

Article

The Significance of the Mystery Play of Elche for the Local Community

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Abstract: This study explores the distinctive collective attitudes among the local community associated with the Mystery Play of Elche, which was designated a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO on 18 May 2001. A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive methodology was adopted via in-depth interviews to identify how the local community perceives and experiences this medieval liturgical drama. The results confirm that the fundamental aspects maintaining the relationship between the Mystery Play and the local population involve several factors, such as the type of transmission and how the performance is experienced by different audiences within the community, bearing in mind that it is a dynamic social phenomenon.

Keywords: intangible heritage; cultural heritage; Mystery Play of Elche; collective memory; fragility of heritage; identity

1. Introduction

The Mystery Play of Elche is a sacred liturgical drama of late medieval origin sung and performed by male voices that represents the Dormition, Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin Mary. It is held on 14 and 15 August inside the Catholic Basilica of Santa María in the city of Elche (see Figure 1), in the province of Alicante in Valencia (Spain).



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Figure 1. Location of Elx (Elche).

The stage is divided into two levels: the horizontal or ‘earthly’ level and the vertical or ‘celestial’ level. The horizontal level includes andador (see Figure 2) and cadafal (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Andador (2021). It is the corridor on an inclined plane that leads all the characters in the play, except for those who descend directly from heaven, from the main door of the temple to the cadafal.



Figure 3. Cadafal (2019). It is a square platform called a cadafal is raised in the transept of the church which allows the spectators to stand on all four sides according to medieval custom.

The celestial stage is installed in the dome of the church, which is covered by a large canvas painted with clouds and angels symbolising heaven. It has a square opening with sliding doors, ‘the Gates of Heaven’, which open and close and through which the stagehands lower and raise the aerial figures: Magrana (see Figure 4), Araceli and Coronación (see Figure 5) bearing the corresponding characters from the celestial world.

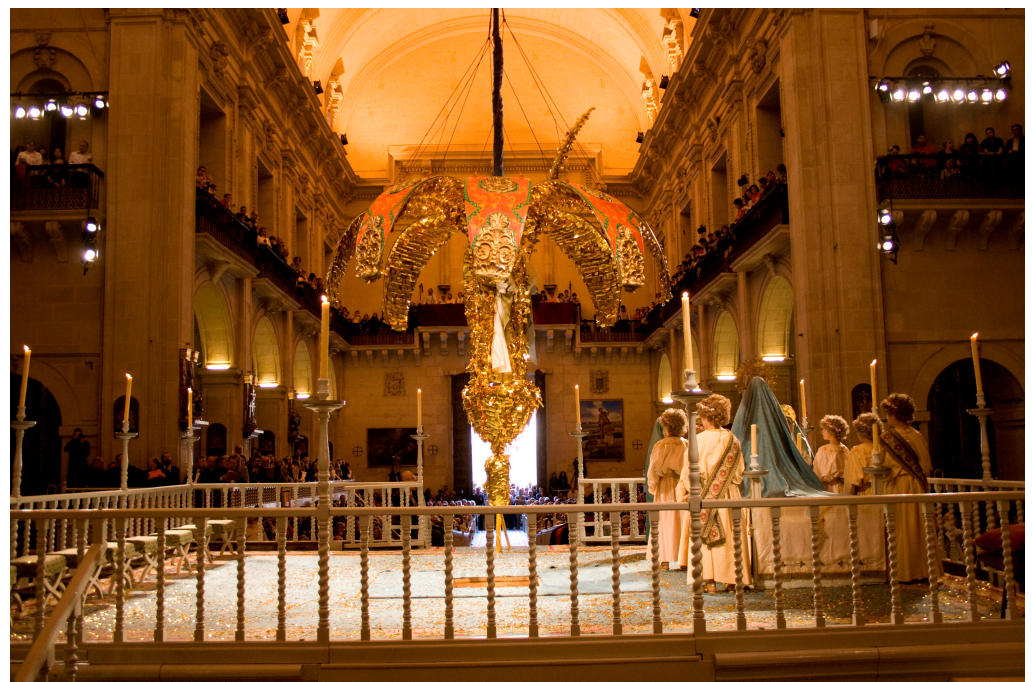


Figure 4. Magrana (2022).



Figure 5. Araceli and Coronación (2021).

The Mystery Play itself is divided into two acts, the *Vespra* (Vigil) and the *Festa* (Feast). The *Vespra* is staged on 14 August. The Virgin Mary and her procession enter the Basilica. An angel descends from Heaven to announce that her death is near. The first act then ends at the moment when St. John the Evangelist holds the golden palm frond over her Dormition.

