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INVITED ARTICLE

Visuality, palm trees and tourism in Uruguay
Between tropical and traditional representations of postcolonialism

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ABSTRACT

Uruguay is a country whose national identity has been created in the image of European modernity. The search for a national imaginary has exalted symbolic attributes of rectitude and (European) homogeneity. A crisis of national identity and the global fracture of modernity broke this model. As part of this process, beach tourism emerged based on the ideal of a paradise which promotes the use of native palms as an important element of the physical and symbolic landscape. This paper analyses the relations between postcolonialism, tourism, modernity, identity and palm trees in Uruguay. It argues that the growing trend of beach tourism is part of a process that articulates tropical and traditional arguments, promoting undulated, local features over rectilinear, global ones.

Introduction

In the last decades, a critical or post-disciplinary turn has taken place in tourism studies (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2006). Following this approach, many works have focused on tourism in colonial contexts or on the consequences of colonial processes in postcolonial terms (Carrigan, 2011; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). These approaches are based on the fact that although formal colonialism has ended in many parts of the world, there is an ideological perpetuation of colonialism that manifests itself at a cultural and symbolic level (Said, 1978). The material contexts involved in colonial processes are strongly linked to the immateriality and the symbolic dimension of post-coloniality. This configures the imaginary of tourists and local people in postcolonial tourist enclaves (Kothari, 2015). The adoption of a postcolonial approach within tourism studies has contributed to unravelling such situations and processes, particularly where the formation of visual discourses plays a key role (Brito-Henriques, 2014).

Tourism is a phenomenon with both material and symbolic dimensions: it stands on a material base, where the tourist experience is developed, but it also features an increasingly visual discourse that influences the experience itself when determining the representations of the destination and the expectations of that experience (Baloglu & Bringberg, 1997; Crompton, 1992; Ekinci, 2003; Rakić & Chambers, 2012; Salazar, 2012). In this sense, the relationship between image and tourism constitutes a field that has significantly grown. While there are several perspectives focused on the economic interest of visual marketing (Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) or the social psychology of consumption (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981), this emerging tradition in the framework of postcolonial studies identifies the importance of deconstructing the visual discourses of destinations in the wider context of social and political processes (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002).

This article joins discussions in the literature on the close connection between tourism, image and colonialism, but it enters from a different angle, addressing not only images and representations but also environmental modifications: in this case, through consideration

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of palm trees in the Department of Rocha in Uruguay (South America). The environmental modifications explored in this paper are understood as part of an ecological imperialism (Crosby, 1986) that took place at a material and symbolic level, through the introduction of various plant species in Uruguay for productive and ornamental purposes. These ecological elements are today being re-signified, as a result of the search for a decolonial national identity that takes up native environmental elements and uses them as tools of emancipation.

In general terms, palm trees play a key role in the representation of tourist destinations. They are one of the most common visual features of paradisiac destinations as something natural, exotic and authentic (Wilkes, 2016). They are often accompanied by images of forests, jungles, rivers, mountains, plains, caves, deserts, dense green areas, and pristine, wild nature in general (Pezeshki, Ardekani, Khodadadi, Alhosseini Almodarresi, & Hosseini, 2019). Apart from abstract images, real or artificial palms are often used to convey a tropical atmosphere. Sometimes, the original vegetation of a place is replaced by palm trees to contribute to a feeling of "tropicality" to meet the expectations of western tourists (Law, Bunnell, & Ong, 2007). These forms of natural tourism require not only whole palms to arrange a tropical scene, but also the use of parts of palms to make products such as thatched huts, textiles or handicrafts (Sierra-Huelsz & Kainer, 2018).

Uruguay's climate is not tropical but temperate. The Uruguayan "vegetal landscape" is dominated by large grasslands, with a growing presence of cereal plantations and afforestation of pines and eucalyptus for the wood industry. The natural landscape of Rocha, located in southeast Uruguay, is also dominated by these grasslands and big plantations, although it also has many hills, swamps and a long Atlantic coast. Over roughly the last ten years, tourism has become the second largest economic activity of the Department of Rocha, after agriculture (Barrenechea, Rodríguez, & Troncoso, 2008). The destination image that is being promoted in this area is based on green values typical of ecotourism but associated with beach contexts. Rocha is the Uruguayan department with the largest expanse of ocean beaches in the country, as well as the area where beach tourism has most rapidly grown in recent years (MinTur, 2019).

This article explores the role played by three palm species in the search for a tourist model in the department of Rocha. This search is affected by global logics on the implementation of a modern colonial project, which is in crisis, as Uruguayan identity seeks to stand out from the postcolonial logics in which it is inserted. This work results from the intersection of postcolonial tourism studies, visual anthropology and archaeology. Apart from the strong link between image and tourist destination, images are considered in anthropology as an object of study across several cultural contexts: magic, religion, art, or personality (Banks, 2000). An important concept here is that of the iconosphere: that is, the set of guiding images of a social group at a given moment (Meneses, 2005). Images must also be understood as part of broader visuality systems, which include institutional supports (schools, companies, museums, etc.); images' technical, social and cultural conditions of production, circulation and consumption; as well as the action of resources and visual products. The material that images refer to is also a key part of this system. In landscape archaeology, the definition of *monument* is fundamental to address the mismatch between materiality, space and visuality. The composition, size and location define the possibilities of being seen, establishing the symbolic potential of visuality (Criado Boado, 1993, 2012; Criado Boado, Mañana Borrazás, & Gianotti, 2005). Although palms are natural elements, their current spatial distribution, their ornamental use and their iconography are acts of enunciation of space and the collective imaginary. This article considers the materiality of palms and the representations of such materiality (visual icons which are indices of that material element) as visual elements themselves (Dubois, 1993).

