

Folk Dancing, Tourism and Identity *A Relationship in (de)construction?*

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Abstract. This paper aims to focus on a study that looked at the extent to which folk-dancing is considered by young residents in the Algarve, Portugal to contribute to the transmission of the spirit of the place to tourists visiting the region.

The study was based on a questionnaire survey given out to a sample of students at the University of the Algarve. The results showed that little is known about folk-dancing among the students, although at the same time they tend to assign a market value to this type of dancing, which is associated with cultural tourism.

It is then suggested that the valuing of folk-dancing as a tourist resource should therefore be re-assessed to allow young people, and even perhaps other age groups, to integrate this form of popular cultural expression as their own rather than being for others (visitors). This in turn leads us to the need to rethink current educational dynamics.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which folk dance is considered by university students in the areas of tourism, and which actions could be implemented to contribute to the transmission of the spirit of the place to residents and to tourists.

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The choice of the target-group is based in the condition this group may utterly act as a “cultural mediator” and has higher chances of interfering in the development of policies with impact in social, cultural and economical fields.

1. Tourism, Identity and Folk Dance: Conceptual Developments

Heritage tourism, as a cultural tourism segment, is “the evocation of the past and inherently about visions or understanding of the present, and a key justification for the preservation of both material cultures and traditional practices, in what they can tell contemporary communities or tourists about themselves and others. It is something of a paradox of modernity that at the same time that relentlessly seeks modern people, also hankers after something older, more authentic, or traditional” (Appadurai 1981; Cohen 1988; Edensor 2002; Gold and Gold 1995; Halewood and Hannam 2001; Lowenthal 1985; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Urry 1991; in Knox 2008: 256).

Folklore, and its various expressions, namely folk dance, is considered as an *intangible cultural heritage*³ (ICH) or *living heritage*, built over the triple conjunction of the conceptual framework: folk⁴, nation⁵ and tradition⁶. The relationship of folklore with tourism, places it in a mercantilisation/touristification process, as a reality in accordance to the post-modern, post-fordist and globalized society we live in.

However, tourism, as an economic activity, must appropriate culture, and namely this kind of heritage – simultaneously traditional and living, in a context “where Economics, Culture and Space are symbiotic of each other” (Santagata 2004). With the recognition that tourists are changing trying to “achieve deeper and more meaningful experiences by changing their role – engaging in volunteer tourism or

³ According to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH is “the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2008).

⁴ Related to people, community, popular classes or groups.

⁵ Under the name of which the knowledge and the work of the people were scanned in order to identify hypothetical elements to include in strategies of integration of the global society.

⁶ Related to rituals, culture, transmission.

creative tourism” (ETC, 2006: 5), it is important to be aware that folk dance is losing its traditional role in local/regional communities.

But, in post-modernity, it's not only the memory that is in a losing risk, identity is too. Recognising identity as a non neutral and evolutionary process, Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher (2005: 29) point out that “The development of identity ... is not always smooth, well ordered, and without disruption”.

2. Experiencing Identity through Tourism

Folklore could be seen through the “other” and this fact presents a set of threats. Knox (2008:256) refers: “the mobilization of traditional practices in a tourism context often results in the presentation of apparently compromised, essentially limited, and highly commoditized forms of culture (Graml 2004; MacCannell 1976, Wang 1999)”. Shackley (1998: 101) point out that: “almost anyone can respond at some level to dance, irrespective of the dance's intended meaning, but dance media presented to tourists run the danger of becoming merely a set of signs rather than a set of symbols, with most of the original depth of meaning being lost”. This fact constitutes a great threat, and is in the origin of the growing adaptation of folk dance performances (by folk groups) that have in mind the tourist public.

Considering the importance of identity maintenance, Steiner and Reisinger (2006: 304) underline the role of heritage as a history component, determinant to the perception of the spirit of the place: “It seems that people look to the past to identify and understand themselves. This is consistent with Heidegger's idea of where one's existential identity and meaning can be found. History gives people their possibilities, which define them. But the historical world of possibilities is constituted by both heritage and destiny. The former is one's personal history of experience, learning, an education, with heritage as the primary source of unique possibilities. In contrast, destiny is communal history. It can only be the source of unique possibilities when people engage with it authentically. Otherwise, it will reveal only shared possibilities, which will impede authenticity”.

