

Risks and Opportunities of Globalization in the Processes of Heritage Conservation in Historic Villages

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Since the creation of the Pueblos Mágicos program in 2001, a series of social and cultural events have directly affected the heritage conservation of 121 towns. Multidisciplinary groups from all over Mexico, create a set of diagnoses for most of these settlements, in a constant can be observed in most of them, which is the loss of cultural heritage.

Several factors have been identified that have promoted this cultural loss, as a direct reflection of the economic crisis prevailing in Mexico, highlighting transculturality, understood as the integration or substitution of local cultural patterns to the detriment of the heritage of these Pueblos Mágicos. The entry and contact with new cultures have led, in some cases, to a low valuation of cultural traditions, which translates into a transformation and even their total loss. This paper seeks to present specific cases of transformation and loss of cultural heritage due to the application of the public policy of this program and propose scenarios in which the negative effects can be reversed.

Keywords: globalization, heritage conservation, Pueblos Mágicos, public policy

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of the result of a research developed over the last six years on the Pueblos Mágicos program in Mexico. The main focus has been the role that public policies have played in heritage conservation in Mexico, from multidisciplinary approaches that have allowed a holistic view of the problems generated by the application of the aforementioned federal program.

In recent decades, Mexico's economic policy has focused on improving local economies through public policies such as the Pueblos Mágicos program, created in 2000 by the Ministry of Tourism. This has 121 registered towns as of 2018, when the program was cancelled. However, throughout 18 years of application, many towns underwent transformations due to the greater access of tourists, both national and international. In some cases, the economic flow increased, in others it did not; but in general, all of them suffered changes in the conservation of their cultural and/or natural heritage. These transformations and/or permanencies have left their mark on the way in which the inhabitants of these towns relate to their culture, generating new identity patterns. Among the main causes of these changes in the perception of identity is the process of globalization that has reached these settlements thanks to cultural tourism.

Since the creation of the Pueblos Mágicos program in 2001, a series of social and cultural events have directly affected the heritage conservation of these towns. A large number of studies have been carried out that seek to analyze from different perspectives and disciplines the consequences that these designations have generated in the Pueblos Mágicos. Multidisciplinary groups such as the one headed by Carmen Valverde and Liliana López Levi, have brought together specialists from all over Mexico to create a set of diagnoses of most of these settlements, and although each one has unique specificities, a constant can be observed in most of them, which has to do with the loss of cultural heritage and is related to globalization.

GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is a phenomenon that is happening in our world at all levels, economically, politically, culturally and socially (Rodríguez, 2016). This phenomenon has two faces in terms of heritage conservation: on one side organizations such as UNESCO give priority to social and cultural issues, while on the other side others such as the World Bank seek the economic one (Arizpe, 2006). This duality of wanting to conserve heritage in order to leave it to future generations on one side, tends to clash with the other, which is to conserve heritage if it leaves economic resources. The exploitation of tourism products has in many cases guided heritage conservation policies, corresponding to a globalizing phenomenon of cultural tourism, that is, a cultural globalization defined by García Canclini as “[...] the passage from traditional and modern cultural identities, territorially based, to other modern and postmodern ones, of a trans-territorial character” (García Canclini, 1995).

This cultural exchange from diverse territories can have, in many cases, negative tints of acculturation and gentrification or classism, as Giddens points out “it brings with it local cultural changes, it marginalizes minorities, it helps the rich more. Instead of a global village, someone might say, this looks more like cultural plunder” (Giddens, 2000). The global nature of cultural heritage can be understood as a public dimension, which makes it essential to reformulate public policies to better manage the globalization of heritage (Arizpe, 2006). For example, in 1996, UNESCO called for worldwide awareness of the impact of globalization on contemporary cultures and the risk it poses to the survival of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1996). This of course goes hand in hand with the concept of cultural identity.

