

THE ACTIVITY OF UNESCO REGARDING THE ELEMENT OF RECOVERY OF THE CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE EXAMPLE OF AEOLIAN ISLANDS

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1. Introduction

The recent interest aroused by Cultural Geography, which expressed a great attention and a study's excitement on "cultural facts", is linked to changes due to several factors in different territorial ambits where human groups' identities are expressed.

The globalization process produced different effects in various cultural regions, which lead to a homologation phenomenon, with consequent assimilation and lost of cultural identity, or to strong defensive reactions for their own specificities. In such a context, a particular attention towards "cultural signs" impressed on man by his environment, in order to protect every residual element that symbolizes the specific individuality which is again the historical connection between human beings and their past.

So, the interest of UNESCO for World Heritage List properties, receivers of protection and preservation programs, has to be interpreted in this sense.

A clear example of the above said comes from the attention turned to Aeolian Islands, recently declared "World Heritage Property", with the main purpose of volcanic identity safeguard, as fundamental landscape component, and of knowledge of Aeolian cultural properties, as expression of cultural identity and place belonging, of hereditary transmission and historical sedimentation, of representative contextuality and complexity.

2. The "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage"

Adopted in Paris on November 16, 1972 from some UNESCO States Parties, it identifies cultural and natural properties of "outstanding universal value", giving importance both to different cultural roots of people, researching them into material and symbolic witnesses of their past, through the historical, artistic, architectonic heritage, in the unity of knowledge and values, and to naturalistic peculiarities of a place that a certain community retained to protect, assuring in such way the historical and cultural continuity of the real space.

With the Convention the World Heritage Committee has been founded, an intergovernmental organization with the fundamental aim to detect, on the basis of candidatures submitted by State Parties, the properties to catalogue into the World Heritage List, that satisfy the valuation principles specific both for cultural properties, and for natural ones, as well as for cultural landscape, meant as "bound nature and man works".

Signatories of the Convention admit that the sites become "World Heritage" belonging to all the people of the world, with no regard to the territories they are placed on. Such a concept is certainly innovative, for the cultural and natural heritage protection is no more entrusted only to the Nation they belong to, but it is based on the concept of common property and international cooperation, even if it does not challenge the sovereignty of the States on whose territories the properties are, that is to say it is not compromising the property right. This kind of protection, with similar rules and validity englobed in a single document, has been reached through the fusion of two separate movements: one that focused its attention on perils to which cultural properties are exposed, ruled by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and the other that was concerned of nature preservation, guided by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). So the most important unique international text was born, the main characteristic of which is just that of joining together the concepts of nature preservation and cultural sites protection: nature and culture are considered complementary given the fact that cultural identity is strongly related to natural environment in which it develops itself; as well as the natural elements can assume the cultural property valency where its quality and the function of real place and together symbol of identity of a group are exalted (Caldo, 1953).

So the Convention is an agreement between UNESCO States Parties that freely accepted the above-said principles and today it counts the signs of 177 States that contribute, with necessary resources, both financial and intellectual, to the preservation of sites considered "World Heritage Property". Besides, in signing this Document, every State commits itself to protect the whole of its national heritage, even if not recognized as world heritage; this should be done with regional planning programs, adopting measures that give to one nation's heritage a function in ordinary community life.

3. The "World Heritage List"

The World Heritage List calls attention to the richness and diversity of the cultural and natural heritage of the planet, and to be included the candidate sites must satisfy at least one of the selection standards established by the World Heritage Committee in order to check their real characteristics of "exceptionality" and "importance", as well as of "integrity" and "authenticity".