The *Palma*, Phoenix palm (see Figure 6) frond with a characteristic yellowish colour after being hooded on the tree to prevent it from going green. After being prepared and decorated with tinsel, it is delivered to the Virgin Mary by the angel of the celestial sphere—*La Magrana*—as a symbol of announcement and protection in the face of her impending death.



Figure 6. Palma (2022).

The second act of the festival (*La Festa*) takes place on 15 August. It begins with the preparations for the interment of the Virgin and ends when the now converted Jews and the apostles sing the *Gloria Patri* as the body and soul of the Virgin ascend to heaven during the Assumption and Coronation.

The Mystery Play combines a number of tangible elements—literary, scenographic, musical and historical—which make up the performance itself, and also intangible aspects—beliefs, values, practices, social habits and so on—that reveal what this event means for the local population. The union of the tangible and the intangible reflects its cultural legacy, giving rise to what we understand as cultural heritage [1] (p. 13) [2] (p. 56) and engendering a sense of belonging to its different representations and symbolic imaginaries.

This concept has an open meaning, where notions of change and mobility play an important role in defining cultural processes and phenomena [3] (p. 703). The union of both these elements gives rise to both a common heritage and a form of social enrichment which has been enacted and maintained by the people of Elche practically without interruption for the last 500 years (except for the cholera epidemic in the 19th century, the duration of the Spanish Civil War and the COVID-19 epidemic), allowing the preservation of this cultural manifestation.

On 15 September 1931 it was designated a National Monument by the Spanish government [4] (pp. 1844–1845), changing its status from a local to a national heritage asset.

On 18 May 2001 it was designated a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO [5], thereby acquiring an international dimension.

Both these designations are used to highlight its cultural importance at a regional, national and international level and also as a symbolic means of distinction, bringing with them a duty to care for, maintain and disseminate the manifestation as a whole in order to guarantee its survival.

Generally speaking, the scientific literature on the Mystery Play has traditionally focused on its tangible elements (literary, musical, scenographic and historical). An example is the study by Chabás Llorens [6], who was a pioneer for academic analysis of the Mystery Play¹.

The article by Pedrell Sabaté [7] granted the Mystery Play an international dimension at a scientific level for the first time and pointed out the need to conserve and dignify the material elements of the manifestation in light of its poor state when he attended in 1906. He described the catharsis produced by the fusion of the locals and the play in a single entity and outlined to a certain extent its identity framework, how this act of communion is constructed and reconstructed [8] and its essence deriving from the strong sanctification of all its heritage elements, which confers it an apparently immutable character.

Although the Mystery Play has undergone various aesthetic changes over time, it has always maintained throughout its history the relationship between the play and those who sustain it: the actors and the audience.

The intangible elements have been subject to limited research, although generally speaking, the literature points to important changes in this respect. In a social sense, it is evolving from a common group experience to an act of a cultural nature, which may affect its essential nature [9].

However, nowadays, any traditional cultural expression must adapt and find its place in contemporary lifestyles if it is to ensure its survival and not remain a mere exhibition. In other words, what must be preserved in order to guarantee the continued creativity of a community is not the objects produced but rather the social processes that generate them [10] (pp. 156–157), and they must play a significant political, economic and cultural role [11,12] in the form of cultural practices that are renegotiated by practicing communities [13] (p. 18).

The aim of this study is to explore the current collective attitudes associated with this manifestation following its proclamation by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. These collective attitudes must be understood as a reconstructed discursive amalgam bounded by the persons transmitting the manifestation (the inhabitants of Elche) and a specific space (the Mystery Play), in the knowledge that the criteria qualifying it as heritage that encompasses a cultural group and the community that sustains it are its historical roots, its identity, its excellence and its uniqueness.

It is therefore necessary to determine how the Mystery Play is currently experienced by Elche society—the meaning they attach to it; its nature in relation to safeguarding processes [14] (p. 336); cultural rights; beliefs as to what is genuine and what is not; management and power strata; its practices and uses as opposed to identities; its development as a tourist attraction or rejection thereof—and all without forgetting the implicit role of issues such as globalisation [15], social homogenisation [16] and deterritorialisation [17] in this process.

2. Materials and Methods

In order to meet the research objective, a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive methodology was adopted, using in-depth interviews to identify the true nature of the Mystery Play as perceived by the local community.

