

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE, TOURIST RESOURCE AND SPIRIT OF PLACES

Ana Olivera

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
ana.olivera@uam.es

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to elements of the territory that have not been sufficiently treated in the Social and Cultural Geography. The territory includes physical, political and economic facts, but more importantly and also contains elements which are not visible but could be of great significance.

The recent changes in the interpretation of cultural heritage have introduced a new concept: intangible cultural heritage. This refers to a reality that has always existed but had not been recognised for its patrimonial value. Immaterial realities include festivals, rites, beliefs, food habits, social customs, traditional knowledge, oral heritage, etc.

Because of the vulnerability of this cultural heritage, since 1999 UNESCO has included protection in its Programme of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage, reinforced since 2003 by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, that was initiated in 2006. The intention is to preserve this cultural heritage for everyone and future generations, especially those elements that are in danger of extinction, by means of designation as a cultural heritage.

The intangible facts usually are embodied in some particular elements and create specific areas or leave footprints which are more or less perceivable. Festivals, fairgrounds, sambodromos, bullrings and many other real elements are reflection of its existence.

Immaterial traditions and expressions are carried in the heart of emigrants wherever they travel, and they jealously guard their beliefs, lifestyle, culinary arts and their music. In a multicultural society, mutual respect and understanding of each others cultural heritage is necessary for promoting friendly coexistence between natives and immigrants.

Immaterial elements are too an emerging tourist resource. New objectives, destinations and tours have been added to the traditional ethnic tourism, for example, as esoteric, shamanic and New Age.

But the immaterial is not only a resource, it is much more. It is especially a factor of identity, territoriality, belonging, sociability and sense of the place. The preservation of these intangible resources is not compatible with their mercantilization or «Disneyisation». Its heterogeneity and authenticity are fundamental conditions for survival. The urgent preservation of the intangible cultural diversity in a globalized world is a task that geographers have to assume with the same enthusiasm as they protect the biodiversity.