Maritza Montero defines national identity as “the set of meanings and representations relatively permanent through time that allow the members of a social group, who share a common history and territory as well as other socio-cultural elements, such as language, religion, customs, and social institutions, to recognize themselves as related to each other biographically [...]” (Montero, 1984). According to José Ramón Terry Gregorio (2011) cultural identity is based on three basic factors that shape it:

1. Historical, which is the basis for the formation of historical consciousness or memory that is reinforced to the extent that each generation assumes the inherited tradition, preserves it, renews it and transmits it to the next generation, thus preserving the cultural identity of the community.
2. Linguistic which considers that, if culture is dialogue, exchange of ideas and experiences, appreciation of other values, traditions and beliefs, language is the factor that guarantees the socialization of this knowledge through a cultural exchange among the members of the community, language becomes a common denominator to establish a system of relationships based on a history, a common space and a common social group.
3. Psychological, which assumes certain permanencies in the psychic structures of the members of the community that are the result of a social learning process in which the historical/cultural environment plays an essential role.

These factors are developed at the social group level in a dialectical relationship that allows understanding cultural identity as a phenomenon or process where identity, appropriation and transformation factors are generated, leading to the consolidation of identity and “[...] the deepening of a sense of rootedness and belonging that is essential to achieve an active and conscious participation of community members in development processes” (Terry Gregorio, 2011).

The processes of construction of identities (national, social, ethnic, individual, community) are nowadays being widely discussed in order to understand the conformation of current societies. These identities are presented as part of the cultural conflicts that occur within current contexts and that demarcate the analysis of the emergence of new actors and/or new identities, according to the dramatic social changes that have occurred in the world in recent years (Zebadua, 2011).

FIGURE 1
NOCHE DE MUERTOS VIGIL IN JANITZIO, NOVEMBER 2019



FIGURE 2
NOCHE DE MUERTOS TZINTZUNTZAN, NOVEMBER 2011



For example, in Figures 1 and 2, we can observe the tradition of the Night of the Dead or (Noche de Muertos) in Tzintzuntzan, the first shows a Purépecha lady watching over her deceased, and on the right, visitors with alcoholic beverages and a Minnie Mouse headband with little lights. The same intangible traditional cultural event, two faces: tradition and the effect of globalization. This phenomenon of transculturation has been easily identified in the study of the 36 Pueblos Mágicos that make up the study sample and that are affected to a great extent by the application of the federal public policy that defines this program, so it is appropriate to define this concept.

PUBLIC POLICIES

In 1951, “The Policy Sciences” appeared, a work elaborated by Harold Lasswell through “The Policy Orientation”, a founding text. Its aim was to create a “policy orientation” that sought to encourage reflection on new trends and to help clarify the possibilities of how to govern effectively.

To this end, it defines a cyclical structure consisting of the following phases: understanding the construction of the public problem, definition of the public agenda, design, implementation and evaluation. Generally, the design of a public policy contains a set of intentions or goals, a mix of instruments or means to achieve those intentions, the designation of governmental and non-governmental agencies responsible for carrying out those intentions, and a distribution of resources for the tasks required (May, 2018).

The intrinsic role of Mexico’s governmental agencies in the work of preserving heritage is in line with public needs to maintain collective memory, especially as an element of identity and social cohesion, as mentioned by Merino, “A public policy can be defined as a deliberate intervention by the State to correct or modify a social or economic situation that has been recognized as a public problem” (Merino, 2013).

PUEBLOS MÁGICOS

This program was developed by the federal Ministry of Tourism in 2001, as a result of the Mexican government’s economic policies. The objectives of the Pueblos Mágicos Program are very broad in scope, among others, to highlight the tourism value of towns with less than 20,000 inhabitants in the interior of the country, in order to structure an innovative and original tourism offer that meets a growing demand for culture, traditions, adventure and extreme sports in natural settings, or the simple but unique daily life of rural areas.