This approach provides information on how this social experience creates and gives meaning, along with an understanding of the experiences of the informants, with an overriding focus on both the construction of social interactions and their meanings [18]. It is important to assess spoken and written words, gestures and both what is said and

what is omitted, along with the objects, the spaces occupied, beliefs, feelings and other observable behaviour [19] (p. 45).

In order to construct the specific profiles of the study, the criteria that define a cohesive cultural component such as its historical roots, the identity factor, its excellence and its uniqueness have been taken into account. In this sense, applying the model of Bonta and Protevi [20], the population of Elche was grouped into four large groups: (1) of local ancestry (two or more generations); (2) of local origin (first-generation only); (3) of mixed Spanish ancestry; (4) of non-local origin.

From these, a total of 46 key informants were selected and a rapport process was established beforehand in order to develop a basic sense of trust.

Their origin, socio-demographic characteristics—age, sex, education level—and socio-labour characteristics were noted, along with aspects relating to their participation or otherwise in activities related to the Mystery Play and their assessment of the performance and its identity. All of them were informed of the research objectives and participated voluntarily without receiving material incentives for their cooperation.

The participants chose the location where the interview was to take place and the interviews were conducted by members of the research team. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved through the aggregation of data and the use of identity codes (see Table 1)

Table 1. Contributor identity codes.

Sex	M: Male	18
	F: Female	28
Elche Population	C: singer population group	9
	P: Patrono ²	4
	PB: Population	33
	L: Local origin	25
	LFG: Local origin—first generation	6
	NL: Non-local origin	3
	X: mixed origin	12
Interviewee number	1, 2, . . . , 46	
Age Range:	A < 30	12
	B= 30–50	15
	C > 50	19

All the interviews took place between 2017 and 2018 within the city limits of Elche and were concluded when it was observed the interviewees had reached saturation point, between 45 and 50 min.

The analysis unit for the research was the relationship between population identity and the enactment of the Mystery Play, referring to the identity links responsible for generation of a cultural code and their possible evolution and distinguishing between community rites and cultural acts that are representative of the city.

The specific research questions were as follows:

1. Do you usually attend the Mystery Play? Please indicate if you attend the general rehearsals or the performances.
2. How did you discover the Mystery Play?
3. How long have you known about it?
4. What does the Mystery Play mean to you?
5. What does its proclamation as World Heritage mean to you?

Once all the interviews had been transcribed, the phase of data reduction, classification and study began to establish similarities and divergences. Some excerpts from the interviews have been quoted in the presentation of the results, indicating the corresponding interviewee using a code.

3. Results

The coding process resulted in three main codes referring to: Section 3.1 Cultural heritage, management and rights; Section 3.2 Cultural tourism; Section 3.3 From one collective attitude to various collective attitudes. There were no gender differences in the testimonies of the participants provided that they belonged to the same social group.

3.1. Cultural Heritage, Management and Rights

The concept of cultural heritage encompasses a legacy of property, a historical selection and creation of a social identity [21], as well as an artistic monument with a use value, a formal value and a symbolic-meaning value created by a social group and subject to a specific use [22], key elements of the Mystery Play that grant identity to the locals as a people [23] and act as a safeguard of that culture [24] (p. 148).

The Mystery Play is the product of human endeavour; it is both a learned process and a form of expression, as well as a cultural space which combines transmission-legacy, granting it a sense of continuity from previous generations and a possessive or material nature, among other features.

“The Mystery Play is very important, it is part of my traditions, my people, my family [. . .] As a local, it means a lot to me.” FPBL3C

“I know about the Mystery Play and grew to love it because of my aunt; she was the one who always took me.” FPBL2C

“I’ve known about the Mystery Play all my life, because some members of my family were part of the performance. My uncle sang, then my son, and another uncle was a stagehand [. . .] As for me, I always went with my grandmother [. . .] The open days³ are a really big deal. I get excited just telling you about it!” FPBL7C

However, cultural heritage is not created by simply passing on historical and social experiences from generation to generation, as the recipient is free to accept or reject all or part of it. Whoever receives the heritage must be willing to inherit it [25] (p. 51).

