in space and bereft of significance. The exhibition itself then picked up on the most salient themes mentioned time and time again as relevant by the informants for these to be used as audio stimuli for the database and the exhibition.

The space worked upon was the space of Real Las Palmas as of the time of 1930s, an important time in Spain and in the Canary Islands, given the fact that the country was torn apart by a Civil War whilst strategically placed for German and British war deployments (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World War). At that time, the population which existed *intra-muros* ie. inside the old walled city of Real Las Palmas was manageable and everybody knew everybody else. With the development of the Port facilities in another area of the city, the area of La Isleta and the beach at Las Canteras, both trading and social patterns changed within the city, and have continued to do so up until the present day. The historical memory of the population of the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, which is still relatively young, may only date back realistically to democracy, with a minority, though an enormously active minority, with a greater shared historical memory of the times of Franco and the dictatorship. Only a very small proportion of the citizens remember the times of rationing and political repression which have influenced the fates of the more outstanding members of the community (Alonso Quesada, Néstor, Pérez Galdós and Negrín) up until present times.

Using interactive tools such as cut-out figures with which to have your photo taken against landscapes of the past, the team have tried to impress the images visually on the memories of all the visitors. The audiovisuals have been used to reinforce auditory memory whilst recreations of situations with the references of the smells of the past (the dressing table with the classic elements of the past, including the perfumes, or the barber's with the products of past times) have been introduced subtly to consolidate memories by association. The catalogue is designed for the person to be able to store their photos in the back folder and thus create their own personal intangible heritage of their visit to the exhibition. Other interactive elements such as the graffiti and tourism kitsch exhibits are designed to make the younger generations engage with the image projected of their reality to outsiders.

The Mediterranean panorama is recreated using sense-scapes of the different partners as defined by them (colours, smells, sounds, textures, tastes and musical instruments associated with their city, 'senses' of place). The idea is to create a kind of mnemonics within the museum which will then be hung on the web as a virtual exhibition and will function as a permanent activator of memory for the visiting community, thus precluding the temporal disadvantages of a one-off exhibition. Since music is seen as being central to the Mediterranean way of life, together with contact with Nature and respect for the same, this harmony is reflected in the central patio with the presence of musicians (in the evening) and the aromatic herbs and plants of the sense-scapes.

The schools which visit the exhibition engage in activities which are scaled by ages. All the students are monitored for perception of image of one or more of the partners before the exhibition (e.g. the younger children from 6-9 are asked to draw their perceived image of Bethlehem), in different ways depending upon degree of skills. The teachers are asked to monitor again one month after the visit to see if there has been any perceptible change in image reception. Likewise, the students are involved in different activities relating to use of limited resources, respect for Nature, recycling and tolerance, by age group. Provision has also been made for the younger students to interview their grandparents in situ with the results in video soon to be featured on the database.

For the community at large, there are three seminars relating to (1) education and how to use the data-base (2) intangible heritage, cultural tourism and community participation and (3) intangible heritage and image projection. The seminars are designed as semi-think-tanks and will give rise to blueprint manuals of future developments, and who is to assume

responsibility for what. The idea is to convert the Casa de Colón, the most visited museum of the Canary Archipelago, into the centre of community participation and the model for other island museums to follow. The restaurants in the area have been encouraged to put on special museum evenings, to allow for the after dinner debates so typical of Mediterranean countries and of island life in particular, and thus improve turnover and vigour within the area. It is hoped that the provision for foreigners (the catalogue in English and personal guides from the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the ULPGC) will mean that they stay longer in the area and investigate it in greater depth, in benefit of the local commerce in the area.

In conclusion, this exhibition is designed to use new technologies designed at reducing privacy, immediacy of information and a decreased need for memory to, paradoxically, produce respect for everyday life and the individual and create lasting triggers for memories. In the times of digital photography, we run the risk of losing tangible vestiges of the past and of constantly re-inventing the wheel, history and geography. Voices and Echoes is a tangible attempt to prevent changes in the intangible script.

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The Exhibition 'Voices and Echoes: Reminiscences of the Mediterranean in the Atlantic' to be held in the Casa de Colón, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain between the 23<sup>rd</sup> November and 18<sup>th</sup> December 2004.

<http://www.euromedheritage.net/>

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