
The contestation of culture

The possibilities of using cultural heritage as a resource in times of crisis

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Culture and crisis

Times of crisis require decisions. That is the indication of the etymological derivation from the Greek *krísis* (= decision, decisive turn of diseases, but also judgement; cf. Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen 1997, 735). In times of crisis communities wonder, "Where are we?" and by answering the question "What do we aim at?" they make decisions for their future development.

Radical economic changes like the collapse of important local industries frequently trigger off crisis for municipalities and cities. As a result a postponement from manufacturing business to service industries often takes place. Strategies of deindustrialization are established to give a new image to old industrial sites (cf. Evans 2005; Short et al. 1993). Especially "white industries" like the tourism business seem to be an attractive new orientation for local economies. Cultural resources play a decisive role in such processes (cf. Chang et al. 1996; Herrero et al. 2006; Olsson 1999; Robinson 1999; Zukin 1995). The recent development of Bilbao serves as an example: After the decline of Bilbao's heavy industry the new Guggenheim Museum functions as an inspiration for the city's successful new orientation as a destination of cultural tourism and has important multiplier effects on Bilbao's economy (cf. Cerro Santamaría 2007, 116-120; Plaza 2000).

Without dealing with the complex discourses concerning the concept of culture (cf. Tschopp/Weber 2007, 24-52; Wimmer 1996) at this point, culture as a touristic resource can be defined cumulatively as points of attraction being composed of artefacts and representations from the fields of history, folklore, religion and art, in the form of historical buildings, parks and gardens, museums, theatres, music, dance, festivals, pageants and other events that induce potential guests to visit a destination. But to succeed as a destination in international competition it is not enough to be in possession of these kinds of resources. It is rather a question of having unique resources at one's disposal to distinguish oneself from other destinations in order to ensure a sustainable competitive position. Any kind of labelling can improve the attractiveness of cultural resources. The heritage boom of the last two decades and especially the run for the world cultural heritage label verify this impressively (cf. Rössler 2005, 246). "Inscription has become a political issue. It's about prestige, publicity and economic development – there's the possibility of some financial aid, yes, but mainly of more visitors", that was the comment of the director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Francesco Bandarin, concerning this development in 2001 (cf. Strasser 2007, 112).

The UNESCO labelling practice ascribes a new significance to cultural heritage. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006, 193) this process of appreciation in value can be divided into two successive acts: The first act of valorization, which is the (re)appraisal of the heritage goods by means of deliberation, institutionalized processes of negotiation, debates in public media and pleas by experts, is followed by a second act of valuation, the assessment of use values that people actually attach to heritage goods, based on what they spend to consume these goods, but also of intrinsic values, which means option values for possible consumption and existence values concerning the very preservation of heritage goods even if they do not consume them (cf. Pearce/Markandaya 1989, 23-24). This appreciation in value and the integration into the economies of cultural tourism put cultural heritage in a new situation: As a result of labelling processes buildings, areas, artefacts and traditions, that were regarded as old-fashioned and inconsistent with a profitability-oriented present, become economically viable and their existence is (re)justified (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 61). Consequently the World Bank links the extension of credits and the remission of debts to the economic utilization of cultural heritage and in processes of labelling the UNESCO tries to influence development efforts to its purpose (cf. Weigelt 2007, 143).

But in situ the use of cultural heritage as a resource is evidently contested (exemplary cf. Gotham 2002; Nogués Pedregal 2000, 2006; Robinson 2001; Teo/Yeoh 1997). Even the act of labelling involves a potential of conflict: In so-called metacultural processes of labelling (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006, 179) culture is put in a new reference system and is reinterpreted. To list a historic monument for preservation or to ennoble it with the label “world cultural heritage” means to put it under the regime of the concerning award giving institution. Moreover it radically changes the traditional rights of disposal when in questions of world cultural heritage local actors no longer have exclusive access and the right of hereditably but “the whole of mankind”, represented by trustees, marketing experts and visitors of the cultural heritage is involved as well (cf. Kearney 2009; Noyes 2006). Depending on social or political power relations this can restrict or enable development. In other words: „possession and inheritance create the dispossession and disinheritance“ (Ashworth/Graham/Tunbridge 2007, 39). The discussions regarding the proposed construction of several high-rise buildings near the Cologne Cathedral or the projected construction of the Waldschlösschen-Bridge in the Dresden Elbe Valley and the resulting deletion from the world heritage list may illustrate this.