Methods. Approaching the relation between palms and tourism

Uruguay has six species of native palms (Chebataroff, 1974). Although this type of vegetation is not very abundant in Uruguay, palms are disseminated throughout the country. Their presence in sandy beach ecosystems is not very common; instead, they are generally located in hills, swamps or grasslands in the continental zone. The three types of palms on which I focus here are (a) *Phoenix canariensis*, known as 'Phoenix' palms, (b) *Syagrus romanzoffiana*, locally known as 'Pindó' palms, and (c) *Butia odorata*, locally known as 'Butiá' palms. I focus on these three palm species as they are the most abundant in the study area and especially because they have been the most used at an ornamental level. *Washingtonia robusta* palms have also been used for ornamental purposes in the area, yet not as frequently as the other three types of palms discussed here.

Phoenix palms are an exotic species introduced by the European settlers in the 19th and 20th centuries. They were an important element of public and private ornamentation in colonial Uruguay. This palm has a rectilinear brown trunk that looks like a column without ramifications. It usually measures between 12 and 15 m, although it can reach a height of up to 20 m. It has a crown of leaves at the top which is rigid in appearance (Naranjo, Sosa, & Márquez, 2009). Pindó and Butiá palms are native palms that have acquired an increasingly important role in the configuration of an authentic and traditional tropical destination in the study area, displacing the Phoenix palms from public and private spaces. They also have a unique trunk with a crown of leaves at the top. Although their trunks are generally rectilinear, Butiá trunks are sometimes curved or inclined. The most distinctive aspect of Pindó palms is its foliage of long and soft leaves that move easily with the wind (Chebataroff, 1974). Butiá palms have a more rigid appearance, with curved yet firm leaves. Pindó palms are a not quite as tall as Butiá palms, although both oscillate at heights of about 9–12 m.

In the area of Rocha there is a significant number of Butiá palms. It is the most widespread palm, and it forms large, dense and very particular palm forests in Uruguay (covering an area of 60,000 ha) as well as in the south of Brazil. In Uruguay, Butiá palms are located mainly in the Department of Rocha (one of the 19 political-administrative units of Uruguay), in the southeast region (Zaffaroni, 2004). Butiá palms are the most iconic symbol of the Department of Rocha. They are mentioned in the local anthem and appear in local art and literature. In Rocha, everything is immersed in the iconography of these palms (Dabezies, 2019). This is largely due to the historical economic role[2] that this species has played for local populations since prehistoric times. The oldest archaeological record of Butiá

[2] Economic in a broad sense, as Butiá palms have not been cultivated or industrially exploited in a long-term, systematic way. However, from a historical perspective, it has played a key role for family use and consumption.

remains dates back to 8500 years ago (López Mazz, Gascue, & Moreno, 2004). Currently, the fruit is eaten as such and is also used to make a wide variety of products that are sold to tourists: jam, beverages, sauces, ice cream, chocolate, liqueur, etc. (Büttow, Barbieri, Neitzke, & Heiden, 2009; Dabezies, 2011, 2018; PROBIDES, 1995; Rossato & Barbieri, 2007).

Focusing on the material aspects of palms in tourist contexts as well as the symbolic dimensions related to their representations, I followed a qualitative approach in this study that includes aspects of archaeology and visual anthropology. Visual anthropology focuses on the study of the relationship of human beings with images. It considers images as a key part of culture, where the material and immaterial elements are interconnected (Banks, 2000). Although visuality in anthropology has always played a key role in the interpretation of cultures, visual anthropology has rapidly grown after the rise of information technologies, centering on the study of image production, appropriation and circulation (Pink, 2006). Archaeology focuses on the study of material culture. Archaeology has also traditionally focused on learning about past cultures from material remains, in a close interaction with anthropology. Archaeology is increasingly focusing on the study of the contemporary world (Harrison & Breithoff, 2017).