The requests of candidature start from "the bottom", in fact the presentation of the requests to the UNESCO must take place by the single State Parties on their own initiative. These dispose, for every property, the complete documentation to submit to the Committee judgment, pointing out the characteristics in a precise and detailed way. On such bases the Committee will choose the most significant properties that will be included in the World Heritage List pointing out the name, the geographical position, the main characteristics and the selection standards which they satisfy, making it, in this way, as much representative as possible of the local cultural identities, realities that could otherwise escape to the attention if a recognition from "the top" were used. At the moment, the selected sites are 754, 582 of which are considered cultural properties, 149 natural properties, 23 mixed properties and are shared out in 129 State Parties. Italy is represented by 37 sites, of both cultural and natural interest, among which the Aeolian Islands, inscribed in the year 2000.

But the World Heritage List does not only have the function of recognizing and cataloguing of cultural and natural sites considered of "outstanding universal value"; rather, it proposes itself as the means to spread a different way of relating with the heritage of cultural and natural sites, a changed viewpoint that must concern community as well as field workers. Precisely, sites of the World Heritage List are bound to the idea of their transmission in the sense that UNESCO aims to protect and preserve properties that represent the identity of peoples, considered "common heritage" in what they form an intergenerational bond: they come from the past and are destined to future through the filter of present that act as selector and must take upon itself the task of deciding what should be transmitted and how (Serenò, 2001). In fact, the construction of the world cultural and natural heritage, which takes place by the election of the sites to include in the World Heritage List is the equivalent of the activation of a social process of reconstruction of one's own history more than a recognition of the property as a territorial "datum" (Soderstrom, 1994).

When a reading of the sites included in to the World Heritage List is done, it is necessary to pick up, in a critical way, the "sign function" that they express in a given territorial contest and that has pushed the "locals" to ask for an international recognition. The cultural and natural heritage so detected assumes a specific sense in relation with the cultural background of those who benefit from it and it activates connections between the characteristics of the sites and between these and the entire load of personal and collective memory and imaginary.

Such a richness must interest everybody, since it is by now demonstrated by different cases that its custody can play a significant role in the economic and social development of local communities, in particular through cultural tourism. In fact, the awareness of the "alternative resource" function, has lead to a connection, acquired by now, between economics, territorial politics and cultural and natural heritage (Barilaro, 2001).

This is what is happening in the Aeolian islands since the awareness of having an historical, environmental and cultural heritage has been focused, no more to exploit it like an inexhaustible resource, but, on the contrary, to protect and to preserve because absolutely unique and of priceless value and source of "profit" only if respected. This concept has spread into the mind of Aeolian people, who have strongly desired, and obtained, the international recognition of "outstanding universal value" of their own environmental and cultural

properties through the most prestigious instrument: the insertion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

4. Aeolian Island

The archipelago of Aeolian Islands, located in the low Tyrrhenian Sea in the north of the eastern coast of Sicily, is made up of seven islands (Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Stromboli, Filicudi, Alicudi and Panarea), all of volcanic nature, even if they were born in different moments, five islets (Basiluzzo, Dattilo, Lisca Nera, Bottaio and Lisca Bianca) near Panarea, and many seamounts. It is administrated by the province of Messina and is divided into the municipalities of Malfa, S. Marina Salina and Leni in Salina, and Lipari, which include all the other islands.

Even if every single island shows specific morphologic qualities, they all share the mountainous nature of the ground, marked by hardly steep slopes and a few plateaus mainly set over high cliffs. Such a rocky nature did not allow the formation of great springs, and this, together with the scarceness of annual precipitation, has determined a mainly arid environment. In spite of this, these are places of ancient humanization where the human presence has strongly conditioned the landscape aspect, so that it is possible to affirm that almost no area of the Aeolian territory can be defined as a wilderness. Indeed the landscape is marked by the signs of millenary human work, like the thick terracing that shapes mountain sides, which, even if partially abandoned, are visible still now.

Contrary to what could appear at first sight, the prevalent economic activity in Aeolian Islands in XIX century and in the first half of XX century was farming and not fishing, so that the prevalent residence style was formed by shed rural dwelling in which more than half of the population lived. But through time, different factors determined the crisis of the agrarian field, such as water lack, emigration, excessive splitting up of the landed property and the difficulties in the use of machinery. The only solution for the survival of the Aeolian people was emigration, directed mainly towards the USA, Argentina and Australia, and this emigration caused a demographic decrement, that emerged after World War II. From 1972 on a reversal tendency has been recorded due to the improvement of social conditions of the population thanks to the incomes of tourism and fishing, which contributed to hold emigration.