Conflicts like this often become acute when a process of touristification, which means that cultural assets turn into merchandise, adapted and marketed for the international tourism consumption, accompanies the process of labelling. This kind of valorisation is linked to the concern about commodification, a reduction to pure value of benefit (cf. Cohen 1988; Watson/Kopachevsky 1994), and the destruction of the cultural capacity to serve identity development. MacCannell (1993, 169) refers to the concept of *exchange values* that lead to the exclusion of all other, non-pecuniary values from cultural heritage. In contrast *use values* stand for using something to keep it (for example like having a home as a place to life, not to sell it). As a result rituals become devoid of meaning in the course of their commodification, festivities become less important to the local population and intangible heritage is no longer regarded as authentic. Greenwood (1976) observed this in one of the first studies on this issue. But touristification and labelling processes can also take another way and be interpreted positively like a multitude of tourism studies have shown (exemplary cf. Abram 1997; Boissevain 1996; Cole 2008; Géraud 2002; Macdonald 1997; Picard 1995 or Tate 2004; Greenwood himself drew this conclusion in 1989 in a later statement on his study “Culture by the pound”). Commodified cultural heritage as well can be taken as self-affirmation and as empowerment (for different levels of empowerment cf. Scheyvens 1999) that (re-)strengthens local communities with regard to social power to act. The following observations centre on the question under which conditions different cultural modes of expression can be used as economic resources but also be seen from the point of serving identity development in times of crisis and on the discourses accompanying these possibilities.

The case of Elx

The collection of the study's data took place in Elx, a city situated in the autonomous region Valencia in Spain that is decorated with two inscriptions on the World Heritage List: In the year 2000 the *Palmeral*, a landscape of groves of date palms and an elaborated irrigation system from the 9th century, which is still functioning, was inscribed on the list as a unique example of Arab agricultural practices on the European continent. In 2001 the proclamation of the *Misteri d'Elx* took place. As a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage* the mystery play is a living testimony of European religious theatre of the Middle Ages and the cult of the virgin.

To show the multilayered discourses concerning the perception and the use of cultural heritage qualitative interviews, informal conversations and participatory observations (within the *Misteri* representations) were conducted. Data was collected during a five-week field research phase from the beginning of August until the beginning of September 2007. Additional data comes from informal conversations and lectures from later sojourns. Respondents include office-bearers from the Patronat del Misteri d'Elx and the Patronat del Palmerar d'Elx, Misteri-singers and stagehands, members of the Catholic Church, scientists and academics, local politicians, employees of the museums and players in the city and tourism marketing. Informal conversations were conducted with members of the tourist office staff, relatives of Misteri-actors, a journalist as well as additional inhabitants of Elx. The main source of conducted data comes from semi-structured interviews. Additional tools were a recorder, a notebook and a camera. Data was completed with an analysis of newspaper articles that were published in times of the UNESCO-proclamations as well as data from tourist brochures and documentary films about the Misteri. The data analysis is embedded in the Grounded Theory. Strauss and Glaser developed this concept of a process of understanding and research in the social sciences in the 1960s. Grounded Theory is mainly characterized by the interconnection of the collection and analysis of data. It is not a linear but a cyclic view of the process of understanding and research in which different modes of data collection, data analysis and generation of theory stand in a recip-

rocal relationship that is fundamental. This guarantees to generate a theory that is close to the object of research or rather anchored or grounded in the object. Grounded Theory helps to explain phenomena within a theoretical framework that results from the research process by itself (cf. Strauss/Corbin 1996; Glaser/Strauss 2005). The research problem is bound to the processual character as well: Initially a broader problem is narrowed down and focussed in the research process, possibly reformulated as well. In the context of our study this became necessary with regard to probable tendencies of the *Misteri's* commodification after the UNESCO proclamation. As this tendencies could only be confirmed for a small, strictly religious cluster with distinctively traditional opinions, the further investigation focussed on reasons why the *Misteri* is hardly affected by dangers of touristification.