This complementarity of approaches allowed me to address material and symbolic dimensions of palms in Rocha in an articulated way. In relation to the material aspects, I focus on the ornamental use of different palms. I consider the location and structure of the spatial configuration (Criado Boado, 1999) in relation to public and private spaces. In terms of symbolic exploration, I also offer an iconographic analysis focused specifically on Butiá palms, to consider the use of indices or icons (Dubois, 1993). In both cases, it was essential to understand the visual and spatial reference framework, for which I presented a previous analysis on Uruguay's landscape construction, emphasizing the impact of tourism on the landscape's structuring and meaning, and the iconosphere of the region, analysing the conformation of a model of tropical visuality associated with beach tourism in the area. This work combined observation techniques, spatial analyses and interviews. I visited 13 of the 15 seaside resorts in Rocha and conducted interviews in 5 plant nurseries and 5 government offices. This work is part of a 2-year field project which had several stages of participant observation, informal talks and 22 open-ended interviews with a number of stakeholders in the region who use the *Butia odorata* palm for consumption or to elaborate food by-products. Even though the information presented does not result directly from this fieldwork, the general flow of information and interpretations cannot be separated from this general research framework. All interviews and instances of participation and observation were oriented to the study of Butiá palms in the area. Much of the information collected served as direct input, but other information served to contextualize the interpretations and establish bonds of trust with people with whom I worked in the field.

Landscape, identity and ecological imperialism in Uruguayan tourism

In modernity, the landscape was understood as a finite, measurable, real space: it is reduced to its physical dimension, understood merely as space which can be divided, distributed, expropriated and sold (Criado Boado, 1993). This need to order, parcel, distribute and sell is based on a conception of a world dominated by straight lines. Straight lines (and *straight* as a general concept) are representative of modernity. According to Le Corbusier (1924:274), the rational man *"walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going, he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and goes straight to it"*. Straightness is a positive symbolic value in modernity, contrary to curvature. The righteousness of when a person is standing has moral and social connotations, since it denotes high social position. This concept also differentiates civilized and primitive people. In fact, rectitude has been regarded as an indicator of human evolution: monkeys only occasionally stand in an upright position, and Neanderthals were erect but not fully straight.

According to Ingold (2007:153), the English language offers a number of metaphors and examples for that which is not straight: "*there is the twisted mind of the pervert, the crooked mind of the criminal, the devious mind of the swindler and the wandering mind of the idiot*". In short, modernity associates straight lines with order, humanity and culture, and curved lines with disorder, animality and nature (Ingold, 2007). As Leach (1976:51) proposes, the *"visible, wild Nature is a jumble of random curves; it contains no straight lines and few regular geometrical shapes of any kind. But the tamed, man-made world of Culture is full of straight lines, rectangles, triangles, circles and so on*". Another key element in this rectilinearization of modern life is the increasingly larger separation, with straight lines, between public life and private life, which clearly mark an inside and outside (Touraine, 1994). Privatization is commonplace in modernity in various areas of life, including domestic and labour spatiality (Domenach, 1995).

Modernity in Uruguay had a significant impact on architecture and urbanism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The New Architecture manifests itself in two opposite poles: austere rationalism and a late eclecticism (such as Art Deco). The city of Montevideo was heavily transformed, in terms of its structures, spaces and urban components, as well as in its building dimension. It was a time of great works that showed the country's potential to project itself into the modern world of the 20th century, with various architectural and structural works that manifested this need to project and consolidate the nationalist imaginary (Arana & Schelotto, 2004; Ponte, 2004).

This search had cultural implications in the construction of collective identities as well. In the early 20th century, along with the 100th anniversary of the country's independence, there was an urge to portray an integrationist imaginary of cultural homogeneity (Caetano, 1992; Verdesio, 1992). This was clearly reflected in official statements published in the *Centenary Book* of 1925, celebrating one hundred years of Uruguayan independence: "*... the only nation in America that can categorically affirm that, within its territorial borders, there is not a single nucleus that is reminiscent of its aboriginal population*" (López Campaña, 1925:10). At the same time, Uruguayan public school were consolidated, proud of their progressive secularism, promoting the idea that equality was equivalent to homogeneity (Guigou, 2000).

The Europeanizing identity discourse remained virtually invariable until the 1970s, when national identity began to be reinterpreted considering the Indianness and the Africanness of the population (Porzecanski, 1992). Examples of this trend include the official stance concerning the repatriation in 2002 of the remains of the last indigenous referent of Uruguay, Vaimaca Peru, an increasing demand by Afro-descendant groups since the '80s and '90s to be legally recognized (Cabella & Porzecanski, 2007) and, as of the '90s, the inclusion of cultural minorities in the legal framework of national heritage, which until then consisted mainly of real property belonging to Uruguayan public personalities or monumental buildings of aesthetic character. These processes are framed within a more general

paradigmatic fracture of modernity, proposing a rupture of life's rectilinearization. This deep process is part of this modern crisis, whereby the undulation of straight lines implies not only the predominance of curved lines versus straight lines, but also of the prevalence of what is animal versus what is human, breaking the basic modern opposition which separates nature from culture. There are several examples of this trend towards curvature: the architecture in La Défense, in Paris, going from sharp and aggressive forms (1970s - 80s) towards more curvilinear shapes nowadays, or even the changes in car design in the last 15 years (Criado Boado, 2012).

