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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

It is quite significant that the MD received the UNESCO imprimatur the first in the history - together with the Repas gastronomiques des Français – because food was not considered until then a cultural heritage by this prestigious institution. But in recent years something has changed in public and institutional opinion. The MD is the litmus test of the birth of a new symbolic common sense that makes food the signal of a planetary transformation of attitudes, feelings and collective responsibility towards nature and living species. Into this new cultural landscape is inserted the MD, which is the resultant of different local food cultures and at the same time a global intellectual product. In fact the UNESCO Mediterranean Diet is not just the result of an acknowledgment of the existence of something but also the outcome of a crossing of heteroclitic glances, that since the fifties, has progressively identified, created and idealized a real form of life. *Diaïta*.

Not surprisingly, for the Ancient Greeks the MD meant rule of life, life style, but also home, habitat and research (Moro, 2014: 16). And the genuine simplicity of olive oil, bread and wine, sacred elements of the Mediterranean civilization, becomes the symbol of a modern frugal abundance. That is the new recipe theorized by many intellectuals who looking back to the past may be a return to the future (Latouche, 2000; 2004). And nutrition is one of the key elements in this new model of society, simply because food has always been the real gasoline of human history, the material energy of bodies, brains, societies, ideas and emotions. War and peace depend on food more than on anything else. One common error is the belief that poverty and necessity have mostly determined what people eat and cook, and also that old traditions were all born by poverty. This is just partially true. All cultures choose what to eat, why and when, through a collective and quite sophisticated cultural process, in which necessity is just one possible explanation (Sahlins, 1972; Douglas, 1966).

This general anthropological rule also works for the MD, which today I would define a cultural pattern (Benedict, 1934), to give the sense of a unity of institutions, ideas and traditions that, connected one another, create what we usually call a culture. The MD in the larger sense of a life style is the effect of the interaction of several institutions, ideas, and traditions, which co-operated for centuries in a specific geographical area. It is a certain way of farming, nourishing, feasting, praying: producing goods and worshipping gods.

Professor Jeremiah Stamler, emeritus of the University of the Northwestern University of Chicago, one of the international stars of cardiology and promoter of the MD as a lifestyle capable to prevent the cardio vascular diseases, is a special witness and stakeholder of this political, medical, and cultural process. It is relevant to know also that he has been a colleague of Ancel Keys, the discoverer of the MD and inventor of its name (Moro, 2014: 37-41). With Keys, Stamler spent part of each year living in the small village of Pioppi/Pollica in Cilento, becoming in more than 40 years of attending there, a citizen. When Stamler wrote a letter to the UNESCO Commission in favor of the candidature of the MD he also pointed out the cultural pattern behind it, and he defined it as a social practice rather than a clinical nutritional system:

«The Mediterranean Diet is for us a shared heritage of value for our well-being, handed down from one generation to the next, uniting social classes, and bringing families and friends together to share common moments of delectable and healthful pleasure (...).

I am, for these reasons, convinced that the registration of the Mediterranean Diet in the prestigious UNESCO List would represent for our community a further guarantee of the safeguard of this tradition and, at the same time, it can strengthen the UNESCO List that therefore can be perceived by many people as the ideal place acknowledging traditions that unite and enhance countries, cultures, religions, and community histories that are seemingly different (Signed: Professor Jeremiah Stamler M.D. President of the Association for the Mediterranean Diet – Pioppi/Pollica Cilento)»³.

During my research on the MD spanning one decade, I noticed that the MD is also an invention, in the Latin sense of the word *invenire*, which means to discover, to recognize, to find. It is the result of a foreign look that has recognized a coherent and healthy system of living and feeding, which could not be seen by the natives, who as a matter of fact, did not have a specific name for it. Again, the name and concept of the MD was invented by Americans Ancel Keys, a physiologist at the University of Minnesota (and inventor of the United States Army's K-Ration) and Margaret Haney, his wife and a biologist of the Mayo Foundation (Moro, 2014; Dixon, 2015).

³ This Letter by Jeremiah Stamler is part of the dossier that the Italian Ministry of Agriculture has attached to the dossier of candidature. Another interesting case of a process of identification, definition and collective construction of a Cultural Heritage fitting into the UNESCO interpretative grid is the Val di Noto in Sicily, studied by Berardino Palumbo (Palumbo, 2011).

