

The Llofriu Cork Harvesting Festival: Territory, Local Identity and Transmission of Cultural Heritage

Antonio Rojas Rabaneda

Catalan Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (Spain)
Parc Científic i Tecnològic de la Universitat de Girona
Ed. Narcís Monturiol C/ Emili Grahit, 91
Bloc C, 17003 Girona (Spain)

Abstract

This paper analyzes the Cork Harvesting Festival as an activity that assigns a value to local cultural heritage. We point out the differentiating features of the cork festival which contribute to diffusing an economic activity that is completely linked to local territory and represents a mark of identity for local inhabitants. The research is based on ethnographic field work. It allowed us to collect data about the Cork Harvesting Festival and the people taking part in it.

Keywords: cultural heritage, cork, identity, community.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized society, local communities tend to explore and exploit their marks of identity and initiate processes that highlight the value of their cultural heritage. Through heritage, archaeological, ethnological, natural, tangible or intangible, local communities can foster their social identification with the territory they live in. The association between heritage and identity is well defined in the bibliography on cultural heritage (Smith, 2006, 45). In certain contexts, cultural heritage can promote feelings of belonging to a place of tangible or intangible elements. Therefore, cultural heritage may represent or become a mark of identity of a community (Fernandez, 2006, 6) and of identification with territory. The well planned management and promotion of cultural assets is essential to local communities because they serve to reinforce identity and diversity in a globalized world (Toselli 2006, 176) where homogenization and consumerism are paradigms. The implication of local authorities, institutions and local communities is essential to achieving adequate social uses of cultural heritage (Canclini 1999, 16-33).

Society's interest in cultural heritage must be placed in the context of the overall growing interest in heritage. The development of citizen organizations dedicated to the defence of cultural heritage is an example of this growing sensitivity toward heritage (Hernandez, 2005).

2. Methodology

Our research methodology is mainly based on ethnographic field work. Our field work allowed us to collect data about the Cork Harvesting Festival and the workers taking part in it. Additionally, we carried out a set of semi-structured interviews with artisans and cork harvesters participating in the traditional trade fair and with the festival organizers. These interviews allowed us to identify the perceptions of both active and retired cork professionals and those of the organisers. Finally, we took into account the documented research, consulting the available bibliography and searching the web.

3. Traditional Trade Fairs in Catalonia

Traditional trade fairs can be found throughout the Catalan territory and have clearly increased in numbers in the last 20 years. Up until now, ninety traditional trade fairs have been documented. In this context, we should highlight a general growth in thematic events in Catalonia (Rojas, 2010). Currently, there are around one hundred events dedicated to the dissemination of history and one hundred and fifty fairs dedicated to gastronomic heritage.

These events are not only conceived as leisure or tourism related activities but also as activities which promote the localities where they take place.

In Catalonia, both tangible and intangible heritage have been developed with the aim of diversifying tourism. In an increasingly globalized society, towns and cities are emphasising their unique characteristics, past and identity in order to achieve a level of exclusiveness. The main actions taken to promote tourism and local development have involved exploiting local potentials in order to create new tourist attractions.

The increase in thematic events is closely linked to the growth in cultural tourism. These events are short events, lasting two or three days, which could probably be included under the concept of event tourism (Getz, 1999; MacDonell et al. 1999). For some towns, especially towns with no other tourist attractions, these events represent the main tourist attraction, while for traditionally touristic towns they represent a diversification of tourism. Therefore, some of these traditional trade/craft fairs represent an opportunity to promote tourism, local products and local commerce. Nevertheless, tourism and the desire to attract tourists may be an added value and play an important role when it comes to revitalising traditions and renewing identity (Besculides et al., 2002; Boissevain, 1996). However, we should not only see fairs as tourist activities but rather as valid elements for promoting and assigning value to cultural heritage.

Notwithstanding, the Cork Harvesting Festival is not conceived as a tourist activity but rather as a fair for local people and anyone interested in learning about the world of cork. Therefore, this festival is the kind of event which prioritizes education rather than tourism, something quite rare nowadays.

4. The Cork Harvesting Festival

The Cork Harvesting Festival is a leisure activity based on a traditional activity deeply rooted in territory. The festival involves demonstrating the traditional method of extracting cork from cork oak for the production of cork stoppers.