Crosby (1986) describes ecological imperialism as a way of reproducing European ecological contexts in countries where they could be more easily reproduced. In fact, European colonial expansion occurred mainly in areas with similar biogeographic characteristics to those of the places where immigrants came from. For such purposes, it was necessary to introduce animal and plant species that would allow reproducing the original productive forms. The Southern Cone of America was one of the areas where ecological imperialism became most evident. In fact, Argentina and Uruguay are two of the main soybean suppliers for the first world. In Uruguay, aboriginal populations were wiped out almost entirely and replaced instead mainly by European immigrants (mostly from Spain and Italy). Cattle, horses and sheep were brought along, having historically constituted the productive base of the country. However, in addition to the massive arrival of Europeans, plants, and animals used for production, exotic species were also introduced in an attempt to reproduce their original environments, evoking representations of order and civilization.

As part of this modernizing project at the end of the 19th century, Uruguay's productive structure was transformed, going from the model of the stationary ranches or *estancias cimarronas* —with a very limited livestock management— to a system based on the intensification of livestock production. This transition from a pre-colonial productive system to a colonial one resembling the European model occurred together with a symbolic domestication of the way in which Uruguayans could imagine themselves as European people. This symbolic context was reinforced by the configuration of flora in public spaces. Trees in parks and public spaces of colonial Montevideo (18th and 19th centuries) sought to replicate European urban areas. Tall plant species were very common in colonial public decoration, so much so that even nowadays the public urban areas in most Uruguayan cities are mainly decorated by exotic species (Lombardo, 1969, 1979).

This colonial project was also projected in the search for a national tourism model. The need to project a model of colonial tourism has meant that, towards the end of the 19th century, tourism in Uruguay was mainly concentrated on the beaches of Montevideo, imitating a model typical of the European bourgeoisies of the 17th and 19th centuries. It was also accompanied by a growth in the cities of Mar del Plata and Rio de Janeiro, the main seaside resorts of Argentina and Brazil, respectively. This increasing beach interaction in the 19th and early 20th centuries began to expand eastwards, towards the Atlantic coast. It was preceded by several domestication processes: routes, afforestation, spa hotels with casinos and, eventually, land division and the construction of holiday homes (Da Cunha & Campodónico, 2012). Afforestation in the east of Uruguay in the mid-20th century was one of the great national projects of nature domestication, mainly with exotic species. Initially, the main goal was to control the loose sand in streets and houses near the beaches by imitating what had been done in Arcachon, France, given that environmental conditions were similar. These plantations of straight and tall exotic trees are believed to have played a key role in tourism development all along Uruguayan coast (Porcile, 2007).

This modern and colonial project of ecological domestication suffered from a crisis at the end of the 20th century, almost simultaneously with a crisis in national identity. Within this context of increased environmental awareness and nature consumption, interest in Butiá palms started to grow. The number of studies in natural science with a conservation profile has increased enormously since the 1990s. Several institutions in Uruguay and Brazil took an interest in the conservation of these palms, exploring different alternatives to some of the reproductive threats faced by the palm forest as an ecosystem. Such is the case of many local, non-governmental ventures (*Grupo Palmar*, *Eco-Palmar*, *Projecto Palmares*, *Casa Ambiental*, etc.) which, directly and indirectly, propose to conserve and appraise Butiá (Dabezies, 2018).

Also, since the 1990s, there has been a growing governmental and general interest in nature. In 1992, National Act 16,408 ratified the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), representing a milestone in Uruguayan nature conservation. This laid the foundations for a structural governmental approach to nature linked to the strengthening of the Ministry of Environment and the eventual creation of the slogan "*Uruguay Natural*" (Natural Uruguay). This new symbolic country model, seen as a greening of the State and society (Renfrew, 2006:81), goes in keeping with a new way of consuming nature and the strengthening of conservationist social organizations. As a result, natural tourism in the Department of Rocha not only grew but consolidated, leading to a number of proposals to exploit beach tourism, nature and rurality (Da Cunha & Campodónico, 2012). It is also the department with the most protected areas and, since the 90s, the one with the largest number of proposals to develop natural tourism (Montequin, 2014). This growth is associated with the consumption of "wild nature and tranquillity" (OGD, 2016) and the presence of "paradisiacal beaches on the Atlantic coast, protected areas ideal for ecotourism, and old ranches to experience the typical *gaucho* lifestyle".[3]

This type of natural tourism in third world countries is presented as a new form of ecological imperialism (Hall, 1994), since the ecological values promoted tend to follow a series of criteria based on Western representations and imaginaries (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). On the other hand, there is a strong relationship between neocolonialism and exoticization of tourist destinations in the post-colonial third world. The use of objects that are sold as pristine, hidden gems or culturally authentic, is part of a global phenomenon of tourist consumption (Carrigan, 2011). This has generated a discursive process with a strong visual component aimed at "building" these types of destinations as an "Exotic Other" (Bandyopadhyay, 2011). In the case considered here, this process is quite particular, since, although it operates on the basis of these global values and processes, it presents a series of internal tensions where two tourism models come into play: one is related to tropicality, the other one to traditional aspects. This process must be framed within the crisis of modernity, encompassing a search for an authentic Latin American style and a postcolonial Uruguayan identity. In this context, the increase in the use of native palms —both physically and symbolically— and the abandonment of exotic palms of colonial origin

[3] https://turismo.gub.uy/index.php/lugares-para-ir/region-este. Acceded on 30/7/2019.