Economic activities, until the beginning of XX century, were based on ancient balances founded on farming, fishing, seafaring activities and commerce, as well as on Lipari's pumice extraction, the only industry of the archipelago. From the second half of 1900 until today, the development of tourism phenomenon has much concerned the Aeolian archipelago, causing, to a great extent, the end of the economic relevance of the agrarian and seafaring activities. In such a modified economic situation, social relations and income levels changed and, in a lack of planning and, above all, of a politics respectful of the historical and environmental specificities, on one hand, and with tourism and new work opportunities, on the other hand, a savage speculation came out, which compromised cultural and natural environment, disrupting the landscape characteristics, especially those of traditional architecture. The rural house, in fact, built according to specific needs, changed its use, becoming purely residential and losing, therefore, its typical connotations.

The denaturalization of the house model, due especially to an amplification of volumes, or to the use of particular materials and elements, contributed to alter the typical Aeolian environment; moreover, with the decrease of population in the country and with the consequent leaving of shed houses, an excessive concentration of new buildings near the docks can be noticed, thus creating new centers, or oversizing others, leading to an unbalance both in visual terms and in terms of territorial administration, due to savage construction of cement buildings, disrespectful of the landscape.

The principal cause of environmental decay of the Aeolian Islands is to a great extent imputable to mass tourism, which, directly or indirectly, produced negative effects. Tourism has been useful to the archipelago to escape the state of neglect in which it was in the post-war period, but the discovery of the Aeolian Islands and their tourist exploitation have been too much explosive to allow an harmonic territorial development. In fact, the lack of an economic and territorial planning which allowed to manage in an inadequate manner the growth of tourism, together with the progressive neglect of traditional activities, permitted a

development based on intensive exploitation of resources. That joined to the building speculation, is leading to the loss of the *modus vivendi* deep-rooted in the local culture, since the economy of a high percentage of Aeolians families at the moment is based on tourism. But this is a tourism that did not create solid bases where a lasting development could be founded, with beneficial effects on the occupational versant.

In the beginning, the real source of attraction of the Aeolian Islands were volcanoes. But together with Stromboli and Vulcano, even Lipari was concerned with the tourist phenomenon because it offered more links with the mainland, more adequate infrastructures and acted as intermediate station.

It is mainly in the 60's that the Aeolian Islands enter the big circuits, attracting an ever-increasing number of persons and determining deep changes in the archipelago. The need to widen receptive structures turns Lipari (endowed with good infrastructures) and Vulcano (where the uninhabited plain of Vulcano Porto lent itself to a tourist exploitation) subject to a real reification of the territory: given the lack of instruments of territorial planning, these underwent the devastating action of a building industry that allowed the untidy growth of buildings, without any urbanistic logic, nor any environmental sensitiveness.

Stromboli loses, instead, its hegemony because of the connections and landing difficulties. In this island and in Panarea, on the fringe of mass tourism flow, the wide availability of abandoned ruins led to the birth of a "second house" market.

Around the 70's the expansion of secondary houses was still configured like the characterizing element of the whole archipelago development. This made the effective number of tourists hardly detectable, and even today the tourist movement is certainly greater than that certified by official data.

At the moment the Aeolian Islands show different degrees of tourist penetration, visitors density and environmental decay. For example, Alicudi and Filicudi have a number of visitors adequate to the services they can offer.

Stromboli and Panarea are characterized by natural and anthropic environments that have a strong attractive potential, but they own adequate receptive structures that allow tourist satisfaction. Salina still holds a territory in which tourism did not leave deep scars and that could prove to be the winning factor for future tourism; in fact, it is the most studied of the whole archipelago and acts as a pilot-laboratory on which the future of the Aeolian Islands must be built from a point of view of sustainable development. Lipari, and especially Vulcano, have come to the mature and saturating stage of tourism. The blows inflicted to the landscape here are by now deep and hardly healable.

