

THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

The Interplay of European Heritage and New Traditions

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In this paper I discuss different ideals shaping the development of the reanimated Camino de Santiago (the pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela). I first analyze the heritage ideal, represented by the official discourse, especially that of the Council of Europe. I then look at the ideals represented by the material route signs, which demonstrate how the European heritage discourse is enacted “from below” together with competing ideals of the Camino. Last, I present modern traditions found on the Camino and the implicit ideals underlying them. I argue that these traditions are transmitted by face-to-face conduct (orally and bodily) as well as through written texts (mainly on the Internet). I conclude with remarks on the nature of these traditions and their interplay with the European heritage ideal.

Keywords: Camino de Santiago, tradition, heritage routes, cultural routes, post-nationalism

On my first Camino (Camino de Santiago or the Way of St. James) in 2000 I passed through the small village of Tiebas. I took a look around its municipal pilgrim hostel (*albergue*), hoping someone might stamp my pilgrim passport. It was half way to that day's destination – Puente La Reina, where the Camino Aragonés joins the crowds on the Camino Francés. The door of the albergue was shut, but a note was placed on it. It was a note thanking the village people for their hospitality, put up by the Muslim Amigos of the Camino de Santiago en route to one of Christianity's main patrons, St. James (the elder), who was also known as the guardian of the Christians in their war against the Spanish Moors. I was wondering how Muslims could walk along a route, where occasionally St. James is depicted in a typical iconography known as *Santiago Matamoros* (St. James the Moor-slayer). This question touches on one of the many contradictions and puzzles posed by the reanimation of the pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela.

By the time I set off on my second journey on the Camino in the holy year of 2004,¹ the term “the Camino” represented many thousands of kilometers adorned with unique Camino symbols and signs that can be found across Europe (especially in Spain and France, but as far as Italy, Poland and Holland). In the 1,300 kilometers of Camino mileage I walked, and the thousands I drove, I listened to many stories and I spent hours reading many more in the imagined Camino community on the Net or in books. My own experiences drew my attention to the Camino's diverse character, which raised many questions that I addressed to myself as much as I addressed them to others.

Why do people in the twenty-first century go on pilgrimage by foot to a city in north-west Spain? This wasn't always so. Dunn and Davidson (1996), who have been following the Camino since the 1970s, tried to explain the change it had gone through (p. xlvi):

... in 1974 ... When we arrived at the Cathedral, we had some trouble finding the Cathedral archivist for the *Compostela* certificates. His book listing pilgrims for that year had fewer than fifty names ... What a difference in 1993! 99,000 pilgrims ... In these twenty years I feel that I have witnessed and participated in the rebirth of a phoenix.²

In my research I focused on the life of this “phoenix” after its rebirth. In this paper I discuss the ideals shaping the contemporary Camino (explicit and implicit). I do that by examining three discourses on the Camino. First, I discuss the official heritage discourse (represented by the Unesco and the Council of Europe) and its *conceptual* idea of heritage routes. Then I examine the *material* discourse represented by the Camino route signs and symbols, including the (normative) discourse about them. Last, I analyze a few traditions of the reanimated Camino as evident in books, pilgrim forums and voices I heard on my own Caminos, by emphasizing their *verbal* articulation and the *bodily* movement involved in their experience.

Context

Most historians trace the discovery of the Galician tomb of St. James (who was beheaded in Jerusalem in 44 AD) to the ninth century, when a farmer was directed by a falling star to a field that revealed the tomb (hence it is known today as *Compostela* – “field of stars”). Historians discuss the massive popularity of the pilgrimage to the shrine in the Middle Ages, a place which became a very important Christian pilgrim destination in the twelfth century, third only to Rome and Jerusalem (Stokstad 1978). Many of these historians emphasize the role of “the pilgrim’s guide”, the Codex Calixtinus, a Latin manuscript written in the twelfth century. This manuscript, attributed to Aymeric Picaud, a French monk from Poitiers, describes four pilgrim paths in France: three merge at the foothills of the Pyrenees and another, the Camino Aragonés, crosses the Pyrenees on a higher pass and joins them into a single pilgrim’s path, in Puente La Reina (Navarre). Historians of the Camino tend to recognize specific places and thereby create an historic picture of standard pilgrim routes.

Recently, this historical account was undermined by Denise Péricard-Méa (2000), who denies the importance of the Codex Calixtinus. Although it was written in the twelfth century, she doubts its popularity in the Middle Ages and points out that it was discovered only as late as the nineteenth century. She discusses the multiplicity of the cult of St. James in the Middle Ages, which went far beyond his tomb in Compostela, and traces the “invention” of many of the accepted medieval pilgrim traditions to the literature of the Counter-Reformation and to the scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Based on different pilgrim accounts, she demonstrates the varying motivations for the pilgrimage, as well as the different routes taken by pilgrims in the Middle Ages.

Historians do not doubt the popularity of the legends connected to St. James’ shrine as these were well known. None however, argue the fact that the pilgrimage died almost completely by the nineteenth century and was reanimated only in the last thirty years. This revival has received considerable academic (and non-academic) attention from various points of departure.

Thus, it is considered by Lois González and Somoza Medina (2003: 450) as “Northern Spain’s main tourist product”.³ If the Camino is a “product” then one wonders: who are its producers? I would argue that many pilgrims and people who are connected to the Camino do not view it as a “product” per se and the Camino was not an outcome of the work of a great business firm.

In their discussion of heritage routes, Moulin and Boniface (2001) imply that such routes are more than “business”, and that they “... have social aims as well as economic goals” (p. 237). In relation to the Camino, they mention that “One aspect of the pilgrimage from the past ... is that the pilgrimage involves shared effort and represents a *common ideal*” (ibid.: 241, my italics).

This “common ideal” is left a bit vague. While there might be a common destination, many pilgrims do not arrive there. If there is a common ideal, then it differs between the Camino’s different “producers” (in Lois González and Somoza Medina’s

terminology) – whether these are heritage officials in Strasbourg or Paris, or whether they are restaurant owners in Astorga or a Brazilian pilgrim debating her love life in El-Acebo. In this paper, I relate to some of the ideals (in the plural form), that are involved in shaping the contemporary Camino, and are revealed through the examination of three discourse types.