Fig. 1. Phoenix palms linearizing the landscape of Rocha in the early 20th century. Old abandoned roads (down and up left) or with little use (up right), important avenues in the early 20th century (middle to the right) and a military facility (middle to the left). Source: the author.

represent a decolonizing intention. However, as previously stated, this new, alternative tourism model based on attributes of nature consumption and authenticity is also part of a global project that may also be understood as a neocolonial process.

Results. Butiá palms and tourist (de)colonization in Uruguay

Palms and the physical dimension of landscape

Butiá palms are increasingly widespread along the oceanic coast of Rocha. Their increasing use for ornamental purposes resulted in a decrease in the use of *Phoenix canariensis* palms, which were very common. Phoenix palms are native to the Canary Islands and are widely used in parks and avenues in Spain (Jones, 1994). The first written records about the presence of Phoenix palms state that the first seeds brought to Uruguay from the Canary Islands date back to the early 1800s (André, 1893). Canarian immigrants brought these

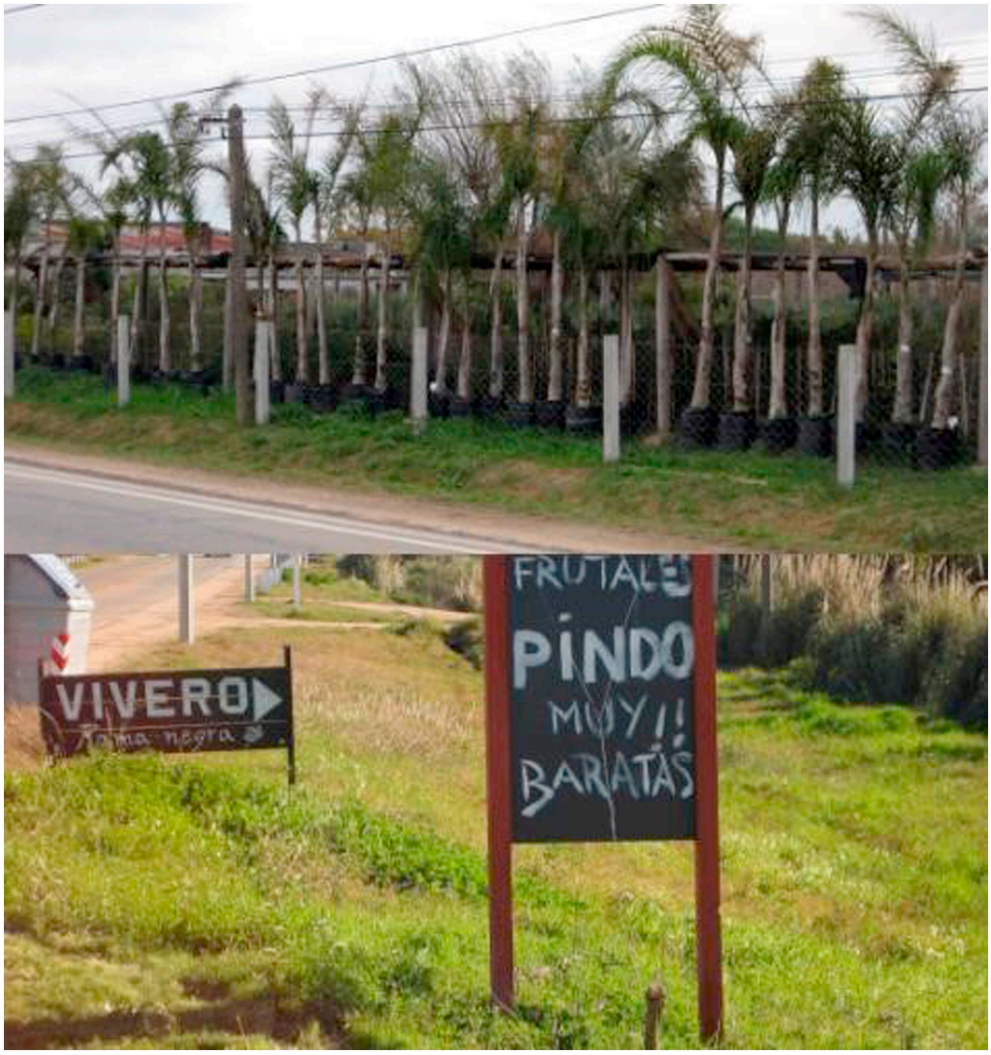

Fig. 2. Pindó palms are sold in a nursery in Rocha (above). Sign advertising the sale (below). Source: the author.

seeds, together with cereal seeds for food. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, these palm trees were commonplace, especially in the city of Montevideo and its surroundings, where many public spaces were adorned with them.

The Phoenix palms observed for the fieldwork were mostly arranged in rows along avenues and streets in both urban and rural public spaces. However, they are also occasionally used to linearize spaces close to the beach. In the Department of Rocha, they appear in urban spaces such as in Camino Real (an old access point to the city of Rocha), in Santa Teresa National Park (supervised and maintained by the Armed Forces) and along countryside roads. They are also found, generally following a symmetrical layout, at public buildings in the Department of Rocha. Also, mainly in rural areas, it is common to have two palms at the entrance of a house to mark the limits of the property. This kind of layout separates the inside from the outside and, therefore, what is public from what is private property. Also, individual palms are often found next to a house.