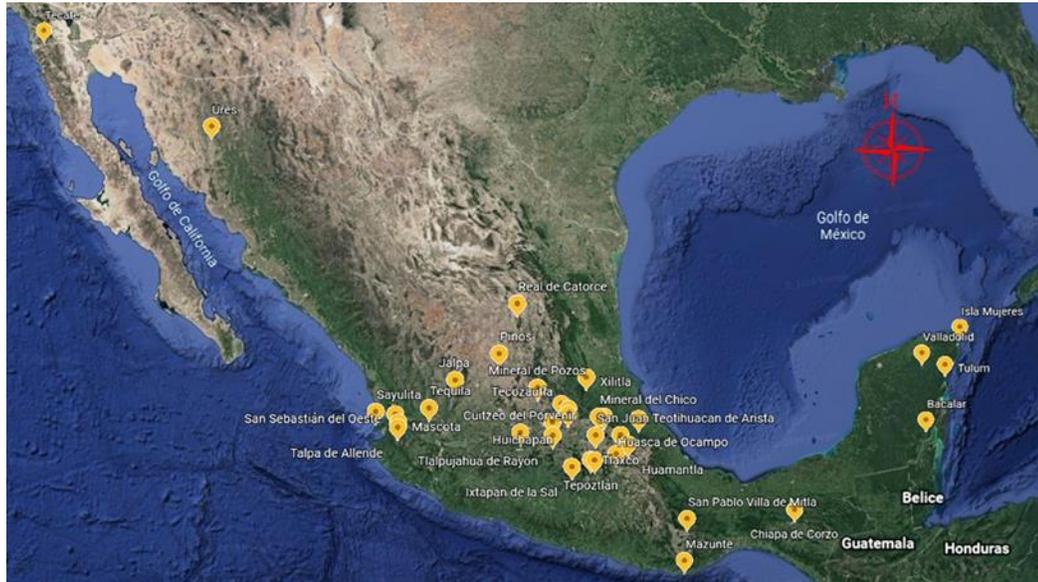
Under this objective, the towns selected to obtain this distinction are very diverse, from abandoned mining towns such as Real de Catorce in San Luis Potosí, to colonial towns such as Tequisquiapan in Querétaro, to places with natural attractions such as Bacalar in Quintana Roo.

The primary intention of the program was that its repercussions would go far beyond the idea of merely improving the urban image and try to combine efforts to turn them into triggers for local economies and even have an impact at the regional level. It was believed in that first stage that tourism and the flow of visitors alone could produce surprising results in communities of great cultural strength and urban and natural environments of great impact.

For this publication, 36 Pueblos Mágicos (see figure 3) have been selected for study, based on those settlements that are cited in volumes I and IV (the first and last of the collection) of the series produced by the multidisciplinary group led by Carmen Valverde and Liliana López Levi (researchers from UNAM and UAM Xochimilco respectively) in the project supported by CONACyT entitled “Pueblos Mágicos. An interdisciplinary vision” and of which we are part. This sample is considered representative, since it represents 30% of the total of 121 Pueblos Mágicos.

Returning to the purpose of this paper, which is the loss of intangible heritage in the Pueblos Mágicos due to the application of this public policy, a table has been made in which, in each chapter on each town of the 36 that make up the study sample, the elements of loss or transformation of their intangible heritage have been identified. This identification is based on the texts written by the participants of the project “Pueblos Mágicos. An interdisciplinary vision” in the volumes already cited.