As many authors refer the “authentic” and the “inauthentic” are not bounded categories, and are both able to represent, create and perform “the past and the present of any community defined through

practice. (...) Thus, for example, the folk cultures, costumes, songs, and dances of European nations were created in their current form as part of a 19th and 20th century process of collection, representation, and anthologizing (Boyes 1993, Crang 1999, Knox 2001; in Knox 2008: 259). In this context, post-modernity celebrates the use of tourist attractions that we are aware of their “fabrication” leading to “travellers in hyperreality” (Eco 1986)⁷.

Another important threat to *genius loci* is the continuous loss of the sense of belonging between residents and folk dance. The fact is related with the processes through which folk dance traditions have moved from being an everyday, unremarkable practice to public spectacle and tourism performance.

This dissociation is a preoccupying aspect that shouldn't be ignored. According to our perspective, it must be essentially surmounted by local community cultural dynamics. These dynamics should be emphasize by both community members and public powers (cultural, territorial and tourism planning and management). In this process creativity should be emphasized.

Simultaneously, cooperation and collaboration, as major issues in the planning and management arena, should be linked “through political powers, to the idea of sustainable tourism development (Bramwell and Lane 1999, Hall 2000; Selin 1999, Timothy 1999), and, in the context of community-based tourism, to integration and participation (Mitchell and Reid 2001; Tosun 2000; in Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher, 2005: 30).

3. Case Study: Folk dance and tourism: a students' perception

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2003, 2006), the tourism sector represents an expressive importance in the economy of Portugal and in the Algarve (south region of Portugal) in particular. However, this relative importance of the tourism is accompanied with an extreme dependency of some markets, like the United Kingdom and Germany in the case of the Algarve⁸.

⁷ It is difficult to use the term authentic in relation to ICH; some experts advise against its use in relation to living heritage (see the Yamato Declaration).

⁸ With a number of overnight stays of about 14 millions (INE – Statistics of Portugal, 2007) for the region of the Algarve. The UK market represents in the Algarve 47,9% when quantified through the overnight stays of foreign tourists.

If we take into consideration the National Strategic Plan for Tourism of Portugal (PENT) analysing the strategic matrix of the development of the products in the territory, we verify that the cultural product is contemplated in a little extent for the region of the Algarve. The products to be developed are concentrated in the main motivation of sun and sea. From our point of view it is important to consider the cultural product when contextualized in diversification and complementary strategies to the core product.

The present case study is based on a questionnaire administered to students in Higher Education taking degrees related to Tourism in Portugal (Hospitality, Tourism and Management). It encompasses different steps: identifying folk dance in the global framework of dance, different perspectives of folk dance as a tourism product and finally, the analysis of different actions to promote the valorisation and identification with the folk dance and tradition, in the perspective of tourism valorisation of the products for the tourists and residents and the funding of these activities.

Two hundred and eighty three (283) valid questionnaires were collected which represent 17,4% of the total students registered in the 2006/2007 school year in the Algarve University (School of Management, Hospitality and Tourism).⁹

3.1. RESULTS

Firstly, as a general framework, we try to identify the interest of the students for dance, considering the context of four different types. When questioned, students mentioned ballroom dance and modern dance as preferential types. Classic dance and Folk dance obtained minor classifications, with 48,0% and 51,1%, respectively, mentions of “really dislike/don’t like”, only 17,0% and 16,2% expressed that “really like or like a lot” Classic and Folk dance (see table 1).

⁹ Considering that the purpose of this investigation is the students’ opinion as a group, the sample was treated in global terms and the results by particular issues were not considered. Plausibly thinking the tendency to answer the questionnaire is the same for every graduation, the probabilities to obtain an answer of each element of the universe are the same.

TABLE 1 . Types of Dance Preferred

	CLASSIC DANCE	MODERN DANCE	FOLK DANCE	BALLROOM DANCE
Really Dislike/Don't Like	51,1%	23,4%	48,0%	28,3%
Moderately	31,9%	34,9%	35,7%	23,9%
Really Like/Like a Lot	17,0%	41,7%	16,2%	47,8%

When we try to understand the associations to folk dance based on an open question, the students tend to relate the folk dance to the cultural identity (ethnography, tradition) and to the ambience/atmosphere provided.