“I appeared in the Mystery Play when I was a child and my whole family has a close connection to it. [. . .] I stopped going and performing around the age of 14 or so [. . .] My friends did not like it. They were from outside Elche, well from Elche but originally from other places, and they did not go. You know what I mean⁴. Sometimes I go for enjoyment’s sake together with my mother. It’s something that is very important for Elche and it’s very beautiful.” MPBL14B

“My grandmother and my mother go to watch the Mystery Play every year on the open days, but not for the ‘closed doors’ sessions [. . .] I went with them when I was little, but when I got older I stopped going and I have not since. I like doing other things, but it’s a source of pride to have Elche recognised as a heritage site.” MPBLA

The testimonies provided present three different ways the same society has of approaching the identity factor relating to the Mystery Play: as an element experienced personally, as a community and shared element, and as an element that identifies and characterises the city of Elche.

“What drives the Mystery Play and keeps it alive is the popular will [. . .] It’s the city of Elche itself that must decide the future of its Mystery Play [. . .] No outsider should try and tell us what the Mystery Play is about.” FPL40B

This plea may be considered as a synthesis of the issues raised in this paper. The custodians of the tradition (cTs) consider that they are the ones who, through their organisation and preservation whether as actors, devoted participants or members of the local political class, have kept it alive. This is what gives them a broad sense of ownership, an awareness of its importance and a sense of responsibility to care for it.

They invoke a customary right that contrasts with the institutional and political right deriving from the UNESCO proclamation—even though this may not have been intended—[26–32] mainly after the enactment of the Law on the Mystery Play of Elche of 2005 which created the current Governing Board of the Mystery Play of Elche and integrated political structures external to this tradition in its management, such as the Alicante Provincial Council and the Government of Valencia.

It cannot be ignored that both its proclamation as a heritage site and the creation of the Law on the Mystery Play of Elche constitute an exercise of power which, together with the communication of ideas, determines actions and identities, along with its relationship with the community [33] (p. 18).

The Government of Valencia, in the exercise of its legislative powers, has created a cultural discourse of its own by assigning itself a role as a key agent to bring together and preserve Valencia's cultural essence, "the only living example of our culture." [34] (p. 9) Moreover, the law artificially unites territory, society and language⁵, fulfilling the function of enhancing the symbolic capital of the cultural, political and linguistic heritage of the Autonomous Community of Valencia as a whole and maximising the benefits in the form of social prestige [35] (p. 217).

Meanwhile, the cTs perceive it as an instrument used by third parties to misappropriate the Mystery Play, weakening its specific identity by failing to recognise their sense of ownership. They believe that the law cannot define the objectives of the Mystery Play, nor legitimise the creation of heritage, nor authenticate, classify or define it, nor indicate who its custodian is, even though historically this role has in fact been assigned to various management bodies which have each had their own peculiarities:

- The Local Council together with the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Assumption, 1530.
- Local Council, 1609.
- Board for the Protection of the Mystery Play of Elche of 1924, including representatives of the Local Council and prominent local residents.
- Committee for the restoration of the Festival of August and the Church of Santa María of 1939.
- National Board for the Restoration of the Mystery Play and its Temples of 1940, which had two committees: a state committee that approved the general guidelines and a local committee in charge of day-to-day activities.
- National Board of the Mystery Play of Elche and Local Management Board of 1948, departments of the Directorate-General for Fine Arts of the Spanish Ministry of Education.
- Board of Trustees of the Mystery Play of Elche of 2005, made up of two governing bodies, the Patronato Rector or Governing Board and the Junta Rectora or Governing Council, whose members are elected in equal parts by the Elche City Council, the Government of Valencia and the Bishopric of Orihuela-Alicante.

The current law reorganised the links between the sense of belonging of the social group and the creation of a new collective memory by establishing the identity of the Mystery Play as a cultural reference, an issue linked with debates regarding the nature [36] and meaning [27] of intangible heritage and its protection [37] (p. 139) and safeguarding [14] (p. 336) processes.

Mention should also be made of social secularisation and the increasing dissemination of monuments and art works, which are used both from a nationalistic cultural perspective by authorities [11,12] and also from an economic perspective. For example, the regional government uses it as a means of distinction from the rest of Spain through the language issue, and the city council uses it to drive economic and local development as an emblem of its political and tourism publicity and a symbol of local collective identity [38].

3.2. Cultural Tourism

Those who experience the Mystery Play as an act of faith view this political-economic purpose as a devaluation that undermines its true nature: “The tourism theme took centre stage. Otherwise, what was the point of having all those senior officials there?” MCL13B.

The interviewee is referring to the concert that took place in Rome on 14 January 2009 during a visit to the Vatican City coinciding with the International Congress of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimages and the signing of the Network of Cultural Routes in 2009 by the government officials [39] who accompanied the delegation, the President of the Government of Valencia, and the Mayor of Elche. “Peddling” of this nature re-adapted to suit each situation has been carried out on other occasions, for example at various national and international tourism fairs.