Heritage Talks

The concept of “heritage” played a decisive role in the Camino’s rebirth. It was utilized by two heritage institutions, the Council of Europe and the Unesco, whose discourse is analyzed here.

In 1987 the Council of Europe designated the Camino as the first European Cultural Route. Until then, the Camino was an esoteric phenomenon, and though a spark was already lit – as 2,000 pilgrims walked to Compostela that year – it was still a drop in the ocean in comparison to the Camino in the 1990s. By 1993 the Unesco had the Spanish route included in its World-Heritage list, and parts of the French routes were added in 1999 along with a list of specific structures.

What does it mean for a route to become heritage? The tangible features of the Camino – churches, Christian Medieval art, Roman pavements, etc., mentioned in Unesco’s World-Heritage list – might explain why a series of structures are considered “heritage material”. Some of the monuments are in Romanesque style while others are in Baroque or Gothic styles. These monuments presumably together tell an historical story, which is diachronic. It is not clear whether the space between the monuments is considered “heritage material” as well: roads, modern buildings, etc. In other words, Unesco’s idea of a (linear) route is not very clear; is it like in a child’s game – “connecting the dots”?

In their guidelines to the inscription of specific types of properties on the World-Heritage list, Unesco’s definition of a heritage route is stated as follows: “A heritage route is composed of tangible elements of which the cultural significance comes from exchanges and a multi-dimensional dialogue across countries or regions, and that illustrate the interac-

tion of movement, along the route” (Unesco 2005: 88). This definition is further elaborated (ibid.: 89, original italics):

The concept of heritage routes is based on the dynamics of movement and the idea of the *exchange*, with *continuity* in space and time; refers to a *whole*, where the route has a worth over and above the sum of the elements making it up and through which it gains its cultural significance; highlights exchange and dialogue *between countries or between regions*; is *multi-dimensional* ...

Note that the route is based on tangible heritage, but though it is not stated clearly, it is evident that the route is *also* based on intangible features which represent the idea of exchange and international/interregional dialogue that elevates the tangible “elements” to a “whole” route.

When Unesco added the Spanish route it was noted that: “it is a ‘living’ route, *still* used by countless pilgrims” (my italics), in what gives the impression of an unchanged Camino in History’s *longue durée*. The implicit intangible elements are explicitly discussed in Unesco’s document for the justification of the State Party in the case of the French routes to Compostela – it mentions the Medieval *chansons de geste* as an example for non-tangible north-south dialogue existing on the Camino. As Peter Robins notes,⁴ this designation is quite problematic since it is based on a few strange assumptions such as that the valuable monuments found on the routes are necessarily connected to the Camino.

The Council of Europe departs from Unesco’s approach in understanding cultural routes by emphasizing mainly intangible heritage. European scholars had been engaged in documenting the historical Camino for some time – the French Société des Amis de Saint-Jacques was established in 1950 and one of its founders, René de La Coste-Messelière, had already emphasized the European qualities of the routes to Santiago de Compostela (see Péricard-Méa 2000). However, Spain’s entrance to the EC in 1986 and the opening of its borders marked (for the Camino) an important shift from nation-centered

politics to European politics. European political-cultural institutions began to get an interest in the Camino in the middle of the 1980s. A memorandum published by the Council for Cultural Co-Operation of the Council of Europe published in March 1987, discussed publicly the idea of European cultural routes. This statement was finalized by the Committee of Ministers' resolution 98(4) from 1998. The Camino was chosen to be the first European cultural route and its implementation was coordinated at first by the Council of Europe and then by the European Institute for Cultural Routes (EICR) in Luxembourg. Most of the European institutionalized intervention in the Camino was not financial, but rather it functioned as a facilitator for cooperation between different partners.⁵ This bureaucratic procedure eclipses the fact that these European decision makers have a certain ideology as to what a European Cultural Route should normatively consist of. When I interviewed Michel Thomas-Penette, the director of the EICR, in 2002, he expressed his concern about the fact the Camino is not appreciated as a European cultural route as much as it is seen by pilgrims as a Spanish cultural route. At the time, the European route signs (see a later section) were not visible in France and his concern may have been justified.

The EICR (and their partners) constantly reflect on the meaning of "heritage", "European heritage", "common heritage", etc. Some quotations gathered from the EICR official website reveal this reflective heritage discourse: "a whole dimension of the approach to heritage is constituted by sensible experience ..."; "Heritage is a medium"; "how does one interpret cultural heritage in European terms? ... by taking into account the multicultural dimension of heritage and the plural dimension of its visiting (if it is a monument) or of its practice (if it is a tradition, know-how, a festival)".⁶ It is interesting to examine these quotations in light of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's assertion (1995: 369–370), that "heritage ... produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past" – *prima facie* the European discourse is about the present; the EICR promotes a heritage of people and their movement, thus emphasizing values of cultural exchange cutting across

many countries in Europe. This is evident in the chosen themes: Vikings and Normans, Celts, Silk-Textile, Monastic Influence, Hanseatic Sites, European Jewish heritage, the Gypsies, Northern Lights, Castellan language and Sephardic people in Mediterranean areas, the Legacy of Al-Andalus etc. Today there are almost thirty chosen themes. The Camino is part of a broader theme – the pilgrim pathways, although it used to be a theme of its own. In the EICR's "campaign diary", Michel Thomas-Penette (2000) explains the meaning of a cultural route as it is referred to by the Council of Europe (p. 111) – "[it] is not only a physical itinerary, even when it is practiced on specific sites, and even if there are quite a few cases when such an itinerary follows ... a cultural route is characterized by a great European topic ...". And indeed the EICR partners are involved mainly in the promotion of what can be described as intangible heritage, contrary to the tangible heritage emphasized by Unesco.⁷ Intangible heritage can create what Jöhler described (2002: 16) as "European places", which must "be provided on site with symbolic meaning and charged by European content by means of ritual".