When questioned about the different types of dances that they know, the rate of response was very low, with an average of reference of only one in a universe of five. This is an important outcome of the lack of knowledge of the cultural identity about the folk dance. The low interest registered regarding this kind of dance is demonstrated by the reduced audience of this type of dance. The students refer that only occasionally (68,7%) attend to folkloric and popular dancing shows, and 15,7% expressed that never attended this type of shows. All these results indicate a clear lost of knowledge and consequently of identification with the folk dance.

In a second step, focused on folk dance, we tried to understand the importance students give to the knowledge of folk dance by the different destination users: residents, national tourists and foreign tourists. From the data analysis we state the tendency to attribute more importance of folk dance knowledge to foreign tourists than to residents. Although the students refer that they haven't attended regularly to folk dance shows and dislike it (to a significant extent), they do consider important the knowledge of this type of dance for the visitors of the place.

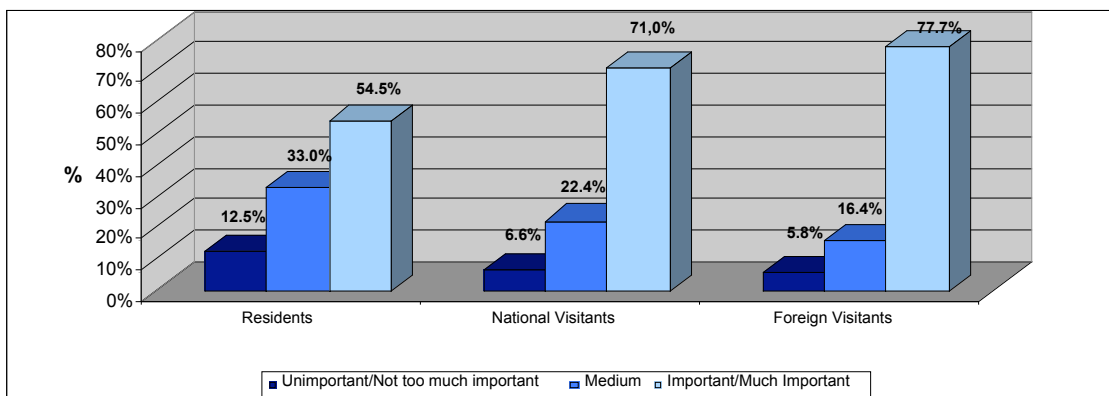


Figure 1. To what extent do you consider the importance of the knowledge of Folk dance by the residents? ... And by the Visitors?

When we try to understand the contribution of the folk dance to the valuing of the traditions and the cultural tourism experience, students tend to see the folk dance as a vehicle to revitalize and valorise the traditions at first instance, with almost 74% references of “Important or Much Important” at this point. Similarly, it is implicit that folk dance has an economic value related to cultural tourism, to tourist product and to the valuing of the tourist experience. The lower contributions of the folk dance tend to be in the context of increasing the participation of the community and contribute to the improvement of the destination image.