The fair, which has been celebrated since 2001, takes place during the month of June, the week before Saint John's Day. The event takes place in Llofriu, a town with an area of approximately 438 hectares and a population of 276, in the north east of the Iberian Peninsula. Llofriu is located at the foot of the Gavarres Massif, in the north west of the municipality of Palafrugell, and is made up of different groups of houses surrounded by a wide area of farmland. Palafrugell, in the north east of the Iberian Peninsula, has a cork harvesting tradition which dates back to the 18th century. In fact, cork was once the basis of the economy for a large part of El Baix Empordà region, until the emergence of tourism in the 1950's. However, cork has not disappeared and today there are still industries which manufacture cork stoppers for wine and cava, paper, clothes and cork agglomerate. The Association of Catalan Cork Entrepreneurs, The Catalan Cork Institute and The Cork Museum, the only museum specifically dedicated to cork in the Spanish State, all have their headquarters in Palafrugell.

The idea of celebrating the Cork Harvesting Festival came from The Cork Museum in Palafrugell. The aim was to increase awareness of cork harvesting, an activity that still survives today in its original form and remains hidden in the forest, outside the world of cork. Another aim was to rebalance the territory in the municipality by choosing Llofriu as the location for the festival. In addition, the museum aimed to project itself outside its own four walls, as something more than a collection of inanimate objects and make itself known to local people. A basic element making the Cork Harvesting Festival possible is citizen participation. Almost one hundred people are involved in the organisation. The festival emerged from The Department of Culture, The Institute for Economic Promotion, The Association of Friends and Neighbours of Llofriu and The Cork Museum, and a diversity of associations in Palafrugell collaborate in the different activities.

The core of the fair is the cork harvesting demonstration which takes place in the Llofriu cork woodlands (figure 1). This is what draws people's attention and makes them return year after year. None of the other activities, directly or indirectly related to the world of cork, take place in the woodland. This dynamic, active and participative festival seeks to gather people around an activity that is rooted in territory. It is conceived as a day of celebration, an activity which escapes the simple classical attitude of observation that a visit to a museum entails. It is worth highlighting some of the other activities in the festival, particularly those directly linked to the world of cork, for example, workshops, demonstrations of cork workmanship, exhibitions and conferences.

Other activities, not directly linked to cork, revolve around other common elements such as the natural area of Les Gavarres, the woodland and traditional handicrafts. Equally, there are other activities such as music, which is present throughout the fair, meals, horse and cart rides, and stalls with handicrafts which make the festival a great day out. Given that the festival's main aim is not commercial, all of the handicraft stalls are required to fulfil specific criteria, that is to say, they must involve the demonstration of workmanship, be of a local nature and be linked, where possible, in some way to the world of cork. The festival organisers frequently turn down demands from artisans interested in participating whose activities are unrelated because they wish to maintain this element of the cork harvesting festival.

Workshops, conferences and exhibitions take place alongside the Cork harvesting Festival, optimising the use of the region's potential available resources and creating interesting synergies between industry, culture, tourism, the rest of the community and their natural and cultural heritage.

The set of demonstrations on offer represent one element of the activities with a highly didactic component. These include cork harvesting demonstrations, cork workshops for adults and children with workshops/demonstrations of how to make heather brooms, basket weaving, cork stopper making and woodturning of cork oak. Additionally, there are jam making demonstrations organised by The Jam Museum and a sensory workshop organised by The Catalan Cork Institute for observing the changing aroma of cork during the production process. Other awareness raising activities linked to the world of cork include the presentation of books related to cork and the organisation of complementary round table discussions. Other activities included in the festival programme are more closely linked to knowledge of the local territory, with guided tours introducing the locality's tangible and intangible heritage.

One positive element of the event is the fact that it gives visitors the opportunity to actively participate. Therefore, the visitor is not just an observer or a consumer of products. The spectator comes into contact with these activities out of personal curiosity and as a learning experience (Prentice et al., 2003; Richards et al., 2006).

4.1 Cork, identity and local community

The Cork Harvesting Festival is an opportunity for reflection on identity, for participation and involvement of the community and for reviving and outwardly projecting the cork civilization.