In 1951 Ancel Keys was invited to the first FAO Congress after the end of World War II, and during his lecture he explained that in USA 50% of males from the age of 39 to 59 were condemned to die having a heart attack, and nobody could explain why. None of his colleagues made a comment, except for a doctor of the University Hospital of Naples. His name was Gino Bergami. As Ancel Keys writes on his private memories *Adventures of a Medical Scientist*, that I analyzed during my research and put in evidence in my book (Moro, 2014) Professor Bergami told him that the cardiovascular diseases were not present in his hospital. He also did not know why, but maybe it would have been useful to investigate in that direction. Keys went back to England, where he was spending a sabbatical year in Oxford University and he kept thinking about what Professor Bergami had told him. He sent a telegram to Professor Bergami saying that he had been impressed by his observation. Professor Bergami answered with another telegram saying: “Why don’t you come to Naples and check yourself?”. Keys answered with this telegraphic sentence: “We are arriving”. The plural is important; his wife was going to join him. He bought a car, a Hillman Saloon, and in 4 days they reached the city of the Vesuvius. I have interviewed professor Mario Mancini, an 80 year old professor, who at that time was just 20 and brought the Keys to the hospital and translated for them all the medical records. It was true. No heart attacks for the people of that region (Keys, 1999: 43-44, 1995: 1322S; Moro, 2014: 25-26).

In one month Margaret Haney collected many blood samples of the workers of a famous Neapolitan steelworks factory and she analyzed them. Comparing them with the samples of the men in Minnesota, they noticed that the cholesterol rates were greatly different. At that point they had a flash of inspiration. Probably cholesterol was the causation of heart attacks. But that was not all. They started observing what workers ate, and the first evidence was that they eat meat once a week, on Sunday evening. It was the meat of a traditional sauce for pasta, called ragout, that was, and still is, mandatory on Sunday lunch when the families gather around the table (Moro, 2014: 25-26).

The Keys started to take note of what common people ate: lots of vegetables, legumes, broccoli, all kinds of fruits, unrefined cereals, dairy products, but very little fish and meat. Neapolitans loved soups, *minestre and minestrone*, in Italian. Not the same thing as what French people usually call soups, since they were not made with cream or butter, but with vegetables, olive oil, and a bit of pasta. The Keys found bean soup, pumpkin soup, green peas soup, zucchini soup. Those who could afford pasta, would add few spoons of the so called short pasta, not long spaghetti, but small size pasta. If pasta was not available, they used rice, hard bread or the so called *biscotto* or *fresella* – a whole meal bread, cooked twice in order to make it very dry, so it may be conserved for long periods.

Ancel and Margaret arrived soon at the conclusion that probably food was the key factor. Thus Keys’ intuition gave the birth to a major international research project called Seven Countries Study (Keys, 1994; Kromouth et al., 1993). That study began with a pilot study in the small village of Nicotera, in the southern Italian region of Calabria, where the methodology was first tested on the local male population. The results were consistent with the Neapolitan ones, and today this experiment is the reason of the local vindication of a primacy in the genealogy of the MD. If the Calabria’s claim of an exclusive primogeniture from an historical point of view would not be correct, on the other hand this initial study could be the reason for a legitimate ambition to use the MD UNESCO as an instrument for a new perspective of development of the territory (Piotrowski, Arezki & Cherif, 2009; Prud’homme, 2013; Mazanec et al., 2007). In a recent article Jeremiah Stamler suggested that in order to improve the public health the MD, in the version studied in Nicotera and in other Mediterranean places in the 1950s, indeed in Naples, with few corrections, should be adopted by everybody (Stamler, 2013). Stamler defined this nutritional pattern the MD for the 21st century. And during an interview with me on 30th January 2014 in Pioppi, he told me:

«If you look at the papers that described the classical Mediterranean Diet, you will find that it was high in salt, for many men it was high in wine, it was high in oils - which are very caloric - it was perhaps not as high in protein as one might like, protein from low fat and fat free dairy products, protein from fish, protein from vegetable products, *fagioli, pasta e fagioli* etc. I did not myself do research on the Mediterranean Diet, Keys did a lot of research and I followed closely what Keys was doing, I kept informed and learned from him. Later, when I commented, I recommended what I call The Modern Mediterranean Diet. Eating style, modified from the “classical” diet people followed in places like Nicotera (Calabria), studied forty or fifty years ago. That means: not just low saturated fat and low cholesterol intakes, to avoid high blood cholesterol, also low salt, not too much alcohol to avoid high blood pressure, not too much oil, control calories, prevent obesity»⁴.