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2005: 2) points out: the heritage discourse (in our case, of the Camino) can "change the relationship of people to what they do". However, in my experience of the Camino, the language of heritage, which is "value added" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995), is not always so appreciated by the people who "do" the Camino. In the creation of European culture, which goes beyond the nation or the region and their memories, the concept of heritage stresses the mediation involved with a possibility of harnessing it to a multi-cultural form of European-ness. The fact that heritage is considered by some people in the EICR as a medium illustrates that it is seen as the means and not as the end. Perhaps the heritage discourse seems to be "selling" a product, while some of the pilgrims do not want to experience the Camino in such a way. The value people attach to the Camino is made more often by the concept of tradition, which generates to some a positive "added value". The Camino signs represent a varied discourse that combines notions of heritage and of tradition.

Talking with Signs, Speaking of Symbols

Route signs create a mosaic of meanings and represent the different motivations and ideals found on the Camino. Different groups in various spatial scales use different route signs – some emphasize a certain heritage, while some are driven by other motivations.

The scallop shell was associated for centuries with St. James and with the Jacobean cult. Although it is not clear whether it was accepted as a symbol of St. James as early as the twelfth century or a few centuries later (see Almazán 1996), there is no doubt about its pre-Christian origin, as was already suggested by Peake (1919). The revival of the Camino made the scallop shell very popular and it is seen in many contexts – on pilgrims' hats and clothes, on church doors, menus, in hotels and as route signs such as the concrete pole found near Oloron Ste-Marie in the Atlantic Pyrenees (France). Many consider it as the “authentic” symbol of the pilgrimage. In some cases regional governments make use of it in their route signs; sometimes private Camino money-makers use it as an identity badge. Occasionally it is promoted by church officials or by civil associations that support the idea of the pilgrimage – such as the British Confraternity of St. James (CSJ), one of many groups that appeared in the last fifty years (Dunn & Davidson 1996: xxxv–xxxvi). The CSJ mention in their website that: “The scallop shell was and still is the emblem of the pilgrimage, carried back by the proud pilgrim as proof of the successful completion of the long and arduous journey to the shrine of St James.”

The European symbol (or rather logo) for the Camino was promoted in 1993 and it is a modernized version of the scallop shell, with straight lines, “European colors” (usually, yellow shell on a blue background) and it is found in at least five countries on different routes. In the area of Jaca (Aragon), volunteers of the European Voluntary Service for Young People worked on stretches of the Camino in Aragon and emphasized the European symbols. However this symbol was adopted voluntarily by various groups who are not identified as “European” in the narrow sense (“European bodies”) and yet identify with the

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Ill. 1: “Classic” shell in France. (Photo by the author.)

European shell: in Chartres, near Paris, a scallop shell with a sign directing visitors to Compostela is placed in front of its renowned cathedral, hinting at the existence of something (perhaps) more wonderful 1,625 kilometers away. Chartres' municipality is perhaps telling the tourists who come to visit their heritage, the famous glass-windowed cathedral, that this is only a fraction of a bigger – more important – (European) heritage.

The next popular route sign, found especially in Spain and in some other places as well, is a yellow arrow. This index stresses the idea that today's Camino is a one-way network of routes (though if millions of pilgrims did flock to Compostela during the Middle Ages, then they must have had to walk back, something the choice of an arrow obscures). The arrow was introduced by a priest who lived (and was buried) in Galicia and who was one of the main protagonists in the pilgrimage revival, the late Fr. Elías Valiña Sampedro. His deeds remind us of the church's vital role in promoting the Camino as part of what

Frey describes (1998: 246–247) as a shift from a “theology of fear” to a “theology of love”: “the Camino as a positive return to the sacred and an ideal means of cultivating faith among European youth” (ibid.).

Another common route sign found in France and Spain is the red-white striped sign promoted by walkers’ organizations such as the *Fédération française de la Randonnée Pédestre* (FFRP). It represents a GR route (a long-distance path) that is not unique to the Camino. Unlike the arrow, its symmetrical structure stresses the idea that the Camino, like any other walking path, can be walked in both directions. I came across some arrow-styled signs of the *Jakobsweg* in Switzerland, though these signs pointed in both directions, so they are similar in their nature to the red-white stripes.

One has to remember that there are different ways to signpost the Camino and that practices such as naming of streets, hotels and apartment projects

contribute to the efforts of transforming a series of locales to a web of routes.

In its booklet of practical suggestions (Mayol 2004), the Association Compostelle Inter-Regional mentions these different signs. However, it attaches to them a different value: according to them the signs promoted by the FFRP are less genuine than the European shell. This is consistent with what I heard from other people such as a French couple I met in Le-Puy who attached stickers of the European shell all the way from Lyon to Le-Puy. When I asked them about the FFRP marking, they completely dismissed them as non-Camino signs, but signs for walkers who are no different than other GRs such as the one traversing Corsica. They had no doubts regarding the European stylized symbol they were promoting as members of the *Amis de Saint-Jacques* (the well established French civil association comprised of many regional groups). In fact, they proudly men-

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Ill. 2: European shell in Auch (France) – closed side pointing the direction. (Photo by the author.)

tioned the European quality of this symbol and of the Camino being a European Cultural Route.

It is interesting to notice that the very common European shell (specifically) was adopted by different people with different motivations. For example, it appears on a Spanish coin of 100 pesetas from 1993 (kept in my wallet), where on one side the European shell is impressed next to an inscription: “Camino de Europa”. On the other side one can observe a basic pilgrimage map with the inscription: “Camino de Santiago”. Moreover, though it was promoted on an international scale, it carries a different indexical meaning (on indexicality in signs see Scollon & Wong-Scollon 2003). In most cases, the French, German and Swiss put the shell with its closed side facing the walking direction, whereas the Spanish put it the other way round. A French Camino activist mentioned that it is very important since the European shell signifies the many paths that lead to one

point and that for some reason the Spanish do not realize it. The Spanish see it as an icon of the Saint’s hand pointing in the right direction.