All of these are mainly adult palms, which are more than 3 m high. Based on their size, we may conclude that they were planted in the early or mid-20th century, when a modern structuring of space was predominant in an architecture that tried to mirror the European imaginary. Phoenix palms, being native to Europe, have in themselves that symbolism of identity transplanted into the New World. Considering their "columnar" aspect (Naranjo et al., 2009), Phoenix palms structure space in a linear way when used ornamentally (Fig. 1). Their linearity, combined with their symmetrical layout, conveys a modern sense of order. They were used within a context of homogeneous identity at the beginning and until the first half of the 20th century, aiming to reinforce Eurocentric identity through public ornamentation. The other way in which they were used, more monumentally, consisting of a single palm by a house or a pair to delimit private property in rural areas, may be interpreted as a search for individuality based on Europeanness and the concept of private property.

Pindó palms (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*) were also considered in this analysis, as they are frequently used for ornamental purposes. As far as native palms are concerned, Pindó palms are mainly found scattered in private gardens and sometimes in a linear display when used in public spaces. In Rocha, these palms are commonly sold for garden decoration. After conducting interviews with the main plant

Fig. 3. Rocha's coat of arms with the legend "*Rocha, where the sun of our homeland rises*" (above). Logo of the Secretary of Tourism of Rocha (with four Butiá palms) (below). Source: the author.

nurseries in the area, it was unanimously affirmed that Pindó palms are the most commonly sold variety for private ornamental purposes, mainly at beach houses, due to their tropical look and faster growth, closely followed by Butiá palms (Fig. 2). Conversely, Phoenix palms are rarely sold in the area. In fact, many of these nurseries have no stock, as there is little or no demand. As Sonia, a local plant nursery owner says, "*we haven't sold Phoenix palms for about 5 years because nobody buys them anymore. Pindó palms are now the most sold ones for beach houses, as they grow fast and are the most beautiful of all*" (recorded interview, Route 9, Vuelta del Palmar, April 2012).

Pindó palms were also used in public spaces such as avenues, roads, squares, and public buildings of the late 20th century. According to some interviewees who work in local public administration, the municipal government is doing so in an attempt to decorate public spaces with native species. As Gerardo, the person in charge of ornamentation for the city council, explains, "*for several years now we have been trying to change all the vegetation in public spaces using native species. As you can see, here at the entrance of the city, we put Pindó and in the square of Castillos, we planted Butiá palms. It is no easy task, but little by little we are trying to avoid planting exotic plants*" (recorded interview, Rocha, Uruguay, September 2011). The ornamental use of Butiá palms is highly varied. In public spaces, they are a common sight along national routes and streets, forming a straight line, but single palms are also found in streets or squares (usually planted by neighbours, not by the municipal government). They also decorate some public buildings, together with other species (usually Phoenix palms). They are also abundant in private spaces: either single palms or groups of palms are found mostly in front of homes and shops, and sometimes in the garden.

The introduction of Phoenix palms as part of a process of ecological imperialism of a global order took place in a context of domination of modern values of rectitude, order and homogeneity. This order is manifested spatially in the rectilinear distribution of the palms but also in the use of their morphological characteristics to highlight that rectitude. Their trunks look like tall, straight columns, unlike the trunks of Butiá and Pindó palms, which sometimes appear curved or inclined. Their more rigid leaves contrast with the graceful leaves of Pindó palms and the curved Butiá leaves. Even the spatial distribution of Phoenix palms differs from that of other native palms.