The cTs noted how their cultural practices are absorbed by the political and institutional sector. They claim that the Mystery Play is being instrumentalised and that this only serves to legitimise prestige, power or a certain identity, cheapening the subjective, intellectual, emotional and spiritual experience [40] of those who have always been involved.

They reject the external political strategy in pursuit of economic-political gains, which poses a dichotomous segmentation characterised by a conflict between the cTs and political-commercial interests [41–44]. They accept its commodification when it is enjoyed by external audiences in the city of Elche during the so-called “rehearsals” held behind closed doors, as they have internalised the idea that “it has been like this all their lives” MPBL19C. Historically, this is actually not the case, but in their lifetime it represents a reality situated between what is perceived and what is experienced.

This position is consistent with other studies of intangible heritage [45], which conclude that practices intertwining tradition and commercialisation are acceptable [46]. This cultural tourism [47] seeks the consumption of tangible elements—museums or heritage—and/or intangible elements, yet it does not establish a symbolic relationship with the artists-performers in the way that the cTs do [48].

“How lovely! ... the children sing beautifully ... the costumes and the performance are amazing ... I do not know if I would see it again, but I would recommend that people see it some time.” FPBNL17B

As part of this commercialisation process, the Elche City Council created the Museum of the Mystery Play of Elche, which includes a section with explanatory texts, photographs, models and different pieces that form or used to form part of the performance, together with a large audiovisual montage to market the Mystery Play. However, it is noteworthy that few of the interviewees say they are familiar with it and the ones that do only offer a terse “it’s okay”, reflecting that these types of museums are an example of instrumentalisation of heritage by public authorities as a means of legitimising their prestige [49].

In addition to the Mystery Play, Elche has other tourist attractions such as the Palmeral [50], proclaimed a World Heritage Site in 2000, and the Centre for Traditional Culture—School Museum of Puçol, inscribed by UNESCO in the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices for Intangible Heritage in 2009. The major difference between these three sites when it comes to using them as tourist attractions lies in the fact that the Mystery Play can only be enjoyed on specific days of the year, while the Palmeral and the School Museum of Puçol are constantly available.

3.3. From One Collective Attitude to Various Collective Attitudes

As a form of intangible heritage, the Mystery Play has always been dynamic in nature. Aesthetically, for example, the performances of the 17th century were not the same as those of the 18th century and so on. However, its enactment always involved a cathartic experience linking the Mystery Play with the local population [8,50–52].

The Mystery Play has evolved aesthetically over the centuries and these changes can be seen in all aspects of the theatrical performance, a reflection of the evolution and

acceptance by local Elche society of opposing visions ranging between tradition and culture understood as heritage.

A good example is the following dialogue between a Patron, a first-generation local representative of the City Council and member of the Governing Board, and a singer.

“It was so beautiful! We should think about incorporating some of these *consuetas*⁶ in the performance of the Mystery Play.” FPLOG7

“Look, that *consueta* is fine to sing in a concert, but for the Mystery Play we sing our one.” MCL9B

The first transformation of this apparently unique concept of a collective attitude into different collective attitudes took place from the 1960s onwards. There was considerable national immigration following the boom of the footwear industry in Elche, with consequent social diversification and a major restructuring of the local economy [52,53], resulting in deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation and social hybridisation.

“For me the Mystery Play is a cultural event. I’ve never seen it, but I would go to see it before I would go to see another event somewhere else.” FPBLF6B

“In August the whole family used to go to the village. I’ve never been to the Mystery Play and neither have my children, even though they are from here, but it’s important for Elche.” MPBLF9B

“It means nothing, in the sense that for me it’s not important, but I know it’s something that identifies my city, that is all; in what way I do not really know.” MPBX3A

“Back in the day, we used to have our traditional festive occasions. Then, on those same days and in the same places festivities from outside began to take their place, and now our festive occasions have been relegated to a secondary role mixed in with the other ones or are no longer celebrated.” FPBL4C

Mention should also be made of the current impact of globalisation [15] and homogenisation [15–17,53–59], meaning that the local society in Elche and the Mystery Play are no longer unified and it is perceived as evolving towards something more of a cultural event.