Economic situation in Elx

Since the middle of the last century the footwear industry has constituted the heart of Elx's economy. Elx is Spain's most important producer and exporter of footwear with a production volume of 40 million pairs per year (in 2007; cf. Ajuntament d'Elx 2008b), with a clear downward trend after a historic peak in 2001 when 88 million pairs were produced (cf. Miranda Encarnación 2006). As a result of globalization, product piracy and growing competition from developing countries and especially from Asia the footwear industry got into an enduring crisis in the middle of the 90s. In reaction to the crisis strategies of diversification and deindustrialization were taken on. These ideas were incorporated in the Futurelx Strategic Plan from 1997 and the Second Futurelx Strategic Plan from 2008 (cf. www.futurelx.com). The plans are a vision of the future development of Elx. It emphasizes the integration of economic, social and spatial problems. The intention is a sustainable development leading to economic prosperity and a higher quality of life for the inhabitants of Elx.

The tourism sector represents one of the main pillars for achieving the intended diversification (cf. Martínez Gómez 2009). One focus lies on cultural tourism with the two world heritage inscriptions, the *Palmeral* with the Palm Groves Museum, the *Misteri* with the Municipal Festa Museum and the Museum of the Virgen and also the Museum of Archaeology and History (MAHE) with a copy of the so called "Dama de Elche", a pre-Christian Iberian bust, as highlights. At least this is how the situation is viewed by the players from the field of city marketing and from the tourism sector. They make the case for an aggressive use of the UNESCO-label and a creative management of the cultural heritage to make Elx an attractive destination for cultural tourism. The supply of hotel beds has clearly increased since the inscription on the world heritage list: from 228 in 1999 up to 1.416 in 2007 with the strongest increases from 1999 to 2000 (50,0%) and from 2005 to 2006 (52,8%; cf. Ajuntament d'Elx 2008a). The number of visitors of Elx's tourist office increased between 2000 (83.751) and 2008 (148.025; according to e-mail information from the Tourist Information Elx from August 12, 2009). Apparently the mere UNESCO label has a touristic appeal. But the city and tourism marketing's mindset encounters multiple resistances. We found different reactions for the *Palmeral* and the *Misteri*.

The *Misteri*

The *Misteri* or the *Festa d'Elx* crowns the annual calendar of festivities in Elx (cf. Castaño García 2006; Massip i Bonet 1991). The *Misteri* is "la festa del poble" (roughly translates into "the peoples' festival"), a common phrase in Elx, explicitly codified in the preamble of a particular "Misteri-Law" (Llei del Misteri d'Elx 2005). So in the sense of living heritage it lives not only through the parties directly concerned, the so-called "Misteri-Family", but also essentially through the audience's co-presence and the big crowd of the accompanying processions.



Figure 1: Performance of the Misteri in the Basílica de Santa Maria (Photo by Jessica Furnell, August 2007).

Therefore in political statements and also in academic papers (cf. Càmarà Sempere 2001, 2007; Massip i Bonet 1993; Nogués Pedregal 2006) the *Misteri's* aspect of community- and identity-generation is emphasized. The keepers of this tradition, mainly found in the surroundings of the festival organisation, the so-called *Patronat del*

Misteri d'Elx, fear the mutation of the *Misteri* into a tourist spectacle as a result of the inscription on the World Heritage List. Since the UNESCO's proclamation this group looks at the *Misteri* with worries about commodification: "I hope this is not the beginning of the end, and that the *Misteri* can stay like it is: a festival of the people (...). The *Misteri* must not become an opera, that competes with the ones in New York (...), because of the UNESCO proclamation", that was the statement of one of the Patronat members in a newspaper interview right after the world heritage decoration in 2001 (Información 2001, 6). During the days after the UNESCO-declaration a virtually belligerent vocabulary was used in the public discussion: "... to fight for the *Misteri*'s purism .." (Serrano 2001, 6). Underneath this criticism of an abuse of the *Misteri* because of the valorization through the UNESCO label lays the concern about possible changes in the *Misteri* practice. The former musical director of the *Misteri* puts this attitude in a nutshell during an interview when he states: "we have to defend what we inherited" (Ramos 2001, 6). Even if the people in Elx feel obliged to share the *Misteri* as a world heritage, at the same time they stress that reasonable respect for the *Misteri* is demanded of potential tourists; being well aware that a performance which lasts several hours in the heat of August and the difficulties of a restrictive procedure of advance ticket sale require a considerable enthusiasm and/or willingness for suffering. Consequently it is hard to find a foreign tourist in Elx right when the *Misteri* is held. Although the number of visitors of Elx's tourist office shows the highest figures in August each time but mainly it is about Spanish tourists (according to e-mail information from the Tourist Information Elx from August 12, 2009).

