

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

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of the European Union's EuroMed Heritage II programme, 2001-2004, thirteen partners worked together with London Metropolitan University as co-ordinator within the *Mediterranean Voices* project. This 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' (2) the value of oral history in the museum and how it can be used to re-value intangible heritage (3) the difficulties of exhibiting information on intangible heritage, based on implicit background knowledge, and designed as 'triggers' of memory and reminiscences, to audiences lacking the requisite contextualisation, either for spatial reasons (people from mainland Spain or other countries, new immigrant communities) or for motives associated with time (people of the younger generations who have not been exposed to the reality exhibited). The paper also, and most importantly, analyses (4) the role of the museum as an 'activator' of memory and a centre for discussion and promotion of community identity, sense of place and belonging as opposed to its modernist conception as an educator of the 'uncultured' masses and archive of encyclopaedic wisdom.

In the post-museum many voices are heard.
(Hooper-Greenhill, 2002: 144)

With the joint Barcelona Declaration of November 1995, the European Union (EU) and 12 prospective partner

countries from the Mediterranean's southern and eastern shores, launched a new Europe-Mediterranean Partnership (EuroMed) that aims to transform the Mediterranean region into an area of peace, stability and shared prosperity. The region's heritage was soon

identified as a priority within Euro-Med, and EuroMed Heritage I was launched in 1999 with the aim of supporting Mediterranean countries in their efforts to promote and care for their heritage. This was followed in 2001 by EuroMed Heritage II, which supported 18 international cooperation projects and laid particular emphasis on preserving the Mediterranean's 'non-material' (i.e. intangible) heritage.

One of these 18 projects was *Mediterranean Voices*, a programme coordinated by London Metropolitan University with thirteen other 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). This was a coordinated study of the intangible heritage of these thirteen cosmopolitan centres based on the recorded oral testimonies of the citizens, and communicated to the wider public through a new IT database with web access (<http://www.med-voices.org>).

The programme also included an exhibition coordinated by the London Metropolitan University: *Voices and Echoes: Reminiscences of the Mediterranean in the Atlantic*. This was organised and part-funded within the EuroMed *Mediterranean Voices* initiative, with matched funding by the Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria. The exhibition was shown in the Casa de Colón, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain, between the 23rd November and 18th December 2004 (and in the end extended because of public demand through to the beginning of February 2005).

The project responded to a perceived need for greater public participation in cultural tourism and matters pertaining to community identity together with projection of 'sense of place', in an ever more standardised and

'aseptically cultured', globalised world. As such, it was an attempt to let 'muted' voices be heard, the voices of the ordinary people, talking about how they make sense of their past and their present. It was an attempt to consolidate the intangible heritage of who we are and where we come from, the 'roots' and the 'routes', in order to fortify local self-esteem and help others understand the 'true' historical memory of the places involved, as opposed to what is 'said' or left 'unsaid' in the official history books, written, as Paul Thompson (1978:5) puts it, ... *in an age of bureaucracy, state power, science, and statistics*.

The project faced different challenges in the different places - or the same challenge to varying degrees, depending upon the perspectives taken. However, in a globalised world, where globalisation has only been understood and 'interpreted' on an economic basis, *Mediterranean Voices* was an attempt to move towards a social re-interpretation of our realities as global citizens (if such a term can exist as pointed out by Turner (1993:177) when citing the etymological roots of the word 'citizen') and everything that 'community' represents, outside the purely statistical, monetary values promoted by the EEC. As Paul Thompson says in his book, *The Voice of the Past*, the project was using oral history (built out of oral testimonies) to

... bring history into, and out of, the community. [Oral history] helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact - and thence understanding - between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it



makes for fuller human beings.
 (Thompson 1978:24)

The project, which began back in May 2002, posed various problems for the participant members, universities and NGOs, not least of which was the tension of exposing a private anthropological interview on a highly public medium such as the web, and avoiding the reification of the testimonies and the community involved as a result. The idea of promoting a database to be accessed on the web was audience-based, in that the web allows for communities (in this case, the Mediterranean), cultures and collections to be linked across the world, whilst the actual information provided was designed by way of 'activators' of individual thought and virtual discussion. The project, thus, was using IT, the most dangerous enemy of memory and conscious thoughts, and the promoter of individual endeavour over community, to promote a different type of cultural tourism from the 'encyclopaedic' and 'red carpet' versions in existence, a cultural tourism based on governance and community participation, in the broadest possible sense of the word 'community'.