These signs represent the diverse discourse on the Camino and the way its heritage is seen differently by people who share its revival as an ideal. In the Basque village of Ostabat (the road-sign to the village is adorned with the European shell), where three important Camino paths meet according to the “pilgrim’s guide” found in the Codex Calixtinus, a monument and a sign commemorate this “meeting point”. However, in the Codex Calixtinus, the Basques are depicted as Barbarians, speaking the language of the devil. By signposting the meeting of the roads, it seems that the local Basques affirm the authority of the Codex, but the sign is placed next to a *Pilota* court (Basque ball game; an important representation of Basque nationalism)⁹ and greets pilgrims in English, French, Spanish and Basque.

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Ill. 3: European shell in Navarre (Spain) – open side pointing the direction and a yellow arrow. (Photo by the author.)

After giving some background to the importance of the place, the sign reads:

In the 12c, the “Pilgrim’s Guide” by Aymeric Picoud described the Basques as “Barbarians” ... this gives a good indication both of the isolation felt by the exhausted pilgrim, confronted by an unknown language and the mistrust of the Basque people ... the Basque language known as Euskara is one of the oldest languages in Europe ...

In what follows, there is a small introduction to basic Basque words. This sign first acknowledges the heritage of the Camino by stressing its official history as portrayed in the Codex, but then re-contextualizes it so as to fulfill its role in the Basques’ (national) heritage.

The sign in Ostabat demonstrates contested identities in the background of the Camino’s revival, which normally do not appear on the surface. However, the *choices between* different route signs (as the cases of the European shell and the GR-walking signs demonstrate) represent the struggles over the identity of the Camino as the following example shows very vividly: In 2006, the Galician government announced that they would replace the yellow arrows with a new route sign promoting the holy year of 2010, a big foot symbol, something that follows their work in the holy year of 1999 when they promoted a cartoonish symbol of the Camino. The new decision was a very “hot” topic in some of the pilgrim forums such as the *Santiagoobis* forum:¹⁰ “... it makes a mockery of the pilgrimage” wrote one pilgrim and another suggested that “the yellow arrows will win”; another gave an interpretation: “the footprints are ... not very functional” whereas the yellow arrow is “the lowest common denominator. All function, no flash”. A pilgrim that was not so convinced added: “Somehow I get the feeling ... that a lot of people are overreacting ... The arrows are not exactly an ancient tradition. They have been around for only thirty years ... I have strong feelings for the arrows myself.”

The signposting of the Camino is not only about helping tired pilgrims find their way. The different

signs represent various ideals and competing Camino identities: European, religious, regional, etc. The discourse *about* this choice demonstrates the emotions involved and the varied justifications for it.

Tradition Conversations: Performance, Text and Words

I am interested in discussing traditions that can be found in the “revived” Camino. My point of departure is similar to that of Simon Colman and John Elsner (2004), who examined the tradition of journeying to Walsingham (Norfolk), and maintain (p. 275) “that a top-down approach to invented tradition is not sufficient to explain much of the contemporary use of tradition by pilgrims at Walsingham”. They address here, Eric Hobsbawm’s (1983) well known terminology of “invention” that relates primarily to national traditions.¹¹

I am aware that naming a few social practices as traditions by a folklorist is in itself a scholarly practice that does not hold a neutral stance towards its object of inquiry. What happens when the term “traditional” is applied as part of a post-modernist discourse? If tradition is modernity’s otherness as Pertti Anttonen emphasized in his seminal book (2005), then I believe it holds a more complicated reference to post-modernity. If, as Anttonen argues, tradition is bound to modernity and the nation-state, then what happens to this concept in a post-modernist discourse? This terminology is not aimed at expressing a change in the actual practice, but a change in the researcher’s gaze. Anttonen points out that tradition and modernity are not dichotomous notions (ibid.: 39), and so I do not want to transform one novelty into a tradition by emphasizing a new novelty. Rather, I examine the discourse of pilgrims that makes use of an anti-modern approach when it comes to some of the behaviors found on the Camino.

These Camino traditions are orally and bodily transmitted by pilgrims who meet face-to-face during their actual pilgrimage and they are presented here based on my own experiences on the Camino. However, in the discussion of Coleman and Elsner (1995), it is evident that the experience of pilgrimage

is also negotiated by pilgrims before they set off on a pilgrimage and on their return home from it. The physical experience of movement through space is later spread by the pilgrims, in many cases with the help of texts. Thus, Coleman and Elsner maintain in relation to pilgrimage (2002: 8) that: "Text and experience intertwine." This point reminds us of the important role of texts in pilgrims' practices and their relation to them. It is important to notice that traditions found on the contemporary Camino are also transmitted in written form – through the Web and through books, including scholarly books. An example of the latter is the book written by Nancy Frey (1998), an anthropologist, who describes the Camino's modern life. Her research examines life on the Camino and the way value is attached to certain aspects of it. She goes in the steps of Eade and Sallnow's (1991) post-Turnerian account of pilgrimage, by showing the diverse (at times competing) discourses on the Camino. Her research was conducted in the 1990s, when the Camino was very much a Spanish single route and the Net was hardly a significant arena for pilgrims to share their views. Frey's book reflects on certain aspects of the Camino, but it also functions as a consolidator of some of the practices there. Due to the authority attributed by readers to scholarly material, such books can function as a point of reference not only to *what happens on the Camino* (descriptive knowledge), but also to *how life should be practiced on the Camino* (normative knowledge): many pilgrims who decide to journey the Camino read material before they set foot on one of its paths – artistic books, history books, travel-guides (on paper or on screen), travel accounts found on the Web or in some cases in paper (e.g. Shirley MacLean's spiritual search led her to walk the Camino and her account of this walk was a bestseller). This knowledge – practical, spiritual, historical or anthropological – contributes to the pilgrims' expectation of the Camino and to their experience there. Thus, a reader who reviewed Frey's book in one of the commercial on-line book shops commented: "I found this book to be very helpful to me as I am in the planning stages of walking El Camino in 2000." Another reviewer proclaims that:

"Anthropologist Nancy Frey has managed to bring the experience to vivid life conjuring the sights, sounds, emotions, exhilarations and disappointments of modern pilgrims as they trek across Spain ..."

If my own experiences form my first point of departure, then the discourse that Frey analyzed has evolved and has been transformed by now to form my second point of reference. In other words, the voices Frey documented a decade ago formed a set of practices that are repeated – their modernity and novelty can be replaced now by the concept of tradition.