The tourists' interest is directed to the *Misteri*'s materializations. Among these are the *Municipal Festa Museum* and the *Museum of the Virgin* where tourists find brochures, documentary films and a souvenir shop (medial intangible heritage; cf. Beier-de Haan 2005, 68). A tour along places that have a relation to the *Misteri*, the "Ruta del Misteri" is in the planning stage.

A first conclusion is that the intangible heritage's performance is safeguarded from touristic access by a number of restrictions like the limiting conditions for entrance. The idea of a more intensive marketing of the *Misteri* was supported only by the persons responsible for city marketing and tourism. All the other people who were interviewed stressed that addressing tourists ought not influence the traditional cultural practice of the *Misteri*.

The Palmeral

Things are different for the tangible world heritage *Palmeral*. Once the palms covered most of the city's area. But since the 19th century industrialization and urban growth caused a fragmentation and partly elimination of the palm groves (cf. Ajuntament d'Elx 2008c, 10-12; Larrosa Rocamora 2003b, 78-80). Figure 2 shows the division of the palm groves into its still predominantly agriculturally characterized areas and the parts which were transformed into parks or recreational areas or were partly built on. Only since the enactment of the law for the protection of the palm groves in 1986 (Llei per la qual es regula la tutela del Palmerar d'Elx 1986) and the additional environmental planning from 1997 further construction or the rededication of areas that belong to the *Palmeral* have to be authorized by the so called "Patronato del Palmeral" (Larrosa Rocamora 2003b, 86-87). The bold line indicates the area that was inscribed in the list of world cultural heritage in 2000. The UNESCO-proclamation refers only to the connected inner-city palm groves that were declared historic (huertos centrales). This area covers 1.484.819m² (cf. Ajuntament d'Elx 2008c, 37).