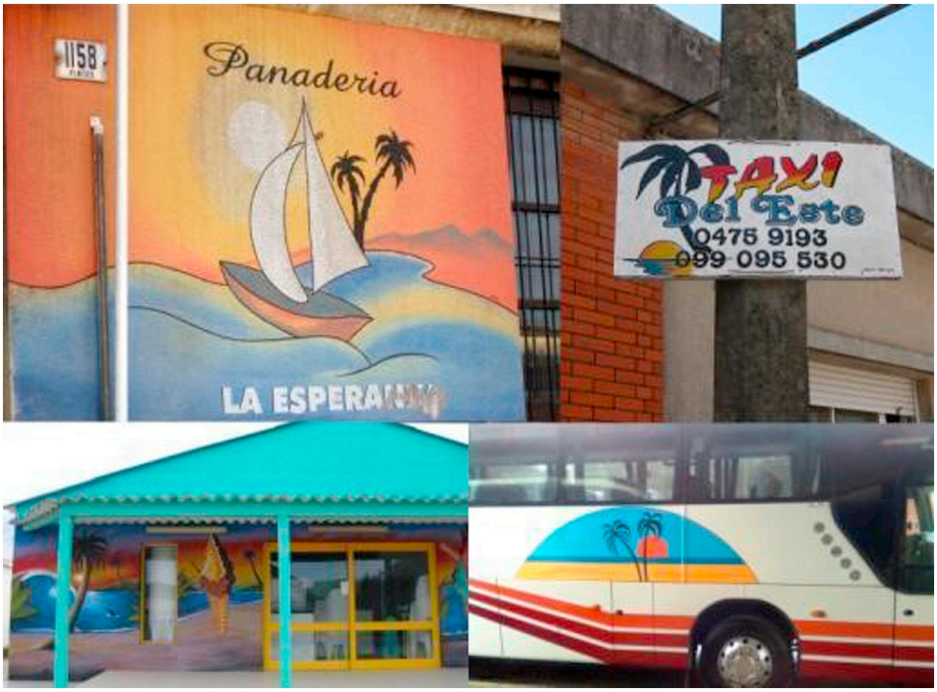

Fig. 4. Local Butiá iconography evoking a tropical feeling. Source: the author.

The demands of the bourgeoisie and European-based beach tourism were aligned in this modern context. In these cases, palms not only point in the direction of a paradisiacal imaginary, but also reproduce the colonial imaginaries and the colonial power relations established in those contexts. This approach resonates strongly with those found by Kothari (2015) in a Caribbean context. In this work, the spatial structure of large hotels offers an ambiguous experience that places tourists between the contexts of the Caribbean exploitation of sugarcane plantations and a natural paradise. The reconstruction of colonial forms occurs at architectural and spatial levels, where the distribution of palm trees plays a key role in the implicit colonial ambiguity and an explicit paradise. The symbolic and the material aspects of ecological imperialism are articulated in the tourist offer.

The vindication of minority identities in the context of a modernity crisis and a search for natural, native and authentic experiences, has created a suitable scenario for the valorisation of native palms as expressions and tools of subversion of modern, colonial order. This process has not taken place only at a physical level, but also at a discursive and symbolic level. The particularity of this process was that native palms were there before exotic palms and even before all models of tourism. The images, discourses and representations already had a life of their own in a framework of vindication of the local and of traditional values. This new context, in which a new model of tourism is imposed, nourishes the established meanings and their discursive instrumentality. Hence, native palms become models of tropical and traditional images, generating two types of representations that coexist in the area.

The representation of Butiá palms

The clearest example of how emblematic Butiá palms are for the local identity is the adjective “butiacero”, commonly used to refer to a person who was born amidst, or lives with, Butiá palms. Some authors even make reference to a “butiacera culture”, the culture and customs that result from being born or living for a long time with Butiá palms (Geymonat & Rocha, 2009:211, 234). Based on an iconographic analysis, several types of representations that involve Butiá palms were identified, oscillating between traditional and tropical elements. By traditional we understand the more realistic representations of the Butiá forest. Butiá palm forests are locally known as “palmares”. The adjective “palmareño” is used as a synonym for “butiacero”, meaning “someone or something that is native to the palm forest”. Both adjectives have a very local reach. The most impressionist aspect of this traditionalism is expressed by the association between Butiá palms and the indigenous people who inhabited those lands. This logic locates them as part of the same symbolic context, granting a historical value through a spatial action in which the palms, the forest and the indigenous pre-Hispanic-colonial inhabitants are placed in the same space. The sun is another typical element of local iconography, usually rising in the horizon. Rocha, located in eastern Uruguay, is one of the first departments where the sun rises. Rocha's coat of arms consists of a rising sun, a Butiá palm, Santa Teresa's Fortress (one of the main colonial fortresses in the country) and the legend “*Rocha, where the sun of our homeland rises*” (Fig. 3). The location of the sun in the horizon is a shared attribute with the tropical representations, but in a different way: one refers to sunset, the other to sunrise.

By “tropical” we mean all the representations that (re)locate the icon of the palm within a new context of tropicality which generally consists of an island, the sun and water. The curvature of the palms also occupies an important role in this symbolic construction. This is