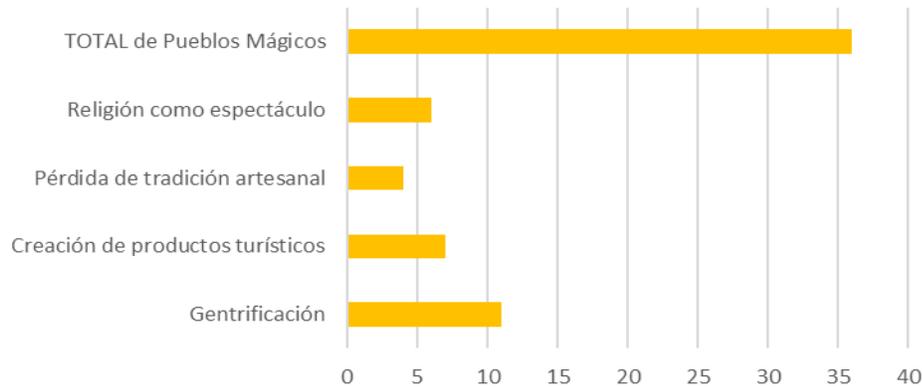
FIGURE 3
MAP SHOWING THE 36 PUEBLOS MÁGICOS THAT MAKE UP THE STUDY SAMPLE



Prepared by Luis Fernando González Barriga.

As a partial result of this research, out of the 36 towns analyzed, four elements can be highlighted that have generated the loss of intangible cultural heritage in a greater number of cases (see Figure 4):

FIGURE 4
ELEMENTS OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE LOSS



Gentrification

In a high percentage, this phenomenon was observed, in which the inhabitants of the towns are expelled from the central or attractive areas for tourism, either by means of real estate speculation or because the residents cannot bear the intensive tourism, which in many cases is for weekends. The towns tend to collapse on those dates because they are not prepared with the necessary infrastructure to attend to this ever-growing cultural tourism. It is also referred in several cases that both national and international tourism tends to segregate the less economically favored social classes, creating a classist tourism only for the “rich”

Creation of Tourism Products

At least seven towns have created tourism products far removed from their cultural tradition. For example, the “Nights of Legend” in Huasca de Ocampo or the events based on terror in Huichapan. They are developed with the purpose of attracting another type of tourists, those who mainly consume experiences, characteristic of the so-called Millennials, who prefer to travel than to buy a house, for example.

Religious Festivities Turned Into Shows

Patron saint festivities, pilgrimages with images of saints, Holy Week processions, among many others, have been transformed into shows that attract tourists interested in the “curiosity” of these religious ceremonies. They take pictures of pilgrims who pray on their knees or interrupt the silence of a Good Friday procession. In very few cases they seek to understand the meaning of these celebrations and religious traditions, and only seek to be spectators who get a good photo for Instagram and boast of being connoisseurs of the local culture.

Loss of Artisan Traditions

The invasion of copies of crafts from China has greatly affected the economy of local artisans, who, although they offer much better-quality products, cannot compete with the prices of Chinese products. This has led to the new generations not wanting to learn traditional artisan techniques, since they see no economic gain in the future and therefore show no interest in producing traditional products.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is a reality that the national governmental structure has sought new ways to boost local economies, and that cultural tourism has been seen as the panacea that can solve economic problems in many places. Sun and beach tourism has maintained its level since its promotion began at the beginning of the last century, and continues to be a source of important national and international income. Destinations such as Acapulco (despite its current security crisis), the Riviera Maya, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos or Ixtapa Zihuantanejo continue to be very attractive destinations for national and international tourism.

However, the example of other countries, such as Spain, which has been able to take advantage of all its cultural and natural resources to attract international tourism, has influenced the Mexican government’s interest in replicating these successful experiences, since Spain continues to be a world leader in cultural tourism.

Following the UNESCO system of registering cultural or natural elements as World Heritage Sites in order to obtain, in addition to the designation, economic resources that allow for the effective conservation of this heritage, the Secretary of Tourism of the Government of Mexico created the Pueblos Mágicos program. The scheme is the same: registration and obtaining economic resources.

This article shows an analysis of the effects that this federal program, as a public policy applied to 121 populations, has had on the conservation or transformation of the intangible cultural heritage of the Pueblos Mágicos. Transculturality, globalization, the creation of identities and the eagerness to increase the flow of tourists have had an impact on the changes that traditions (the main intangible cultural heritage) have undergone in the 18 years of the federal program.

We definitely believe that more studies are needed in this regard, especially in view of the elimination of this program, which leaves these towns, which depended on federal support to boost their local economies, with an uncertain future. The future of the Pueblos Mágicos is more uncertain than ever.

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