Another source I refer to is the Net and the presentation of the Camino there. The Camino is negotiated in pilgrim forums and comes to life in the many accounts of the pilgrimage, which spread the personal experiences in words and pictures (even with sound-bytes). The virtual experience of pilgrimage was discussed by MacWilliams (2002) and specifically in the case of the Camino by Biella (2003). However, though there is much to be done in this field, I limited myself here mainly to the virtual manifestation of the Camino in one pilgrim forum, *Santiagobis*, which forms my third main point of reference in the traditions I discuss.

The following traditions are presented as contradictory notions. They are common idealizations as much as they refer to 'real' practices. They refer to an experience of a community of pilgrims as much as they refer to my own Camino experience. I develop these points in the discussion which follows.

Tradition 1: On the Camino, Pilgrims Eat Dinner Together

When in Santa Celia (Aragon), my wife spoke to Bernt, a fellow pilgrim from Germany. I suggested that I'd prepare dinner for the three of us. While I began cooking, a German pilgrim couple made themselves dinner and began eating. When (our) dinner was ready, we sat with a bottle of wine and invited the other German couple (Romy and Michael) to join us. When they heard it was my second Camino, Romy was quite shy and begged our pardon for not knowing the Camino custom of eating together

in the evening (it was their first Camino night, she apologized). On the following nights they became strong promoters of this newly learnt “custom”. Frey mentions that “through sharing a communal dinner and the day’s stories, curing blisters ... there is generally a high level of congeniality among pilgrims ...” (ibid.: 96).

Frey opens her book with a lunch she had with other pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela, having completed her pilgrimage in what she describes as a “memorable lunch” (ibid.: 4). In the *Santiagobis* Internet-forum, pilgrims frequently discuss the Camino tradition of eating meals together – one thread was titled: “memorable meals”, which referred to “... more than just the food ...”. Mark, a pilgrim, discusses a great experience in a French albergue:

Almost everyone was French, I didn’t speak a word of French, but when I sat down for dinner ... the French guys around had my plate loaded before my fanny hit the bench. My glass was never empty, they tried very hard to include me in conversation and after dinner invited me for Cognac and Cigars.

Seen in the host’s eyes, Mary, who served as a *hospitalera* (a volunteer in an albergue) discussed the work and mentioned: “I had my hands full making breakfast, cleaning and then organizing dinner for 18–40 people every night. And I loved every minute!”

Tradition 2: Pilgrims on the Camino Live like a Big (Ideal) Family

While walking with my pack through the hot Meseta, not very far from Sahagun, one of my rucksack’s shoulder straps snapped. I was a bit puzzled when suddenly a French pilgrim came to the rescue. He was actually so eager, he wouldn’t let me resist while he tried (and succeeded, one should add) to fix my pack. When I thanked him for his good Samaritan deed, he smiled back and dismissed my thanks, saying something about the obviousness of it – something you would expect from a fellow pilgrim. This is demonstrated also in Frey’s book in a picture of a pilgrim helping treat the leg of another (ibid.: 98,

figure 23). Pilgrims often discuss the solidarity and comradeship found on the Camino, though it did not exist at all times; in some cases groups of pilgrims would be very loud, when others tried sleeping.

James, a pilgrim, tells the following story in the *Santiagobis* forum:

I was walking the Camino in April/May this year, and at dinner one night, we had to separate two Spanish pilgrims, one a military man and the other a Communist, who were arguing about General Franco, and wanted to fight each other. We laughed over the next few days when we saw them both walking happily together, deep in conversation (but probably not about Franco). They had obviously found their similarities and forgotten their differences.

Like stories of the Spanish Civil War of families who were split between the two sides, this story conveys the message that the gap between nationalism/fascism and communism is not important enough to jeopardize the pilgrim family.

Tradition 3: On the Camino Pilgrims Walk Slowly so that They can Take Time to Think

In the first Camino I was running out of time (my planning wasn’t very successful) yet I wanted to complete the journey. My motivation was such that occasionally I’d walk 50 kilometers a day. Cyclists would use the fantastic Camino facilities to zoom through the Camino in a *Tour de France* pace. At times pilgrims (upon hearing I had walked in one day what they did in two days) would be angry at me saying that by racing through the Camino “I lose the whole point of reflection”. The idea of making use of the Camino to reflect on life outside the Camino and then being engaged in deep conversations with fellow pilgrims is stressed throughout Frey’s work. Frey exemplifies the conflict between “arriving” and living the moment by the story of a pilgrim who (based on an experience) “felt more committed to honor the moment” (1998: 74). She then asserts that: “Moving more slowly and getting into the rhythm of the ‘human speed’ in which ‘each step is a thought’ can also

affect one's sense of place and experience of the natural landscapes" (ibid.). Gower (2002) demonstrates the "transformative" effect of the Camino, which has two facets – walking and thinking, and later discussing thoughts with pilgrims (or telling stories on returning home). Though it cannot be denied that while walking one has time to think, the thesis concerning the "desired" reflection rhythm is not convincing; it is sometimes harder to reflect when walking slowly with a companion than walking alone quickly. Moreover, people can reflect in libraries, in cafés or while taking a ride on a train. In stressing an "expected" slow walking rhythm, pilgrims follow the Romantic ideal of walking as evident in the work of Edensor (2000) or in Daoism and Zen-Buddhism as evident in the work of Macauley (2001).

Tradition 4: On the Camino Pilgrims Give as Much as They Can

While it is true that the Camino was based on a *donativo* given in the pilgrim albergues, nowadays most of the pilgrim albergues demand a certain amount of money per night. Moreover, most of the albergues in France (in fact these are the same as any walkers' refuge) and the private ones in Spain are profit based. The *menu del Peregrino* is no different than any typical *menu del dia* found in villages out of the Camino in Spain. However, it is very typical to hear sayings such as "exploiting the albergue system" or alternatively "commercializing the Camino". Such statements reveal what is taken as obvious – that the Camino is not about money or commercialization, yet one can argue there are many economic gains from the Camino (and others – religious for example). Moreover, many pilgrims in bygone days were exploited, which assured that pilgrimage destination and stopovers thrived. One pilgrim in *Santiagobis* wrote that: "It's an awful pity that profit and commercialism seem to destroy such a good thing as the Camino." Another upon arriving in Compostela wrote:

I doubt that I will do the French route again in the future. The route appears to be a victim of its own success. Too many people, and too much com-

mercialism. Albergues painting over the arrows to direct you towards their place and away from others. It would seem that Santiago may be nominated as the patron Saint of Taxi drivers. From Leon on were signs all over offering a taxi lift for your pack to the next city.