Another of the products created in the project design was the exhibition as an activator of debate, and as a trigger for the establishment of a new role for the museum in the community. In other words, the project aimed also at re-discovering the role of the museum, (the intangible heritage of the museum), as stimulator and centre of creativity for the future, as a Muse, the offspring of Zeus (the God of Energy and Supreme Knowledge) and

Mnemosyne (the God of Memory), instead of a passive caretaker of the institutionalised past and transmitter of education to the uncultured masses.

Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic, it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective – rather a cacophony of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values. The voice of the museum is one among many.
 (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:152)

This new role of the museum as a social centre and community nexus was considered to be of particular relevance in a traditional tourist resort, 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', in other words, to have local contact. The 'fast food' type of 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. It exacerbates existing traffic problems in the narrow streets of Vegueta, and distorts municipal priorities (since tourism is accountable for 80% of the direct and indirect employment on the island). It also 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). Most importantly, perhaps,

it has led to a progressive 'gentrification' and 'heritage-isation' of the city centre, forcing the traditional communities out, and gradually destroying community. The pay-off, in terms of revenue created for the locals in the area by 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. Thus, no benefits are perceived or received by the local community, and their identity is further and further undermined, as central elements in the 'binding' and social health of the residents, such as the 'corner shop', disappear to make way for classier, more sterile establishments designed to attract the tourists who are merely 'passing through'.

Cultural tourism is a necessity for a place such as Gran Canaria which is a mature tourist resort, and which needs to 'recycle' from the hedonist and mindless 'no place, no face,' 'sun, sea and sex' image, to promoting the differential of the Canary identity, a world apart in nature from that of Spain, the country to which the Archipelago 'belongs' as of the 15th century onwards, and from that of nearby Africa. This is not only necessary to continue to compete in the highly competitive world of tourism, that is, for external promotion, but also for internal consumption, due to the fact that the islands, above all the Eastern islands and the province of Las Palmas, are being constantly exposed to the pressure of illegal immigration from the sub-Saharan region of North Africa (formerly Spanish). Community identity is at risk,

on an island such as Gran Canaria, described as a 'bridge between three Continents', when the school intake numbers reflect a larger proportion of students from outside the island than locals, as has been the case for the last two years, with extremes reached on islands such as Fuerteventura, where over 60% of the resident population is from elsewhere. The benevolent climate of the Canary Islands, and the perceived 'security' of the Archipelago, allow for 365 day tourism per year, thus attracting workers from all parts. The community on the Canary Islands, who remember the days of emigration for survival in the past, have always proved to be hospitable towards people from other cultures in search of a better life. However, the cut-off point in tolerance and goodwill towards immigrant populations, which place heavy demands on health and welfare systems, and occupy local employment, is about to be reached, as can be detected in the levels of student violence and bullying reported lately in the secondary schools.

Thus, the *Mediterranean Voices* project, with its heavy bias towards sense of identity and community and 'belonging', was seen to be a useful tool to reach out and talk to the residents, and allow their voices to be heard, at a crucial time of re-plotting of routes for sustainability. As Thompson says:

Reality is complex and many-sided and it is a primary merit of oral history that, to a much greater extent than most sources, it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated.





This was what the exhibition of *Voices and Echoes. Reminiscences of the Mediterranean in the Atlantic*, held in the Casa de Colón, in the centre of the historical part of the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, set out to do.

Today, cultural maps are being re-plotted and re-territorialised. Re-plotting involves bringing to visibility nodes of significance that were formerly subsumed and rendered invisible within large Western-derived universal narratives; and re-territorialisation entails the projection and exploration of new territories formerly left off the cultural map.

(Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 140)

Although perceived of as an initial difficulty, all of our informants and interviewees, together with the participants in the exhibition, understood why the Canary Islands should have been included in a 'Mediterranean' project. We did not have to explain why Braudel had considered the Archipelago vital to the interpretation of the Mediterranean, thereby proving that the frames of reference and cultural values, the 'roots' and the 'routes' were, indeed, shared.

The exhibition of the Las Palmas de Gran Canaria team 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' (global/local) reality, thereby 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 the said information was also required for any kind of 'reform' to be achieved. Thus, public participation was to be channelled, first, into the supply and exchange of information, information which had been sifted out from the oral interviews made with the ordinary people, usually the elderly, of the area. Then, training or 'formation' was given, so that the community could use the material efficiently to achieve set goals, designed for 'reforming' the shape of the cultural tourism on offer, and putting the local people 'in the picture' by allowing them a say in the decision-making process. Involving local people and recording the voices of ordinary people afforded a whole wealth of information, in the form of interviews, photos and personal objects or mementoes, to which the museum does not generally have access. It also put in motion a whole series of community and school initiatives (children interviewing grandparents and forming their own databases with a view to future exhibitions) which guarantee the sustainability of the project in the area.

The database of *Mediterranean Voices* is structured over seven themes (People, Living Together, Work, Play, Worship, Objects and Spaces) with some seven or eight sub-themes per heading. Interviews were targeted, insofar as they could be, to cull information on each of the themes and sub-themes over some sixty-two hours of interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and

coded by theme and sub-theme, to provide further working documents for researchers. Since the database was limited in size, given the number of partners and due to the need to provide speed of access, only a very small proportion of the work carried out in the four-year project is, in fact, reflected in www.med-voices.org. The bulk of the work has been reserved for future educational applications, research and archives. Overlapping information and coincident themes over the sixty oral testimonies were considered to be significant oral history markers and were thus chosen for the design of the exhibition.

The exhibition was structured to achieve different things for the different age and groups within the community. The only people capable of reconstructing the physical reality of the city, which has changed dramatically in shape over the last fifty years, are our elders. The historical memory of these informants is invaluable. However, respect for the elderly and their knowledge has been lost, to a great extent, with elderly people, in many cases, relegated to dominoes and INSERSO trips. We decided to try to promote greater inter-generational dialogue and respect through the exhibition. Photographs were used to trigger reminiscences in the interviews, and these were recorded on video to be used in the exhibition for (1) the older generation, making the memories more vivid and developing the idea of shared history whilst (2) reinforcing the sketchy visual memories of the generation in between and (3) creating memories for the younger generations for whom the photos alone mean nothing.

The exhibition also worked, physically, on three different levels. The area connecting with the House-Museum of Columbus, the patio of the Casa de Colón, which was accessible to all visitors (including tourists) was designed to give the overall 'community' of the project. The partners of the *Mediterranean Voices* project were represented in a series of 'sense-scapes,' consisting of images chosen by the partners to best represent their project, the colours most identified with their places and a series of elements such as typical sounds, smells and textures, foods, herbs and musical instruments. The idea was to show how much the sense-scape of the Mediterranean had in common, and how rich the area was in stimuli and memory activators which were not merely visual. Another part of the central patio was devoted to a game called 'imagíname' (literally, 'Imagine me' or 'Put me in images') where locals and

foreigners alike had to try and identify the people in the pictures with the partners represented in the sense-scapes. Again, the idea was to move away from stereotypes, break down barriers to understanding and community, and to re-construct and re-form images. The patio was also used throughout the day to carry out 'hands-on' workshops, designed by age, for the parties of school kids who visited, ranging from playing with the toys of the past through to learning herbal remedies, and, at night-time, for musical rehearsals and presentations given by neighbourhood associations. The second level of the exhibition looked at the local 'reality' as it existed in the past using the metaphor of 'lost spaces' – looking at real areas that had been lost, together with intangible 'social spaces' that had disappeared. The third level looked at leisure pursuits, private space and memory, again analysing the tangible and intangible aspects that had disappeared, and touching upon subjects such as honesty, dialogue and community existence as opposed to individual enterprise and pleasure.