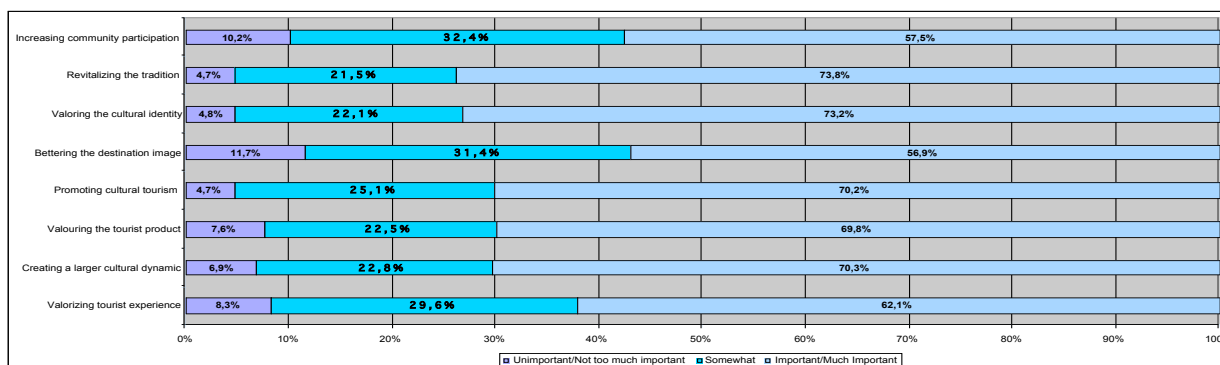


Figure 2. In what way do you consider that Popular/folk dance could contribute to:

Analysing on the perspective of products provided to the tourists, there seems to have receptivity to the creation of new products where the tradition could be recreated. In fact 80,3% of the students consider this an appealing opportunity.

What should be the steps and actions to improve the interest and identification of the residents to folk dance? In the opinion of the students the best vehicle to do that is through advertising, publicity (sites, articles, ...) actions directed to the elderly population and to the primary school and pedagogic activities. Interestingly, the students seem to consider least important actions in the context of higher education.

Aiming at the necessary action and support, the final step of the case study tries to understand which will be the funding responsibility (public and private) for the development of folk dance. From the students' perspective the responsibility of funding this cultural domain still remains with the public economy (68,4% consider important or much important) which is an interesting finding as we are dealing with something that students identify as a tourism product.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Folklore, as a body of expressive culture, has been developed as part of the 19th century ideology of romantic nationalism. It was linked with a sense of belonging and cohesion related to a particular local/regional community and to a particular place. In that perspective it was an element of the spirit of place.

However, in post-modernity, the tendency is to use folklore with consumption ends, a context in which we explore the relation between folkloric dance and cultural tourism. In post-modernity, folk dance tend to be involved in a mercantilization/touristification process and many of its intrinsic characteristics are getting lost in time.

This has to do with two major aspects. The first one is the use of folk-dance as an entertainment performance oriented to tourist consumption. In the tourist industry, destinations appear as an answer to the expectations of the experience the tourist wishes to live.

Folklore groups have then a tendency to acquire the shape of the tourist experience since it is not possible to perform a show without a relationship between actors and public. Any folk-dancing played today

will never be a retake of the original because it has been adapted to the needs of new publics, and consequently it gains new uses, functions and values.

The second one concerns the characteristics of resident population that is urban or urbanized to a considerable extent. Consequently, it is embodied in a globalization process that eventually leads to the disintegration of local cultures. This process is related to cultural homogenization and the prevalence of mainly Western consumer culture in which everything is evaluated in terms of its market value. In this context, university students revealed some lack of interest about this kind of dancing showed in the low frequency in their attendance to folklore performances.

Though students recognize the importance of folkloric and traditional dancing as an expression of cultural identity they also sustain its knowledge is more important in the case of tourists, especially foreign tourists. This tendency leads us to the question: Is folklore, and namely folk dance, disappearing? And do those students think that its disappearance should be refrained?

Students showed a consciousness of the importance of folklore, especially related to the “communication role” that it can play, not only regarding tourists but also residents. Students considered that it is important to communicate traditional folk dance roots as a part of a common past.

Places and local communities are also their cultural past which should be valued it in the present, as our respondents point out. It is our belief that only through a participated cultural and territory planning and management it will be possible to value cultural identity and consequently value the tourist experience. Planning and management should lay on a local/regional cultural dynamic concerned with educational values based on the various expressions of art.

Regarding folk dance, it should be recognized that once it is closely linked to many other expressions such as music, rituals, festivities, musical instruments, objects, artefacts, ornaments, to promote the folk dance knowledge is to promote knowledge about identity.

In this context, folk dance valorisation, as a touristic resource, should be rethought over so that not only young people but also the ones of other age fringes might integrate this expression of the popular culture as their own more than for the others. This demands several educational dynamics.

The results obtained appeal to a reintegration effort of the popular culture as a way of getting to know the past. Our presupposition is that only the resident identification with its culture can produce touristic experiences with a greater authenticity.

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