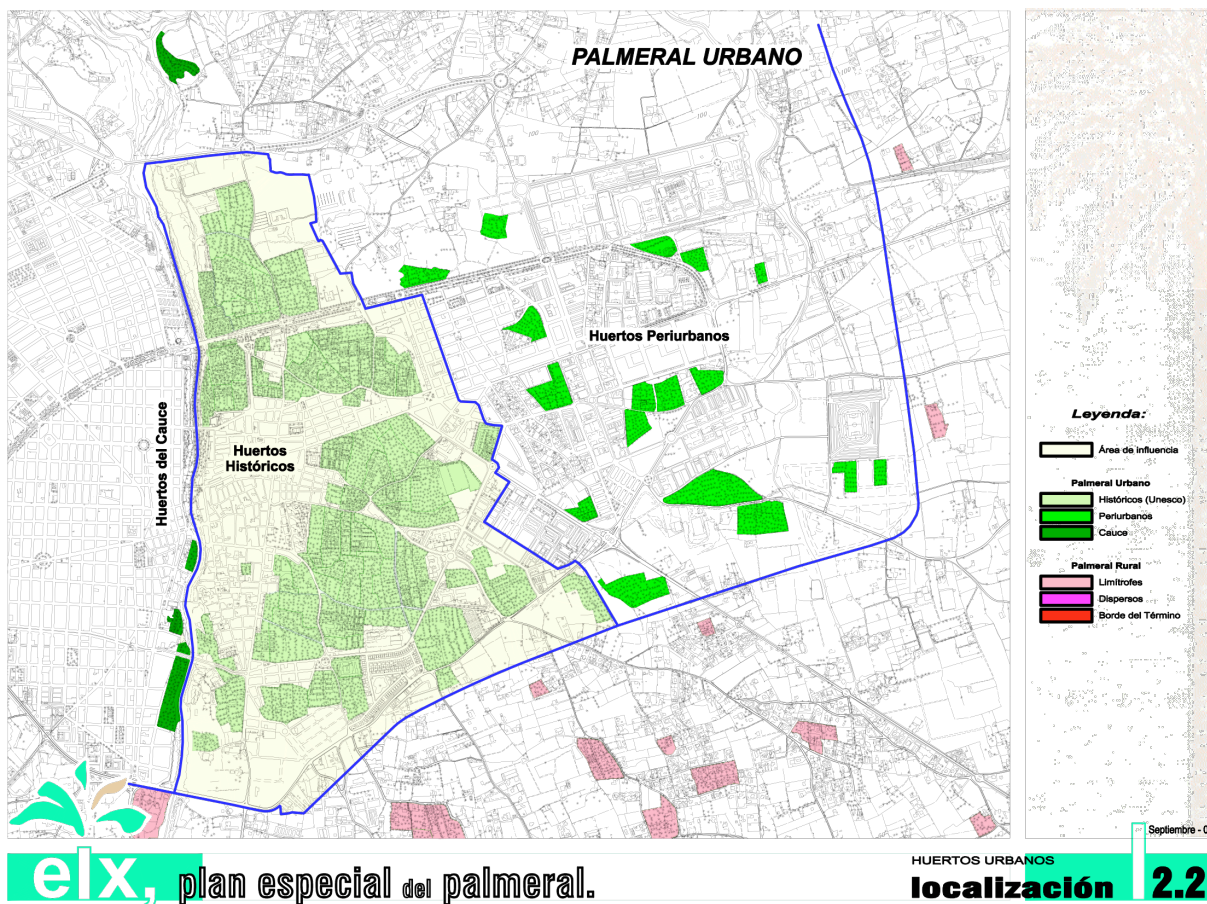


Figure 2: UNESCO-labelled area of the historic Palmeral of Elx (Source: Ajuntament d'Elx 2008c).

Even though the proclamation of the *Palmeral* is considered to be an important key factor for the touristic development of Elx (cf. Larrosa Rocamora 2003a) the celebrations of the UNESCO-nomination were only modest. Unlike the *Misteri* the *Palmeral* only plays a minor role in the people of Elx's lives. Although the palm groves are still present in everyday life and the inhabitants call them an outstanding characteristic of Elx, people show a distinct ignorance concerning the palms. Just a few families cultivate the palm groves in a traditional way and practice traditional handicrafts like the production of the so called *Palma Blanca* which is used in the Palm Sunday processions and in the *Misteri* play. Except for them and for some groups of academics (there are first of all the biologists and the environmental scientists from the palm research centre Phoenix as well as some historians and anthropologists) there is virtually no "Palmeral-family", for which the palm gardens have identity-generating functions. The discourse about the *Palmeral* is almost exclusively held between those academics and the players in city and tourism marketing. The marketers make the case for a transformation of the palm groves into recreational and amusement parks in order to make them more attractive for tourists. In their opinion the decisive criteria are the beauty and the exoticism of the palm groves. The academics' goal on the other hand is to conserve the *Palmeral's* authenticity and hence its agricultural character. The cultural heritage of a unique cultural landscape and the concerning practices represent the reason for the UNESCO's proclamation. Moreover it is argued that the search for authenticity is a significant impetus for world heritage tourists (cf. Larrosa Rocamora 2003a, 151). To focus on a purely aesthetical respectively exotic presentation of a botanical garden would disappoint the expectations regarding a historic agricultural landscape. The successful positioning in regard to the target group of cultural tourists has to take this into consideration.



Figure 3: Part of the historic Palmeral with a preserved agricultural identity (Photo by Jessica Furnell, August 2007).

Conclusion

Elx is one of the few places in the world that can boast of having two world cultural heritage decorations. The city regards this fact as a chance to outgrow the decline of its traditional industrial orientation. The city's cultural heritage is seen as an opportunity. But what the introduced discourses concerning the cultural heritage should have shown is that intangible and tangible heritage are subject to different conditions. In the case of the intangible heritage *Misteri* the focus lies on the participation in the performance of the festival as a lived identity-generating practice (MacCannells *use value*). Referring to Assmann (2003, 133) the *Misteri* can be described as a part of a *lived in functional memory* (bewohntes Funktionsgedächtnis). As a cultural practice it is passed on from generation to generation. While doing so it builds a bridge between the past, present and future. It conveys values of identity generation. In this context Halbwachs (1985, 389) refers to the elements of memory as being charged with meaning. While entering the functional memory every historic fact is transposed into a symbol and is filled with meaning. Three major purposes of functional memory can be deduced from this (Assmann 2003, 138-139): authorization and de-authorization of existence and power as well as distinction. The latter comprises all symbolic forms of expression that make for strengthening a collective identity. This identity is closely interwoven with the cultural performance of the *Misteri*. Community celebrations like the *Misteri* express the re-affirmation of belonging to a place (cf. Cohen 1985, 50-53) and thus they are contested (cf. Boissevain 1991; Gustafsson 2000; Sampath 1997). When the actors of tourism marketing decided to use the *Misteri's* proclamation as part of the world cultural heritage for their marketing activities this decision led to fierce resistance. Even if people are not generally opposed to the revaluation of Elx as a destination of cultural tourism the participation of tourists in the festivities is seen sceptically because of possible destructive influences on the cultural performance. The *il·licitans* regard themselves as the most important group of users – if you like to put it like this.