The 'space' worked upon was the space of Real Las Palmas, the original walled city, from the 1930s onwards. The thirties were an important time in Spain and in the Canary Islands, given the fact that the country was torn apart by a Civil War, with the islands strategically placed for German and British war deployments. At that time, the population which existed inside the old walled city of Real Las Palmas, was manageable, a world where everybody knew everybody else. With the development of the port facilities, 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 to the present day. At present, the historical memory of the population of the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, most of whom are still relatively young, may only date back to Democracy, (that is to the seventies), with a minority, though an enormously active minority, with a greater shared 'historical' memory of the times of Franco and the dictatorship, of scarcity, and emigration for survival. 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 (figures such as Alonso Quesada, the poet, Néstor, the artist, Pérez Galdós, the novelist and Negrín, the politician who suffered stigmatisation and public ignominy for many years for their views). Moreover, as was mentioned before, the pressure of immigration from Europe, Latin America and,



above all, Africa, in recent years, means that many people living in Gran Canaria only have a historical memory which dates back to their arrival in the community. The team shared the concept proposed by Urry (1991) that for the consolidation of a strong community, capable of resisting outside pressure and 'unfair' comparisons with others, such as the European tourists, there must be a shared sense of time, space and historical memory. *Voices and Echoes* was an attempt to construct or re-construct negotiated historical memory, through dialogue.

There were also three levels of interpretation. First, for the people who merely required their memory to be re-activated, there were the photos (without any explanations whatsoever), 'written illustrations' taken from famous people's autobiographies or from the work of poets and writers, and PowerPoint presentations which intermingled photos with extracts from interviews. Second, the younger generations were given a brief explanation of some of the exhibits on display (besides the illustrative workshops), and invited to come back to the museum with their grandparents and parents to get a better and more personal interpretation of the exhibition.

Moreover, a number of guides from the University group of *Peritia et Doctrina* (older students, generally over 65, who have gone back to formal education after retirement) were commissioned to help with explanations. They were particularly well-placed to do this, having also participated in the interviewing process. Thirdly, to help with the tourists, there were also volunteers from the University's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, who 'interpreted' the reality of the past for the tourists.

To use Hooper-Greenhill's definition of 'object' (2000:104):

An 'object' ... may be a thing, an intention, or a target for feelings or actions. Although the dictionary separates out these definitions, in practice, at least in relation to objects, they are intertwined – things do not exist outside interpretations of their meaning and significance.

The 'object,' or intention, of the exhibition was to stimulate perceptions and consolidate memories and associations of the 'objects,' in the sense of two- and

three-dimensional artefacts placed on display, in the minds of the 'objects' of our exhibition, that is, the local community. We used multi-sensorial stimuli to make the conscious or random recall of the past to be as easy as possible. We know from educational and psychological studies that:

It would seem that we remember 90% of what we do, 75% of what we see and 20% of what we hear, so that learning is more efficient when the whole body intervenes in the process, since this requires more elaboration.

(Vallejo-Nágera and Colom Marañón, 2004:224. Author's own translation)

The whole exhibition was designed like a database for people to browse around, but in company rather than alone, using other people's memories to fill in the perceived gaps in information, as opposed to merely seeking out an explanation on Google or in Encarta.

For that same reason, we carefully positioned the themes of the database, using the Roman room system of association. The architecture of the colonial-style building of the Casa de Colón, in the heart of the old part of the city, was re-interpreted and used as a metaphor and an associative trigger. The central patio became the 'patio de los socios', where we gave an overview of the whole project, with the 'sense-scapes' of the partners, the colours, the scents, the sounds and the textures central to the understanding of the Mediterranean world. The room devoted to men and their projection over the various themes of the database was larger than that of the women, with less projection in Society in the Past, and separated from them by a whole series of passageways. The 'riscos,' the steep cliff areas where the original settlers built their dwellings, ran along the perimeter of the staircase, reminding the visitor of their complicated topography and that they were, at one and the same time, the backdrop and a cohesive force in community life in the past. The 'azotea' or flat roof, was placed on the highest level inside the exhibition, beside an open balcony which afforded a view over the flat roofs as they remain today. And the stairwell, which is usually neglected in exhibitions, together with the landing between floors, was used to illustrate the 'lost or forgotten spaces.' Thus, we 'plotted' topics to be remembered within the 'map' or framework of the museum exhibition.