⁴ <http://www.unisob.na.it/ateneo/galleria.asp?vr=1&idev=44>

Many other investigations have been done by the Keys' research group, and by many other researchers that brought the OMS to disseminate the Food Guide Pyramid, originally created by the Old Ways Association (Moro, 2014: 28-36; Willett, Sacks, Trichopoulou, Trichopoulos et al., 1995). All those researches, one for all those conducted in Greece and in Europe by Antonia Trichopoulou (2012, 2009, 2007; Nestle, 1995), have completely confirmed the initial hypothesis formulated in Naples in 1951 (Mancini & Stamler, 2004). Poor Neapolitan workers eat healthier than rich American managers, a paradox that few people were ready to accept in a world still very deeply influenced by the indigence and the malnutrition of World War II.

In 1959 Ancel and Margaret Keys published *Eat Well and Stay Well*, which immediately became a best seller in USA. The success of this book was so great that in 1961 Ancel Keys' gentle and genius face was on the cover of the Time Magazine (Moro, 2014: 61-65). Few years later the Keys published another book, *The Benevolent Bean* (1967), in which this emblematic protein for poor people was presented as a panacea for poor health; a cure for everything; healthy, light, and nourishing. This diet was also presented as ecologically correct, because it has no bad impact on the environment (Moro, 2014: 37-38, 48-49). Considering all that, the Keys demonstrated that they had an extremely advanced position concerning the strict relationship that goes from men to earth, from the health of people to the healthiness of the globe. And now the FAO⁵ tells us that they were absolutely right (Moro, 2014: 17; Burlingame & Dernini, 2012).

In 1963, when Ancel Keys and Margaret Haney, went into retirement, they decided to move to Italy and discovered that many things had changed, and not necessarily for the better. The Neapolitans, having become richer, had changed their habits. Essentially, they had started eating too much. Too many sweets. And in many cases they had added to the traditional food the industrial packaged foods. These two elements together caused several alimentary diseases, including diabetes, obesity, and high cholesterol levels in the blood, a phenomenon quite common also in the rest of the countries in the northern coast of the Mediterranean sea (Alexandratos, 2006). But fortunately, or unfortunately, in Cilento the old alimentary model was still alive, essentially because there had been no economic growth and the process of industrialization did not arrive over there. The Keys had the sensation that a paradise was still there and could be discovered. So, first of all, they bought a little hill and they built a house, and all around them some international scientists did the same, creating a sort of community, a Bloomsbury of Cilento, that was named Minnelea, from Minneapolis and Elea, a blending of the names of the north American city where they worked and the ancient city where Parmenides and Zenone gave birth to the western philosophy with the Eleatic school (Moro, 2014: 44, 118).

Ancel and Margaret lived in Minnelea for 35 years, until 2004, and during all that time they wanted to learn from common people how to cook in a healthy way. Their very special teacher was Delia, the cook⁶. They made ethnographic research on food, recording interviews with housewives, fishermen and peasants. And all this documentation inspired their third book, titled *How to Eat Well and Stay Well. The Mediterranean Way*, published in USA in 1975. For the first time the greater public read the expression Mediterranean Diet, invented by them with the proposal of contrasting the fashion of weight loss diets (Moro, 2014: 44, 118). The scientific Journals had to wait until 1985 with an article written by Mario Mancini and Anna Ferro Luzzi (Ferro Luzzi & Mancini, 1985).