It is likely that this division is a consequence of the institutionalisation and hierarchisation of values imposed on a common heritage element that is not a tangible, consumable, appropriable or interchangeable resource, an argument that may be applied to the Mystery Play as a whole. Even the singers with their strong traditional roots infer that there is a transformation from a traditional religious to a more cultural perspective:

“Now there are people who sing in the Mystery Play because they like to sing, but not for the love of the Mystery Play or of the Virgin.” MCL9C

“Before (at the fraternity meal) only the chapel choir attended: there were no women, no journalists, no guests, nothing [. . .]. People in those days truly lived for the Mystery Play. When the meal was over, we smoked and sang habaneras. Now, people have lost enthusiasm and there are singers who no longer want to come. Now we no longer speak in Valencian.” MCL14C

These testimonies reflect a transition from a traditional rite of group cohesion to a more neutral, cultural one where the subjective identities of the participants are blurred. On the other hand, the distinctive feature of oral communication in Valencian has also disappeared, despite the terms of Article 52 of the Law on the Mystery Play regarding safeguarding and promotion of the Valencian language, which establishes that the Government of Valencia and the Elche City Council are responsible for maintaining the Valencian language precisely as it is used in the *consueta* due to its purity [sic]. The law also refers to the obligation to be aware of the historical and cultural importance of the language, especially for members of the chapel choir.

The dwindling use of the Valencian language is due to the fact that a large number of members of the Choir for the Mystery Play are not native speakers of Valencian, a

situation which also applies to the local population. This decline is a consequence of the aforementioned massive influx of Spanish speakers following the industrialisation of the footwear industry and the official policy of the political establishment during this period of promoting Spanish as the only language.

Currently, the use of Valencian has become politically attractive, and studies confirm its role in the construction of both individual and collective identities. However, given that speech is a cultural practice and the majority of the population is Spanish-speaking, its use is decreasing among the younger age groups and therefore the possible relationship between the Mystery Play and the language used does not strengthen the social links and cultural reference points of the local community.

4. Discussion

Our results show that the Misteri, as it is immaterial heritage, belongs to a tradition that the population from Elche is permanently reconstructing, evolving from an agricultural society to an industrial society, currently more centered in the service sector.

This restructuration has a bearing in contemplating the Misteri as a live organism in both the material and the immaterial. In each representation, the society that created it creates it and recreates it once and again. By doing so, the Misteri relives the appropriation or its own meaning, that involves redoing the ties and affections with tradition. That is, we witness a process of constant production, transmission and reproduction [60], that tie together the different generations of the natives of Elche.

The living experience of the different groups that have been studied must be understood as a synonym of the selection of the social context in which it is generated. It is the memory of that present which configures the past, and not the other way around.

We thus confirm that immaterial heritage such as the Misteri is not inherited genetically but transmitted socially, and this derives from a process of cultural selection which implies that the meanings are modified, but their essence is not. This is their value, considering that immaterial heritage in general lives in the variable, and it is fruitless to persecute the version that we could call authentic [61].

As a factor of cultural identity, the Mystery Play is determined by the type of transmission involved and it has developed in the context of a given culture. It is part of a human group linked to a specific territory, and it has been maintained through social practices and values as a living cultural element throughout its history.

Of the four groups (1) locals with local ancestry; (2) first-generation local origin; (3) mixed Spanish ancestry, i.e., one parent from Elche; and (4) non-local origin, that is, persons not from Elche; each of them have their own collective historical experiences relating to their respective culture or tradition and shape their social and cultural identity based on their rites [62] (p. 928).

The analysis shows that family is generally the main facilitating factor for the transmission of the tradition, the community culture and the meanings, which involves different attitudes referring to personal perception and value, its importance for the city and awareness of specific meanings.

It may be affirmed that changes are taking place in the cultural-festive-identity elements and that the presence of a sense of tradition or lack of it depends on the origin of the informants, their age, faith or religious beliefs, the use of the Valencian language or the type of individual or family customs.

Additionally, the community-festive relationship between the Play itself and the local population is undergoing transformations associated with the characteristics of an urban and industrial city, together with the progressive secularisation of the population and an increasingly globalised identity, all of which means that the Mystery Play is currently only experienced and perceived as a community rite by a small segment of the local population.

In general, they are of the opinion that the Mystery Play is “a big deal”, but the consensus wanes when it comes to its cataloguing and delimitation and even when it comes to obtaining

a closer understanding of it. This reinforces the idea that the concept of heritage is polysemic and undergoes a continuous process of deconstruction and construction [63] (p. 455).

The testimonies of Group 1 mostly show that the Mystery Play grants a sense of identity both to the individual and to the whole group, internalising practices and customs through oral tradition, the occupation of a historically constructed social space and participation in its rituals.