Frey mentions in her book, that in some remote Galician areas the locals don't have hot water to shower while the government-built albergues have hot water for the pilgrims. Lois González and Somoza Medina (2003) show how the Camino was used for rural development. One *Gîte* (B&B) owner in France (whose *Gîte* belongs to a French association of Camino oriented *Gîtes* – Halts vers Compostelle) told me, that there are disputes between villages on where the authentic Camino path went through. This results in an increasing diversification of the Camino so that more villages would benefit from the Camino's economic success, and indeed for many locals the Camino is all about making a reasonable living.

Tradition 5: On the Camino Pilgrims Live Closely to Nature

Though some of the monuments along the way are very well known and to some they play a very important dimension of the walk, many pilgrims emphasize living close to nature. Frey claims that: "Estrangement may also be induced when one comes in contact with signs of urban life, which contrast sharply with the experience or union in nature" (1998: 81). Dudley Glover wrote in his Web-diary (September 21, 2004):¹²

Since I was a biology teacher in my youth, I'm interested in all aspects of Mother Nature. After the sun came out, I saw several *mariposas* (butterflies) flitting among the various wild flowers on the margin of the road ... When I got to the sanctuary, I found a terrific view but no restaurant. It was closed.

Glover's testimony points to the importance of experiencing nature in his detailed description, but he also demonstrates the human existence in it – the

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Ill. 4: Pilgrims on the Camino – getting close to nature? (Photo by the author.)

road and the closed restaurant. On the Camino, landscape always includes human intervention, though at times the discourse on it blurs this fact. Since many of the pilgrims on the Camino may not be interested generally in outdoor walking, there is a tendency to overemphasize the naturalness of the Camino. However, this is not followed with the full political implications. As one question in *Santiagobis* demonstrates: “What efforts then can we peregrinos (whom, I think get very close to nature on the Camino) make to persuade governments to participate in global agreements to protect the environment?” This question remained unanswered in the forum – something that testifies to the marginality of the political implications, but remains faithful to the belief that pilgrims get close to nature.

*Tradition 6: On the Camino Pilgrims
Live a Simple and Modest Life*

The Camino people are strong promoters of “the simple life”. Instead of “simply” driving their car to work, coming back home, watching television and going to bed, the Camino people “simply” walk, eat and sleep. There is nothing simple about walking 700 km (or more), especially when pilgrims recommend to each other in pilgrim forums what gear to buy, what shoes, sleeping bags, packs – all these very sophisticated pilgrim gear, which help make the Camino doable (some discuss the usage of GPS navigating systems and electric sockets for cell-phones).

Many actions, however, are done in the name of simplicity. Some pilgrims reflect on the “simple life we had on the Camino”. Pieter, a Dutch pilgrim in the *Santiagobis* forum, mentions that: “Some members mentioned quite rightfully that: ‘The one thing

about the Camino is that it teaches you how little you need to survive.” (Note the way knowledge becomes anonymous, though with electronic search tools of Internet forums it is simple to retrieve the actual members who mention this idea). Pieter adds that:

The silly thing is that the Camino is not fun: it’s hardship, rain, sprained ankles, blisters, no food or ATM machines, snoring and indecent people, sleeping on the ground, horrible toilets, but ... it is fun and that’s the contradiction as we come to the more pure things of our nature: shelter, food and good company.

He then concludes that: “Pilgrims coming home have difficulty to adopt [i.e. adapt; DS] To integrate the simple life into a complicated life”, to which Judith, an American pilgrim gave an anti-consumerist interpretation:

It would be difficult to live that way all the time ... But it is a wake-up call for some of us, that we

don’t need to collect the “things” that we have been conditioned to buy. Especially in North America where at many celebrations, especially at Christmas, the manufacturers come out with gifts of something new and shiny that we really can’t live without!

Though true to many pilgrims, one shouldn’t forget that sleeping in bunks is not very different than tourists sleeping in such facilities in walking holidays in the Alps or the Pyrenees. On the other hand, many pilgrims lavish on expensive restaurants and wine and some pilgrims enjoy nights in expensive hotels when possible. As one pilgrim (a judge from Tübingen) told me while we dined on a great dinner – being a pilgrim for him meant staying in hotels (preferably in good ones), eating good food and wine in the evening and enjoying the marvelous local beers during the day. However, very often pilgrims regard such behavior as improper or as undermining the true essence of what a true pilgrim is. Frey writes about the pilgrims who arrive at the end and

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Ill. 5: Pilgrims having a rest – part of the consumer society? (Photo by the author.)

transform to tourists – buying clothes and souvenirs. I think this dichotomy is a bit misleading since the same pilgrims are part of the “consumer society” before they arrive at Compostela – by buying walking gear prior to the walk; moreover, one of the main reasons for the “cheap” clothing pilgrims wear and why they refrain from buying such souvenirs is the effort to minimize the weight carried by them. Many pilgrims describe their transformation from being tourists looking for a cheap walking holiday to pilgrims. However, in relation to these stories, Pieter (*Santiagobis*) told a “reverse story”:

A Dutch went a few years ago to St [Jean Pied de Port] walking from Holland. He found it very impressive – as the Pyrenees are – then coming nearer to Santiago (he was followed by a TV-crew) he stopped as he found it too much of a show and too commercial. I think he went back doing the GR 10 along the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean to find some solitude!

This story demonstrates what is obscured in the normative pilgrim discourse. Since many of the walkers to Compostela are not experienced walkers, they do not see the family resemblance of the Camino and other long walks (GRs); hence the GR route signs as discussed above are seen as “something else”.