Another view exists with regard to the tangible heritage *Palmeral*. All the considerations about possible measures focus on an external group of users – which are possible tourists. Even when academics demand for the authen-

tification of the *Palmeral* for example by supporting traditional types of construction or handicrafts which are linked with the *Palmeral*, all this happens with regard to a touristic presentation (MacCannells *exchange value*). As a cultural heritage the *Palmeral* is long filed in the city's storage memory. Referring to Assmann (2003, 133) the *Palmeral* can be interpreted as a part of an unoccupied, dead storage memory (unbewohntes Speichergedächtnis). Unlike the *Misteri* the *Palmeral* is detached from a specific bearer (unoccupied), it is only part of Elx' past and object of academic discourses about truth and knowledge but not about values and identity. For the most part the il·licitans have no vital relation to the *Palmeral*. They saw it more like a museum. All efforts concerning the *Palmeral's* authentication appear to rather be the re-creation of a historical narrative than the *Palmeral's* re-establishment in the city's life. In its traditional position it is no longer generating identity.

Unlike in the *Misteri* discourse, the question is not: tourism – yes or no? It is about how to attract tourists in the best way. In the case of the intangible heritage *Misteri* the people's pride is based on the participation in the performance of the festival, whereas people take a rather abstract pride in something one "owns" but does not "use", when it comes to the tangible heritage *Palmeral*. When cultural heritage is regarded as an economic resource a contrary effect can be observed: Material artefacts are put to direct use (for example through guided tours of the *Palmeral* but also in the form of museums). In contrast the intangible heritage is supposed to only serve as an abstract logo but should not be touched apart from that. Martinez (2005) draws a similar conclusion from his study of potential dangers for various forms of intangible heritage. Faith based intangible cultural heritage (*patrimonio inmaterial fundamentado en creencias*) like the *Misteri* appears to be worthier of protection, because it has a strong identity generating effect and is thus tied to the present and can for example be used to one's advantage in political discourses. This is not the case for intangible heritage that has an economic basis (*patrimonio inmaterial de base económica*). To demonstrate this Martinez uses the "Water Court" of Valencia (Tribunal de las Aguas) as an example. The agricultural and mechanical techniques which are linked to the *Palmeral* are quite comparable. Both are barely tied to post-industrial society and can therefore hardly have identity generating functions. That makes efforts for its original conservation unpromising. It is rather their adaptation to present needs like the transformation of the *Palmeral* into a musealized and touristified garden that can have identity generating effects.

Concerning the opportunities of using cultural heritage as a resource in times of crisis we have to draw the conclusion that the use of tangible and intangible cultural heritage leads to quite different discourses. The abstract "pride in cultural heritage" (here in the form of the *Palmeral*) brings forth a discourse about the best ways of touristic utilization. In the case of the *Misteri* the actual "partaking in cultural heritage" leads to a discourse about whether a touristic utilization should be allowed at all. The way cultural heritage is created and marketed (the process of 'heritagisation'; Ashworth/Graham/Tunbridge 2007, 41) tells a lot about how a city wants to see itself and which kind of identity a city claims for itself. The resulting form of cultural tourism would always be a different one. In the end both forms of cultural heritage can generate identity and be helpful in times of crisis: The abstract "pride in something" (the *Palmeral*) as well as the concrete "partaking in something" (the *Misteri*) cause positive effects.

Keywords

Tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, Palmeral d'Elx, Misteri d'Elx, identity.

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