The festival takes place in an area surrounded by cork woodlands where, historically, as in the rest of Les Gavarres although in this case more outstandingly, cork was harvested, fundamentally for the cork stopper industry, and later exported around the world from the port of Palamós on the Costa Brava. The choice of location is not accidental, the festival is celebrated in the idyllic environment of Llofriu where cork harvesting has always taken place and continues to take place today. Hence, Llofriu is brought to life and made visible for one day. Celebrating the festival in Llofriu represents a territorial rebalance at a microscale as it promotes a village which until now has not been included in the municipality's main lines of promotion. Therefore, progress is being made on this territorial rebalance and Llofriu is promoted to the people of Palafrugell, many of whom have never visited the village despite its proximity. In recent years this rebalance has become more visible. The people of Palafrugell have discovered Llofriu and the neighbours of Llofriu feel this recognition. In fact, part of the responsibility for organising the festival lies with the Association of Neighbours and Friends of Llofriu.

"Palafrugell cannot be understood without cork" confirms the director of The Cork Museum, as he highlights the importance of the festival for the museum and its role in promoting cork heritage. Both politicians and institutions share his opinion and see cork not only as a mark of identity from a cultural point of view but also as a powerful tool for local development. The aim of the festival was to gain social recognition for the world of cork beyond itself, that is to say, for it to become part of the identity of Palafrugell and its people. It seems that this has been achieved and that the fair has also gained the respect of the world of cork itself. Even in Portugal, which has regions where there is a strong cork tradition, it has become an example, in terms of how to manage cork heritage. The factor of identity among fairs and festivals has attracted interest from the international scientific community. At a time of globalization, there is a tendency to search for what is of local value, for the element of identity (De Bres & Davis, 2001). Thus, factors intervene which lead to the creation of events that reaffirm community identity.

Hence, we detected a need to highlight the identity of these villages. Highlighting identity would generate processes which raise the status and disseminate the elements of identity that differentiate one village from another and make them authentic. Thus, some of the motivations detected behind the organization of these traditional trade fairs include factors which elevate the value of history and local traditions in times of rapid change, when the movement of people leads to multicultural societies. In this context, what is autochthonous is promoted and disseminated, for example, language, culinary customs, trades, craftsmanship and traditions. Some of these fairs can provoke a feeling of belonging to communities.

In Catalonia, the factor of identity is present to a greater or lesser extent in traditional trade fairs. However, rarely is it found to the same extent as in the Cork Harvesting Festival.

The Catalan writer Josep Pla (1897-1981) transmitted the factor of identity in his work:

“The enormous commotion produced by the industry in the county, was, well, this: having established a regime of high wages, having given the artisans the maximum purchasing power (...). The consequence was the creation of a high class level of life throughout the industry’s hierarchy, from the manufacturer to the apprentice, the creation of a way of being, a civilization – because the art of making stoppers by hand was an authentic civilization. (...) The mechanization, the transformation of a trade into an industry, caused the death of the splendid, amusing, skilful, trade of making stoppers by hand (...). Good food, gangs of friends chatting in the beach huts, a fondness for dancing and singing, big cafés, countless associations, the first cooperatives, interest in the good schools, the first civilian cemeteries, the emergence of groups of people of reformed religion, republican and federal ideas, Francmasonry logic, aprioristic adverse criticism of all forms of authority, the tendency to feel like a king all of this and more – the indefectible coffee, drink and cigar – are inseparable. They form part of a social magma, they establish a mystery of skills and weaknesses,...”

4.2 The Authenticity of the Cork Harvesting Festival

The quality and authenticity of a traditional trade fair depends on a diversity of factors, including, support from the relevant institutions, budget and the characteristics and experience of the organizing committee. What is of advantage to The Cork Harvesting Festival is that the organizing committee comes from the Cork Museum, which is dedicated precisely to promoting the world of cork. As a result, the festival enjoys a remarkable level of quality and authenticity with the added value of the organizers’ experience in promoting cork.

Another element of the festival’s authenticity is the fact that the activities and events are totally or closely linked to cork. Visitors access the cork woodlands of Llofriú and observe professional cork harvesters demonstrating their trade.

The authenticity of thematic events often has to coexist with the need to create tourist attractions. Therefore, some of these events introduce activities which stray from the central theme. However, in the case of the cork harvesting festival the majority of activities continue to be centred on cork and cork harvesting. In order to avoid the fair from losing its context, care has been taken to insure that all activities are somehow related to cork. In fact, negotiations with the town council around the conditions for celebrating the festival have often had to contend with the tendency to evaluate the festival according to strictly economic criteria. In other words, with the perspective of turning it into a more diluted event in order to sell products, which is what happens in many of the fairs celebrated around Catalonia. Additionally, the success of these events is often determined by visitor numbers. However, in the case of the cork harvesting festival there are clear limitations in terms of the woodland’s carrying capacity. It is precisely this limited carrying capacity which allows the cork harvesting to take place throughout the day, facilitating the scheduled, spread out visits and the organisation of the other activities.