For them, the tradition is understood as a certain way of experiencing and perceiving the Mystery Play. They feel an affinity with it and value it as a representative and unique element, approaching it from the perspective of a family practice where faith, understood as a subjective creation of meaning, is an integral and distinctive aspect of this modern-day theatrical representation which is closely linked with characteristics of medieval theatre [8].

The under-50s from diverse backgrounds in groups 2, 3 and 4 focus on the idea of its importance from a cultural perspective. They indicate that its designation as cultural heritage contributed to their awareness of its importance and showed interest in or appreciation of its meaning.

Those who see it as an external although important element for the city are mainly the under-30s in Group 1, those aged 30–50 in Group 2 and the over-50s in Groups 3 and 4.

After completing the study, it was observed that in reality all the opinions of the participants could be grouped into two basic population groups, regardless of whether they were (1) locals with local ancestry; (2) first-generation local origin; (3) mixed Spanish ancestry, i.e., one parent from Elche or (4) non-local origin, that is, persons not from Elche: namely, those who attend the Mystery Play every year and experience it as a rite (cTs) and those who attend occasionally because it has become popular following the proclamation. It can be seen that the former (cTs) are generally of Elche descent extending back several generations.

These are mostly older people who have experienced cultural transmission through their families, exhibiting characteristics of popular religiosity in aspects such as the rite of the palm frond and the oripell (see Figure 7) and experiencing these concepts at a personal level. The latter, meanwhile, are either from out of the city, cultural tourists or locals who following its proclamation have assumed it as an identifying factor that forms part of their local identity.



Figure 7. Oripell (2021). Pieces of tinsel of different sizes are used during the play on both the aerial figures and the palm frond. Tinsel is also used to evoke the ‘divine rain’ that drops from the angels of the different aerial devices before their intervention and later in large quantities through the opening in the canvas of the aerial stage that represents heaven and around all its edges.

The generational substitution of the cTs—in terms of inheritance, meaning and willingness to inherit—is clearly problematic. Their world is the material remains of an as-yet palpable past [64] (pp. 12–14), raising the dilemma of whether it is possible to argue that the Mystery Play is a traditional community celebration of the city of Elche or whether it is evolving towards a more cultural identity.

In this context, the tradition must be understood as a dynamic element in a state of constant renewal. It is not set in stone [65] (p. 7) and the cTs themselves are an example of this; the Mystery Play has continuously evolved over the years, otherwise it would not have survived as a beacon of cultural diversity for 500 years.

If we were to consider that which is unchanging as intangible heritage, we would have to conclude that the only stable cultures are those which are dead [66] (p. 24). Change in terms of cultural adaptation is inherent to any society. New forms of cultural expression are continually being created [62] (p. 926). These end up becoming identity references for their protagonists, who receive them, use them, transform them, interpret them and pass them on according to their own cultural dynamics. Accordingly, tradition is not unalterable, but rather ever-changing and adaptive [67] (p. 13).

As for its institutionalisation through management committees, this is nothing new. However, following the enactment of the Law of 2005, it could be argued that this process of cultural institutionalisation has become very apparent and is perceived by the cTs as a separation between cultural identity and cultural practices. In other words, in the opinion of the cTs, what was hidden from view has now become visible for the purposes of intervention [68].

In reality, the Mystery Play has always been institutionalised and financed with public funds ever since 1530 by the Local Council. It is also true that in 1939 there was an intervention by the state which could be associated with a neoliberal cultural policy.

Currently, the Elche City Council is the main sponsor of the Mystery Play, together with the Government of Valencia, the National Institute of Performing Arts and Music (an autonomous body of the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport) and the Alicante Provincial Council, in addition to private contributions.

The amounts donated by public bodies depend on their budget allocations, which fluctuate from one year to the next. This monetary intervention is carried out through the governing board, which, although independent, has members appointed by the corresponding authorities [69] (p. 14).

With regard to the issue of touristification, there are two opposing arguments: Firstly, there are those who pose a certain degree of rejection stemming from the perceived misappropriation and exploitation by politicians [70] (p. 280) and those who embrace the idea.

‘Elche, the City with two World Heritage Sites’ is the slogan of the marketing campaign by the Elche City Council following the UNESCO proclamation [71] (p. 16). The Government of Valencia and the City Council are currently intervening in this cultural practice either with the intention of democratising culture or as a means of reactivating the local economy, proposing a transition from culture as a right to culture as a resource.

