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The Mediterranean Diet from Ancel Keys to the UNESCO Cultural Heritage. A Pattern of Sustainable Development between Myth and Reality

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Abstract

This paper deals with the Mediterranean Diet as a potential tool for increasing knowledge and promoting a sustainable development especially in least developed and developing regions. The confirmation of the MD as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity, recognized by UNESCO in 2010, is producing a significant social effect in the seven nations and communities involved. In addition in 2012 the MD has been included by the FAO at the top of the list of the most sustainable diets in the planet. The double recognition of this life style is generating a new approach to this cultural heritage by the stakeholders who are progressively recognizing that it may become a new tool to develop green economy and eco-tourism. To this end the author analyses the real and mythological genealogy of the MD in order to bring out its cultural, economic and social potentiality.

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The confirmation of the Mediterranean Diet as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity recognized by UNESCO in 2010 is producing a very strong social effect in the nations involved, but also in the UNESCO Communities concerned by this political, cultural and social process, such as Cilento in Italy, Koroni/Coroni in Greece, Agros in Cyprus, Brač and Hvar in Croatia, Soria in Spain, Chefchaouen in Morocco and Tavira in Portugal. In addition in 2012 the Mediterranean Diet (MD) has also been included by the FAO inside the group of the most sustainable diets on the planet (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012; Petrillo, 2012: 225; Dernini & Berry, 2015). This double recognition has generated a new approach to this heritage that is increasingly relevant for the green economies and for the development of many territories that are far from mass tourism or large scale agriculture. In order to understand the potential of this anthropological heritage it is first necessary to clarify what the MD is and how this cultural pattern has been discovered and theorized, in other words the process that has produced the identification of this specific deposit of culture and the stakeholders involved.

First of all it is important to realize that the aim of the UNESCO recognition has not been the nutritional pyramid, with its ideal proportions between carbohydrates, proteins and fats. The aim is not even the specific products used in the Mediterranean cuisine, like tomatoes, olive oil, grains and wine, and much less pasta and pizza, even if those foods are two planetary successes of the Italian traditional cooking and two great representatives of the MD. Instead, what UNESCO officially recognized was that “The Mediterranean diet constitutes a set of skills, knowledge, practices and traditions ranging from the landscape to the table” (Petrillo, 2012: 224). As a matter of fact what UNESCO recognized was the anthropological pattern concerning the culture of food that all the communities we mentioned have created, invented and transmitted for centuries. Rhetorics, and social policies have transformed simple food as a symbolic operator, a community factor, a marker of identity. What they created is a unique way to use food as a tool in order to build a community habitat. Eating together and food traditions in this geographic area are elements of an alimentary code that transforms the table in a metaphoric field in which the *koiné* (community) is constantly built and re-built (Detienne, 1972; Detienne & Vernant, 1977; Braudel, 1985; Niola, 2015; Teti, 2015).

Following is the definition of this cultural heritage written in the UNESCO Nomination File¹ by its stakeholders (the seven communities, with the aid of their national governments):

«The Mediterranean Diet – derived from the Greek word *diáita*, way of life – is the set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions, ranging from the landscape to the table, which in the Mediterranean basin concerns the crops, harvesting, picking, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly sharing and consuming the cuisine. It is at the table that the spoken word plays a major role in describing, transmitting, enjoying and celebrating the element. Served for millennia, the Mediterranean Diet, the fruit of constant sharing nourished as much by internal synergies as by external contributions, a crucible of traditions, innovations and creativity, expresses the way of life of the basin communities, particularly those of the seven States Parties submitting this nomination and more precisely that of the communities of Agros, Brač and Hvar, Soria, Koroni/Coroni, Cilento, Chefchaouen and Tavira.

With regard to its utilitarian, symbolic, and artistic popular expressions, it is important to highlight the craftsmanship and production of ancestral domestic objects linked to the Mediterranean Diet and still present in everyday objects, such as receptacles for the transport, preservation and consumption of food, including ceramic plates and glasses, among others. As a unique lifestyle determined by the Mediterranean climate and region, the Mediterranean Diet also appears in the cultural spaces, festivals and celebrations associated with it. These spaces and events become the receptacle of gestures of mutual recognition and respect, of hospitality, neighbourliness, conviviality, intergenerational transmission and intercultural dialogue. They are opportunities to both share the present and establish the future. These communities thus rebuild their sense of identity, belonging and continuity, enabling them to recognise this element as an essential component of their common and shared intangible cultural heritage»².

¹ Nomination file no. 00884 for Inscription in 2013 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity approved in Baku, Azerbaijan in December 2013 and Nomination file no. 00394 for Inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity approved in Nairobi, Kenya in November 2010 in http://www.unisob.na.it/ateneo/c002_i.htm?vr=1.

² www.unesco.org

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