Using interactive tools such as cut-out figures with which to have your photo taken against full-size landscapes of the past, the team tried to impress the images visually on the memories of all the visitors. The audiovisuals were used to reinforce auditory memory whilst the smells of the past (the dressing table with its perfumes, or the barber's with the products of past times) were introduced subtly to consolidate memories by olfactory association. The exhibition was designed so that the person physically entered the database and thus wandered around the subjects, just as they can browse around the electronic version, thereby using kinaesthesia to reinforce memory and association.

The catalogue was designed for the visitors to be able to store their own photos in the back folder and thus create their own personal, intangible heritage of their visit, their own 'imagined' world. Other interactive elements such as the medicinal herb workshop and the tourism kitsch display were designed to make the younger generations engage with intangible 'natural' heritage and image/memory in critically conscious ways.

The idea was to create a kind of mnemonic within the museum which could later be hung on the web as a virtual exhibition, thereby functioning 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 and respect for nature, this harmony was reflected in the central patio with musicians in the evenings and arrangements of aromatic herbs and plants.

The schools that visited the exhibition engaged in activities which were scaled by ages. All the students were monitored for their perception of stereotypes about Mediterranean countries (e.g. the younger children from 6-9 were asked to draw their perceived image of Bethlehem, the 9-12 year olds studied Alexandria, the 12-15 year olds discussed what they knew about the problem of North and South Cyprus, and the 15-18 year olds, again, talked about Bethlehem), in different ways depending upon their degree of skills. The teachers were asked to monitor one month after the visit to see if there had been any perceptible change in image reception or stereotype. Again, these outreach and feedback exercises were graded by age (the younger children produced another drawing, the 9-12 year olds talked about Egypt in the modern world, the 15-18 year olds were asked to imagine their city divided in two and the problems that

would result from that, and the older teenagers were asked to debate the subject of Bethlehem and the wall)

Likewise, the students were involved in-house, in the Museum, in different activities relating to the use of limited resources, respect for Nature, recycling, respect for others, and tolerance, by age group. Provision was also made for the younger students to interview their grandparents in situ with the results in video soon to be featured on the database. The database, as such, was not present in the exhibition (only one computer screen allowed access to www.med-voices.org) but is a constant point of reference throughout the exhibition, with the display designed to be used and re-cycled in combination and combinations with the database framework.

For the community at large, there were three seminars relating to (1) education and how to use the database (2) intangible heritage, cultural tourism and community participation (based on the heritage 'auction' programme, with people defending tangible properties for intangible reasons) and (3) intangible heritage and image projection (new ways of promoting a mature tourist resort and re-positioning it). The seminars were designed as semi-think-tanks and to make people aware that they are responsible for what happens in their area, and not the politicians alone. The idea was to convert the Casa de Colón, the most visited museum of the Canary Archipelago, into a centre of community participation, and the model for other island museums to follow.

The restaurants in the area were 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 their turnover and reinvigorate the area. The scarce provision for foreigners (the catalogue in English and personal guides from the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the ULPGC) were designed, nevertheless, to make them stay longer in the area and investigate it in greater depth, to the benefit of the local commerce in the area.

Paradoxically, this exhibition was designed to use new technologies which reduce privacy, provide immediate access to information and thus reduce the need to remember things, to generate respect for everyday life and the individual, and to create lasting triggers for memories. In these times of digital photography, we run the risk of losing tangible vestiges of our 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. *Mediterranean Voices* is about making people sit up and take stock, re-appraise, re-evaluate and re-create, before it is too late and globalisation of the worst kind, the bland standardisation of 'no face, no place,' sets in. *Voices and Echoes* was an attempt to make people communicate again, inter-generationally, something which our mobile phones, digital cameras, PlayStations, Game Boys, and computer chat sessions has almost put an end to. If we do not communicate, we undermine our most prized possession, the intangible thing which makes sense of our tangible past and guides us into the tangible future: our memory, the most intangible of our heritages. 🇵🇸

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