The manor of the Keys, surrounded by fruit trees, supplied by two organic orchards and one glasshouse, was a very chic family farm, where the agriculture of proximity, the organic vegetables, food localism, and many other food mantra were practiced fifty years in advance of the Slow Food movement (Niola, 2015). What the Keys experienced there was essentially an idea of time, linked to the four seasons, which follow each other, a cycle that influences also food traditions and gastronomic rites such as Christmas eve supper, Easter lunch, name day feast,

⁵ F.A.O. has defined the Mediterranean Diet a model of sustainability for the planet. For these reasons:

1. Great diversity that ensures food nutritional quality of diet and biodiversity
2. Variety of food practices and food preparation techniques
3. Main foodstuffs demonstrated as beneficial to health: olive oil, fish, fruits and vegetable, pulses, fermented milk, spices...
4. Strong commitment to culture and traditions
5. Respect for human nature and seasonality
6. diversity of landscapes that contribute to the welfare
7. less demanding food in primary energy and having in priori less environmental impact, due to low consumption of animal products

⁶ <http://www.unisob.na.it/ateneo/galleria.asp?vr=1&idev=56>

wedding lunch, birthdays, new year's eve dinner, and so on, each time with the same menu, inherited from the family or from the community.

Southern Italians love to keep up with their traditions, while many other peoples tend to break with traditions more easily. This happens because most people in the south still cook every day and each Sunday they spend from three to five hours eating traditional dishes at their parents' home, even if married. If the Anglo-Saxon and Puritan cultures do not assign a strong symbolic or social sense to food, in the Catholic and Islamic people living in the Mediterranean area food has a crucial significance. For them food plays a very important role in their life. That is also the reason why when Southern Italians talk of the Mediterranean triad (olives, grains, grapes), they go back to the ancient Greek religion looking for deep and ancestral meanings: Demeter the goddess of agriculture, Athena the goddess who gave the gift of olive tree, and Dionysus the god of grapes and wine. And even if they are no longer worshipped these ideal figures still play a central role in the process of identity construction and in the marketing strategies.

Identity is never a question of truth, but of emotion. We all are persuadable of a past that provokes a certain emotion in ourselves. That is why people constantly write their history. And even when they are sincerely convinced that they are simply recording what really happens, they are any ways observing reality from one particular point of view, even more so when there is a distance of centuries which makes historical reconstructions extremely difficult, and in any case influenced by present questions. As shown by many anthropologists in the past history people always look for something that might be significant for the present.

So why do Italian people love to imagine and tell that the Mediterranean Diet is a gift of Greek gods and not for example something that has to do with a geographical habitat? Even if they know that nature is a part of the question, they look for a poetic and mythic explanation of their traditions (Moro, 2014: 98-106). So all though today many of them no longer follow the traditional MD and they have experienced a complete food transition toward the Western Diet, they still produce a symbolic value around it, sometimes just to fascinate tourists or to sell food products. We may say that in any southern Italian there is a potential storyteller of the MD. And this is a great advantage for a new project of development based on it.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) used to say that mythology plays a great role in all cultures, because it is like a bridge that men construct to reach a sense, a meaning that stays on the other side of the river. Somehow, Ancel and Margaret Keys tried to build a bridge. Between the advanced medical investigation and the philosophy of life of a population. They appreciated the poetic character of the people they met in Cilento, and they spent hours listening to them because they wanted to learn, from those "primitive" farmers, how to cook and behave in order to reach the promised Land of Longevity, a very modern myth (Moro, 2014: 159-162) that fascinates an increasing number of people. In this sense the MD is a model of lifestyle, an educational pattern, a unique heritage that many people will probably want to learn in the next years. And a very farsighted economic development could profit of this both immaterial and material demand, making the most out of the common capability to create narrations out of food and culinary traditions relying on the fact that there is a very high longevity rate in Italian regions such as Cilento, Calabria, and Sardinia, much higher than in the rest of the World, comparable only with some areas in Japan, and 4 years longer than in the USA. Besides it is higher than in other parts of Italy. As a matter of fact in Cilento presently women tend to reach the age of 88, while the average in Italy is 84, and men the age of 83 despite the Italian average of 79. And this is a record better than any advertisement if correctly used in a cultural marketing plan.

The Keys experienced the positive effect of the local lifestyle themselves. In fact they reached a considerable age. Margaret died when she was 97 years old, and Ancel when he was over a hundred years old. This result is not attributable to genetic factors, since they were not blood relatives, but most probably to the role played by their lifestyle (Moro, 2014: 149-150). A Mediterranean Way.

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