New Traditions: Words and Feelings

It could be argued that the usage of a traditional discourse on the Camino is part of a late Capitalist phase, where tradition is used to sell a product or that it is part of a post-materialist trend (both are presented in Anttonen’s work as conceptualizations of the post-modern). My attempt, however, in examining these traditions was not aimed at refuting such judgments, but to make sense of them in a post-nationalist context due to their interplay with the post-nationalist European heritage discourse I discussed in an earlier section.

By focusing on these traditions, which, as quoted above, are perhaps only thirty years old, one has to take into account that some of them are based on older roots – national, Medieval, regional, Christian,

etc., or that they are part of a New Age discourse that is quite popular among many pilgrims. Most of all, these traditions are undoubtedly connected to me as a subject who was (is?) a promoter of them. They are partial in their nature – in the sense that not all the people on the Camino follow them and also in so far as they represent only one set of traditions found on the Camino that exists there alongside many other bundles of traditions. Many pilgrims are organized in (religious) groups (in many cases they travel by bus) and hence they share a very different experience. My position towards the Christian tradition of the Camino is one of a non-European Jew, a fact that perhaps explains my fascination with the note left by the Muslim friends of the Camino, which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Since most of the pilgrims are European and Christian (not necessarily in a Pascalian manner, which gives priority to religious practice), then they might share a different point of departure than my own. Groups of pilgrims live a more “controlled” Camino where their practices might be regulated by the group organizers or according to traditions that are practiced in these groups outside the Camino. However, the traditions I present here were practiced mostly by “individual” pilgrims who nevertheless may have regarded themselves as part of a “Camino community”.

Can one discuss a “Camino people”? Many pilgrims discuss the Camino community. Frey goes in the footsteps of Anderson (1991) to consider it as an imagined community consisting of people whom one never met, but who walked the Camino some time ago. This assertion is supported by Biella’s work on the Camino’s virtual community (2003) and to some extent by Gower’s dissertation (2002) on the story-telling practices of Camino veterans in Camino community gatherings done in the States, which she sees as an extension of the Turnerian *communitas* (an ideal she remains faithful to). None of these writers try to define what kind of community the Camino community is, though Frey notes that “while pilgrims feel themselves as a larger community, they also retain a sense of national identity” (1998: 90). I believe one can relate to a Camino community and I agree with Frey that it has an imagined dimension,

which becomes very concrete in the “pilgrim gatherings”. This community has its own communicating method – the Net as evident in Biella’s work (in the same way the newspaper according to Anderson was highly important in the national community’s imagination). In certain ways the Camino community is similar to a fan group (Hills 2002), which is active in creating what it is dedicated to – the Camino. This activity is carried out mostly by people who live outside the Camino, contrary to the “fairy tale activists” in the *Märchenstrasse* – the car-oriented tourist route analyzed by Regina Bendix and Dorothee Hemme (2004) – who live along the route. Hills discusses “cult geographies”, which go beyond the text; and in some respects the Camino is a “cult geography” – without a text. However, I haven’t met anybody who considers herself a “Camino fan” (perhaps because fandom seems so be borrowed from the popular culture jargon, which seems to undermine the basic essence of pilgrimage as pilgrims see it).

I referred here to a “Camino community” as a self-contradictory object, though when one discusses an imagined community it is perhaps self-contradictory in any case. This community is separated by many traits. Frey mentions (in addition to the national affiliation) the mode of travel (walkers versus cyclists), and I would add the route chosen (walkers on the most popular route, the Camino Francés, versus walkers on other routes such as the Camino Aragonés, the Vézelay route etc.), and mostly the language barrier separating pilgrims according to a very basic division on the Camino itself and on the Net: one such example can be found in an address delivered by the CSJ’s former Chairman, Laurie Dennett, in a gathering of pilgrims in Toronto on 14 May 2005:¹³

We feel a particular bond with you on this side of the Atlantic – with both the American Pilgrims on the Camino, formerly the Friends of the Road of Saint James, and with the Little Company of Pilgrims here in Canada [The American and Canadian Camino associations respectively; DS]. Part of this probably results from our shared English language in the Jacobean context of so much Spanish!

I was interested in bringing these Camino traditions while deconstructing them so as to show the way they are adopted in the pilgrims’ discourse – written or not – and the way they are rejected at the same time because of their power on the self-image of the Camino folk.

From this list it is apparent that the Camino folk tradition is tightly bound to some of the constitutive images of romantic-nationalism’s portrayal of the national spirit: living a slow-going simple life, strong family spirit, modest, non-materialistic, reflexive and rural. It is interesting to note that the pilgrims walk through agricultural land. They do not work the land, but they walk the land, which is a performative act that ties them to the Camino. Wylie (2005) commented on walking as a state of “being with landscape”.

These traditions of “simple authentic life” did not characterize the primitive societies that constituted the “other”, nor did they refer to people or ancestors in ancient “historical” times. Rather, people today perform their life on the Camino – by living what is considered a “simple and authentic” life. However, this ideal does not live (for most) outside the Camino, at home, and hence many pilgrims return to the Camino to be able to discover the joy of “simplicity” again. Compare that to attempts to find this kind of life elsewhere: Western Ireland in the Irish case (Ó Giolláin 2000) or in a different historical “more authentic” time (Bendix 1997). Walking the Camino challenges modernity by focusing on discontinuity through traditionalization (a break from the expected path from modernity to a “super-modernity”, e.g. instead of replacing the car with a spacecraft, replacing the car with the human body) and by focusing on continuity – literally “reciting” the footsteps of others – whether ancient ancestors or people who signposted the Camino a year before.

The spoken language obviously divides pilgrims and separates them from one another contrary to the romantic-nationalist ideal. However, the spoken language makes way to a body language – mainly that of walking, which brings people together. Alternately, as Slavin demonstrates (2003), when there were language problems, it was easier to make sense

in some of the conversations by “sticking to concrete and shared experiences” (p. 12). The traditions mentioned above are not only necessarily transmitted orally – they are performed in different actions. So while there may be a difference in table manners, the ideal of sitting together in the evening transcends them and is learned regardless of the language spoken. The traditions come into being thus also by a performative imitation.