Tourism in the archipelago is strongly characterized by seasons, since the arrival of people is concentrated in the months of July and August, and this causes a very low use of the receptive ability.

But the fast growth of tourism was not followed by its consolidation, also because an adequate development of essential services and infrastructures did not support civil living, services that result lacking even for local populations during the winter period. Besides, the high unemployment rate, the recession that, in recurrent phases, threatens commerce, and the crisis of traditional productive activities are convincing arguments to pass alternative development plans.

To allow further tourist development of the archipelago does not mean endlessly increasing the number of tourists, but retraining the field to make it compatible with that environment, which is its primary resource. Farming and fishing, for example, cannot to be left to go adrift, but put in condition to act as a support both for tourism through the diffusion of typical products, and promotion of parallel activities of agritourism and rural tourism, in which the sea-based tourist offer makes up a whole with local cultural aspects. The recovery of agrarian territories would put an end, moreover, to their decaying state, contributing to an efficient territorial control also in order to prevent fires and pollution due to unauthorized waste materials emissions.

Interventions on tourism, however, should tend first of all to reduce the concentration of tourism in the high season, an attitude which, helped by a diversified offer and exploiting thermal and cultural tourism circuits, would decongest summer months. This would be useful

also for the widening of the target towards which the offer is directed, from a mainly young tourism, to more mature bands of population, giving in this way more solid foundations to the field. It is necessary, moreover, to improve structural conditions to render them sufficient to bear major flow periods. Then marketing actions that publicize the archipelago and its pro environment investments would be necessary, so to attract a more respectful tourism; as well as projects to obtain a greater professional nature of tourist offer and a service adaptation from a sustainability point of view.

Public Administration must relocate environmental protection in decisional processes of every field, so to protect landscape and, with it, existent tourism opportunity. Besides that, a strong role of private field in the defining of voluntary rules, needed to reach a tourist development that uses environment without wearing it out, is fundamental.

It is essential to comprehend the wholeness of the Aeolian cultural phenomena, such as nature, myth, Mediterranean context, "anthropization" and territorial "domestication" processes, secular seafaring vocation. Aeolian traditional culture come out from a dynamic balance of such elements, and it is not possible to leave any of them out of consideration if we want to deepen the consideration on the present of the archipelago and try an investigation on its future.

All these arguments have been considered in passing an important project for the territorial retraining of the Aeolian archipelago, that is the Landscape Territorial Plan, which considers not only economic and planning aspects, but also those of social values which are fundament for the Aeolian culture in order to maintain an identity that eventually could be in danger.

The Landscape Territorial Plan of the Aeolian Islands has been drawn up between 1996 and 1997 under the scientific liability of the "Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali di Messina". On February 23, 2001 the same Plan has been approved in a definitive way and set under normative law of user and environmental exploitation for the whole Aeolian Islands territory.

The Plan regulates the preservation and compatible transformation of cultural, scientific, structural, aesthetic and recreational landscape of the Islands, whose natural environments, rich of suggestions and archaic-savor traditions, have become the critical point of tourist offer.

But just the great mass tourism development has strong repercussions on the ecological, economic and social level, for the wrong use of limited resources, the cement-conversion of more and more wide areas for the construction of second houses used solely in summer period, the occupational situation and economic activities in a critical position, especially, for the drop in quality of tourist offer.

The Plan started from these tendencies, revealing a pathological impact on the Aeolian ecosystem, whose evolution and history make up an extraordinary capital formed by a system of natural and anthropic resources, material and immaterial resources, renewable and not and new resources strictly linked to knowledge.