The festival is profoundly participative, unique and traditional. It is celebrated not only by the people of Llofriú and Palafrugell but by the entire county, with visitors coming from all around. According to the organisers, foreigners at the fair feel like they are participating in an authentic festival which has not just been designed for tourists. Definitively, the festival is dedicated to discovering and sharing the world of cork and enjoying the woodlands and the village of Llofriú.

5. *The Cork Harvester's Perspective*

Interviews with active and retired cork harvesters indicate that there has been a decline in cork harvesting in the area, especially during the last seven to eight years. According to the interviews, there are a diversity of reasons for this; the felling of cork oaks, the fact that the raw material, cork, is lowly paid, especially the low quality cork called "rebuig" or "waste". Other reasons for the decline in cork harvesting are the fall in the price of cork and the fact that a day's wage costs more. One factor perceived for this decline is that the next generation have not continued on the tradition, young people do not want to earn a living from cork.

According to the interviews, we are faced with a decline in cork harvesting as the activity moves away from what it once was, not because of a change in the techniques used, they are the same, but rather because it no longer forms part of life in the woods.

The cork harvesters do not perceive the festival as an important factor in the conservation or reactivation of this traditional trade. Nonetheless, they see the festival as a way of disseminating the cork harvesting trade. They implicitly point out that the festival is an occasion for disseminating this trade, making what was once practised extensively throughout the county visible to people who were completely unaware of its existence including young people from the county.

Their motives for participating include the fact that they have always liked harvesting and the fact that the festival gives them the opportunity to continue doing so even if it is only for one day as well as the opportunity to see old friends. However, not all the participating harvesters are retired, some are still active. One element detected in the interviews was the harvesters' surprise at the public expectation and interest in their trade.

6. *Conclusions. Factors for the Preservation And Promotion of the Llofriu Cork Harvesting Festival*

The Cork Harvesting Festival is conceived as a strategy to disseminate an economic activity that is in decline, little known and completely linked to territory. Faced with the need to promote this knowledge and in order to avoid its loss, the festival is an attempt to reach out to a diverse audience in a way that a museum or publication cannot.

The Cork Harvesting Festival permits the dissemination of this activity and therefore maintains its memory and helps preserve common identity. Visitors find the festival highly attractive. Experience shows that themed events, from the more modest to the more complex, provoke interest. Therefore, visitors interested in getting to know a place's culture attend these fairs in search of new free time activities. These festivals provide a context for tourists or visitors to come into contact with the different elements of a town; customs, traditions, history, cultural heritage, gastronomy and handicrafts. Culture is a generating source of new experiences (Richards, 2001) and so are traditional trade festivals. Therefore, fairs form part of the strategy to attract audiences and promote local traditions and history.

One motivating factor identified behind the organization of the Cork Festival included a component of social benefit. This event represents an opportunity for the community to acquire or expand its knowledge of the history and cultural heritage of Palafrugell. Festivals like the Cork harvesting one bring people who do not ordinarily use museums or consume cultural products in contact with activities which promote aspects related to territory. Festival visitors come into contact with stories, materials and customs from the past and present. Visitors are attracted by the possibility to attend re-enactments of traditional trades and the historical past. At events they can participate in fun activities, and they can learn from conferences, guided tours and workshops. In particular, the Cork Harvesting Festival is an event which raises awareness, promotes and motivates people to visit areas and resources such as the Cork Museum in Palafrugell and to understand the essence of territory.

Another element of social benefit detected is the active participation of local communities in the development of fairs. We identified a number of fairs in this study with networks of associations playing a leading role in the organization and development. Therefore, these events favour social cohesion in communities, activating a sense of pride in the community and direct participation in cultural, free time and festive activities localities (Gursoy et al., 2004).

One element in favour of the Cork Harvesting Festival is its low cost for the town council. A common element in the design and organization of these fairs is that they should not create any big new resources or infrastructures. The economic means and efforts required are relatively reduced in comparison to the impact they have.

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Figure 1:



Figure1: cork harvesting demonstration in the Llofriú cork woodlands (Author: Antonio Rojas-Rabáneda)