The cultural tourists who attend the performance do not experience the Mystery Play as a fusion of the tangible and the intangible. In general, it does not evoke strong emotions, nor do they internalise it as living heritage because they are emotionally disconnected [72] (p. 185). This statement may be qualified by the fact that on the days of the ‘closed door’ rehearsals, the cTs of Elche also attend, thereby transmitting to third parties some of this cathartic-emotional evocation, although it dissipates after the performance ends.

The Mystery Play Museum plays an instrumental role, for it is undeniably of very good quality with meritorious multimedia adaptation [73], yet it does not manage to communicate the abstract knowledge associated with this intangible element, nor does it establish a dynamic connection as a receptacle of past experiences.

The promoters of these types of facilities (the vast majority of whom are political representatives of public authorities) may seek to achieve a sensorial and emotional connection, although what they actually achieve is an instrumental and optimistic vision linked to economic gain

which, generally speaking, does not correspond to reality [69] (p. 33) [74] (p. 94). Admittedly, in this particular case it is functioning effectively as an attractive means of providing access to culture for local children and teenagers who visit it as part of their school activities. Such experiences, based on the evidence of similar cases in other parts of the world [75–77], can help to achieve greater diffusion of this intangible heritage of humanity.

5. Conclusions

The Mystery Play must be understood as a discursive form in which tangible and intangible elements are fused in a single process, the result of which is a production charged with meaning. Its identity value is associated with a multiple and changing population which varies and adapts to the changing times, in which new values and meanings emerge and coexist with the previous ones.

Without entering into the debate as to whether culture can be legislated or the consequences of institutionalising culture, the legislation has proven effective to guarantee the safeguarding of the Mystery Play as an integral feature of the city of Elche and a communal rite, protecting against situations such as the possibility of it ending up as a mere tourist attraction or the introduction of certain ideological perspectives that are not in keeping with the essence of the Mystery Play.

Nonetheless, this identity discourse need not be at odds with the value that may be assigned to it as a product for consumption, as in the case of touristification processes, particularly if it is heritage tourism [78–81]. However, due to the unique characteristics of the Mystery Play, priority should be given to symbolic acts that assert its identity rather than changes that could lead to over-exploitation or debasing of this heritage.

In light of the above, maintenance of the community-population-representation relationship requires responsible management by the Board of Trustees with reference to the group's social memory, given that the characteristics of this heritage element are associated with the actions and uses made of it by the society of Elche. Accordingly, the Board of Trustees must seek to ensure preservation of this festive-community dimension which gives meaning to the Mystery Play as a whole, adopting an incomplete perspective of heritage transfer subject to constant reformulation which must connect the past, present and future of the Mystery Play.

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Notes

¹ For further information please consult the bibliography of the official website for the Mystery Play, <https://www.misteridelx.com/en/biblioteca/> accessed on 15 July 2021.

² Patrono (Patron): This is the name given to members of the Mystery Play Board in recognition of the fact they hold a certain position in the social hierarchy. Before the Law on the Mystery Play of Elche of 2005, the position of patron was for life. Now the term of office is four years.

- 3 The need to improve the interpretative quality of the Mystery Play highlighted by Pedrell (see above) led to the establishment in 1924 of a rehearsal on 13 August behind closed doors as opposed to the performances open to the public on 14 and 15 August. In the mid-1950s rehearsals also began to be held on 12 August, and in the 1970s on 11 August as well, which could be attended by purchasing a ticket. Some of the songs of the Virgin and the one corresponding to the Araceli of the Vespra are not performed during these rehearsals. After Pope Pius XII declared the Assumption of the Virgin Mary official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church on 1 November 1950, additional performances of the Mystery Play were established every five years from 1954 onwards. Since 1972 it has been established that every year ending in even numbers will hold extra performances of the Mystery Play on 29 and 30 October, with tickets being sold to attend behind closed doors, while on 1 November admission is free for the sessions open to the public.
- 4 The interviewee refers to the fact that even though his friends were born in Elche, his parents were not and they had no cultural or emotional connection with the Mystery Play.
- 5 The Mystery Play is sung in Valencian, but in a form dating from the 17th century, with the exception of some of the motets of the liturgy which are sung in Latin.
- 6 *Consueta*: the various manuscripts used by the chapel masters that contain the dialogue and score of the Mystery Play, as well as the stage directions. There is no single *consueta* and in this case it refers to the 1722 copy which is not used in the current performance, but from which a concert version was made.

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