So the Plan has charged itself with analyzing the historical model expressed from Aeolian environment, which is to maintain and recover beyond its aesthetic perceptive aspects. The historical core to be recovered: the sea-mountain settlement model, the integrated productive one, all are healthy and valid elements, lacking in the post-industrial society, that magnificently join cultural tourism bound to local human factor to the familiar dimension.

The Landscape Territorial Plan of the Aeolian Islands intended to promote, with an innovative programmatic model, new values deriving also from the knowledge of the Aeolian cultural properties, which include volcanic jewels of world interest and significance, extraordinary archaeological sites, environmental insularity, archipelago, landscape, thermal, warm sea, human relationship in the hospitality of the hotel-town and hotel-territory values, in continuity with history and in natural harmony.

But Aeolian public authorities have gone farther: in fact, sustaining the candidature for the insertion of the archipelago into the World Heritage List, they committed themselves to produce new eco-compatible development politics even towards the international community, accepting the World Heritage Convention rules with all the consequences that could be derived in both economic and territorial planning, in exchange for the prestige deriving from such an important acknowledgement of their own territorial value.

Just the presence and the operating of the Landscape Territorial Plan has been the basic condition for the inclusion of the Aeolian Islands into the World Heritage List, because they satisfy one of the criteria among those fixed by the Committee for natural properties .

The Committee, like for other properties, has fixed monitoring parameter to check and assure the state of site conservation. It is established that, in accordance with local administration, the following have to be kept constantly under control: urbanization rate; road traffic during high tourist season and above all in the historical center of Lipari that results congested during summer period; tourist flows, in accordance with Regional Tourism Office; volcanic eruptions, with Universities and special research centers. Just for their intrinsic characteristics, the micro-insular environments result fragile to external impacts, especially to human activities and among them tourism is the most devastating. But in the Aeolian Islands, besides mass tourism, also another phenomenon which threatens the site preservation exists: the pumice excavation in Lipari .

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, in fact, during the General Session of July 6, 2002, recalled the attention on these questions forcing Italy to give binding assurances related to the planning of interruption of mining activities of industrial pumice excavation, confirming that public institutions are engaged in a custody behavior and in a compatible use of the Heritage recognized as a world value, while the exercise of such activity is disfiguring and destroying the morpho-volcano-tectonic unity of the archipelago.

On the contrary, some Aeolians Municipalities and Pumex and Italpomice industries contested before the TAR the Landscape Territorial Plan, asking for its cancellation, for it would revoke the licenses for the pumice mining determining, in this way, its dismissal.

But having verified that the keeping of mining activity would cause a very serious assumption to the exclusion of Aeolian Islands from the World Heritage List, for it would not respect the custody conditions that UNESCO retained necessary in the moment of inclusion, TAR and national Government considered of basic importance the preservation of the Landscape Territorial Plan validity, the encouragement of a fast activation of the managing plan and finding an immediate solution to the pumice mines problem, in the meaning recalled by UNESCO.

The recovery of existing structures has been moreover considered, through their reorganization in receptive tourist activities, hinged upon the very particular local geology and upon the history of mining activity. For example, the tourist-cultural exploitation for Acquacalda has been proposed to be realized through the creation of the regional pumice Museum. This structure would allow the custody and preservation, assuring public fruition, of handicrafts and equipment which form a precious industrial archaeological heritage; the creation of new qualified occupation in the islands and development chances for the entire hamlet; the realization of a geo-mining park that preserves historical memory of pumice productive activity and creates new occupation.

The Aeolian Islands are an important example of how the activity that UNESCO displays in the protection of cultural and natural properties, seen now from the point of view of their transmission, is an important element in the recovery of peoples' cultural identity and in the custody of their real space. Protection is not meant like heritage "museumification", but like an opportunity of eco-compatible and lasting growth of a territory, to obtain through adequate development politics. Aeolian population and public institutions, in fact, have by now assimilated that only this type of investment forms the premise for a profitable development of the archipelago, under the banner of protection and exploitation of those places which are source and origin of their own extraordinary culture.

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