The limitations of (re)presentation (and an academic paper is a written representation) reduces the experience to what can be “told” (here in English). It avoids the nod I got from the French pilgrim in the *Meseta*, the wink of the *hospitalero* in St. Jean pied de Port accompanied by his firm and slow movement as he pushed me aside and collected the broken glass from the floor, the smile I received from the nun in Carrion de los Condes while she showed me to my bed with a certain bodily gesture, the movement of pilgrims on the stone floor in the albergue in Castrojeriz, the finger on the nose of the Brazilian pilgrim expecting us all to be quiet as his wife was not feeling well or the Basque pilgrim’s face as he served us tasty Spaghetti Carbonara in Los Arcos, the rattle of the plates and the smell of food spread all over the dining room. And yet again, I’m left only with words to describe multi-sensory experience ...

Conclusion

The European heritage discourse of the Camino emphasizes a search for a common ideal. Contrary to initiatives that emphasize especially the tangible heritage of the Camino (Unesco), the European initiative is concerned with a dynamic approach to heritage with a constant dialogue between the present performance on the Camino and its past. This ideal is negotiated by Camino activists who use a sign language to mark the Camino routes. The route signposting discourse reveals a diverse understanding of the ideal the Camino represents and the discourse on these signs shows that the introduction of the European route sign is highly regarded by many of the pilgrims. Moreover, it demonstrates the way a heritage discourse that was launched “from above” is enacted “from below” and the way the Europeanness

of the Camino is slowly accepted in representing the Camino, though together with competing representations – Christian, Spanish and Galician especially.

The examination of traditions seems to demonstrate another search for a common ideal, by pilgrims. This ideal is shared by many members of the growing Camino community and I described it here in romantic terms. It demonstrates a dialogue between the present and the past, but not in heritage terms. It was not presented here as an opposite of the heritage discourse, but rather it complements it in certain aspects. The Camino traditions presented here are transmitted by the usage of oral communication, written form (especially in the Net), but also with a body language, which overcomes language gaps. I call it “romantic post-nationalism” since its diverse discourse of romanticism does not reinforce a specific national romantic past, though it does not go explicitly against any nationalist or regionalist forms of identity.

After the Madrid terrorist attack, there were calls to replace the statue of *Santiago Matamoros* (St. James the Moor-slayer) with a less offensive depiction of Santiago as a pilgrim. Church officials announced that it would be replaced, but after a public outcry they backtracked and decided to keep it in place. If the romantic ideal of the Camino traditions is close to that of the European common heritage ideal, then it is interesting to follow the course of this romantic-European direction in the future. Where is it leading? Will the Muslim Amigos of the Camino be able to take part in the Camino traditions to come? The European heritage discourse is about multiculturalism, promoting the legacy of Al-Andalus as much as the Spanish Jewish (Sephardic) legacy. These legacies touch on the blind spots, the Camino traditions’ shadow – the violent past of the *reconquista* that ended in the forced expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Spain. The Camino heritage is about a constant dialogue and choices – between different roots and routes – a choice that possibly makes all the difference.¹⁴

Notes

- 1 A holy year of the pilgrimage (Xacobeo) occurs when the Saint's holy day – July 25th is a Sunday and it happens in intervals of 11, 6, 5, 6 years. The holy year of 1993 marked the success of the Camino revival and demonstrated the potential of it. The success of the next holy year – 1999 – was not a surprise, but it had given a strong momentum to the phenomena, which by Xacobeo 2004 became a wider phenomenon as many of the pilgrims walked the less traveled routes in Spain, France, Portugal etc.
- 2 The *Compostela* is a proof of the pilgrimage granted by the Archdiocese of Santiago. Though it has a religious significance, today it is granted to anyone walking at least the last hundred kilometers or cycling the last two hundred and for genuine reasons (i.e. spiritual or religious motives) and for many it is the ultimate souvenir. In 2004 close to 180,000 pilgrims were given the official *Compostela*, though the actual numbers are a lot higher since many pilgrims did not arrive at the end or did not bother to queue for the church certificate.
- 3 This approach is shared also by Murray and Graham (1997).
- 4 Robins: "Camino de Santiago – World Heritage? Cultural Route?" <http://www.peterrobins.co.uk/camino/heritage.html>. Accessed 22.12.2006.
- 5 In addition to that, volunteers of the European Voluntary Service for Young People worked on stretches of the Camino in Aragon, and according to Frey (1998), the Council organized a conference in 1988 and funded a committee of experts to advise it. Murray and Graham (1997) mention the influx of funds from European regional development programs such as LEADER.
- 6 European Institute of Cultural Routes website: <http://www.culture-routes.lu/>. Accessed 15.12.2006.
- 7 Though in Unesco's 32nd session, intangible heritage was added to the convention: see Unesco's director general's preface to Unesco's *Museum International* volume dedicated to this decision (Matsura 2004).
- 8 "Santiago de Compostela: the goal of the pilgrimage", *The Confraternity of Saint James website*, <http://www.csj.org.uk/santiago-de-compostela.htm>. Accessed 11.12.2006.
- 9 As evident in the documentary movie by Basque film-director, Julio Medem, *La Pelota Vasca: la piel contra la piedra* (2003; English: *The Basque Ball: Skin Against Stone*; Basque: *Euskal pilota: larrua harriaren kontra*).
- 10 There are many pilgrim forums – Biella discusses them in his work (2003). These are differed according to language and other affiliations. I found the Santiagobis forum to consist of quite an international crowd as it is not affiliated to a specific national group of Camino activists, though it is "biased" by English speakers, its managers are Dutch and at times other languages are used. See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Santiagobis>.

- 11 Anttonen stresses it was used in the case of nationalism "to legitimate the consolidation of territorial and administrative control" (2005: 11).
- 12 Glover: "Road to Santiago", <http://www.roadtosantiago.org>. Accessed 27.12.2006.
- 13 "2,000 Years of the Camino de Santiago: Where did It Come From? Where is It Going?", *The Confraternity of Saint James website*, <http://www.csj.org.uk/2000-years.htm>. Accessed 11.12.2006.
- 14 I would like to thank Ronnie Ellenblum and Galit Hasan-Rokem for their valuable suggestions and comments at different stages of this study.

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