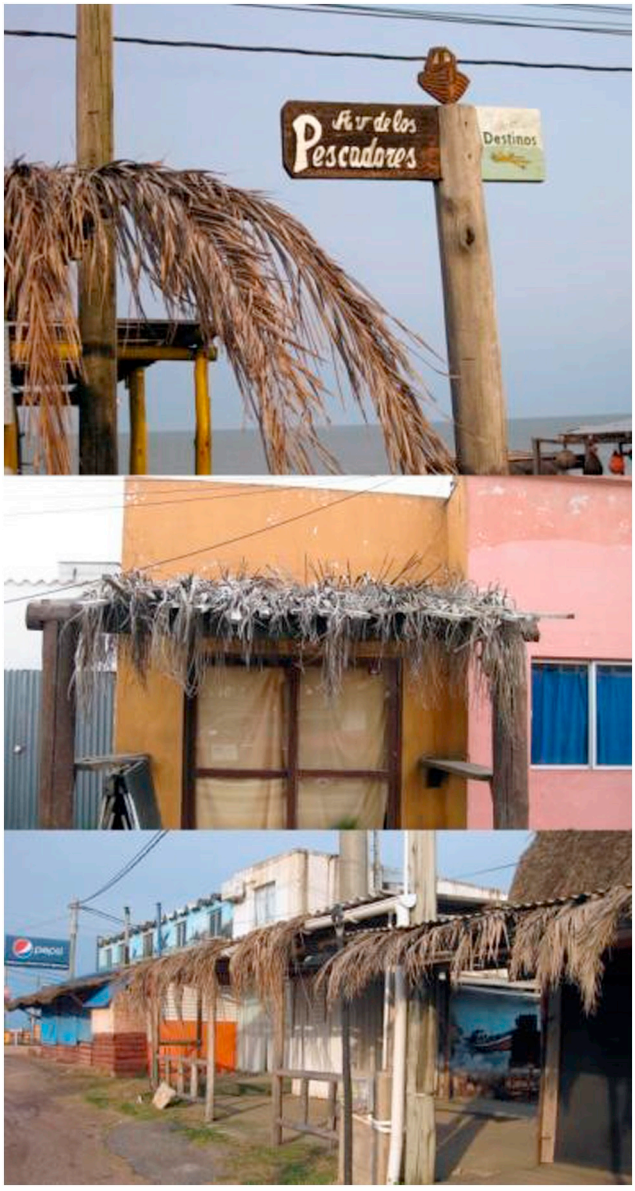

Fig. 5. Butiá palm leaves are used to create a tropical atmosphere at the beach. Source: the author.

a clear reference to Caribbean postcards with drawings or pictures of *Cocos nucifera*, or coconut palms, growing in the sand, leaning towards the sea. The sun in the horizon is now interpreted as a sunset rather than a sunrise, due to one of Rocha's main tourist attractions: in La Paloma, a seaside resort, there is a sunset ritual at La Balconada, one of its most emblematic beaches. The ritual consists of clapping enthusiastically when the sun sets, as it is considered one of the most beautiful sunset views in the country.[4] These representations are varied in use, following a more traditional approach within the public sector and a more tropical one for private purposes. Palms are very much used in local iconography by various institutions, for example, by the Secretary of Tourism (Fig. 3). Such iconography is particularly strong in the city of Castillos, being present in many local emblems and logotypes of civil groups (Fig. 4).

These two images are often used together, offering a summer product which conveys a tropical feeling, combined with a more traditional, local use. Such is the case of simple roofs made of palm leaves, which are commonplace in several beaches of Rocha. These roofs are usually built to provide shade rather than protection against the rain. However, they mainly seek to create a tropical atmosphere evoked by the palms (Sierra-Huelsz & Kainer, 2018), while also referring to more general, deeper attributes associated with postmodernity, such as their uneven curvature and casual appearance (Fig. 5).

[4] See: http://www.turismoenrocha.com/atardecer-en-la-balconada/

This process of search and definition of a tourism identity is based on arguments of authenticity, tradition, white sands, natural beaches and blue skies in a context of pristine nature. Tourism in Rocha aims to differentiate itself from nearby alternatives such as Punta del Este, one of the most exclusive seaside resorts in Latin America. Punta del Este is located some 150 km west of the main beaches of Rocha, being the busiest and most popular beach destination of the country. Clearly luxurious and high-end, it caters for a much more massive type of tourism based on the combination of excellent beaches, good services, and artistic and cultural activities. Rocha, more oriented towards ecotourism, seeks to differentiate itself from Punta del Este, but also operates following a global ecoturistic trend. This growing new type of tourism based on green and traditional values —typical of a global ecotourism model in the third world (Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Hall, 1994)—has resulted in a tension between a traditional and a tropical profile.

Conclusion

This work offers new insights for postcolonial tourism studies. It is an analysis that considers, on the one hand, form and spatiality, and, on the other, the elements with a specific meaning that make up that structure. However, in addition to this view, it articulates another dimension oriented to understanding the relationship between these material elements and their representations. The mental comfort offered by straight lines, ordering elements which were disordered (curved), typical of colonial destinations, is key when it comes to thinking about the construction of tourist destinations that articulate an exotic experience with a sense of control and order. Similar to what Kothari (2015) proposes, these types of destinations offer a series of ambiguous sensations as strategies that articulate order, chaos, authenticity, tropicality and control that allow tourists to consume these destinations within their interpretative frameworks in places which are perceived as exotic, at least to some extent.

The rupture of modernity, the crisis in national identity, the new consumption of nature under the slogan “Uruguay Natural” and the growth in local tourism, combined with a growing demand for local products, has led to an increase in the use of native palms (mostly Butiá palms) in the east of Uruguay. Modernity is characterized by rectitude, order and homogeneity. The summer, beach holidays, palm trees and tropical environments have an anti-linear intention, according to Ingold's (2007) interpretation. Just like carnival, these events disrupt time's linearity, proposing attitudes outside of this “line” (Da Matta & Green, 1983). Straightness, which represents order and domesticated life, gave rise to wildness and a lack of order. The fragmentation of modernity generated an unevenness in rectilinearity. As part of this transition from modern to postmodern symbology, tropicality represents the breakdown of order. National identity following a modern, Europeanizing nature, was built as part of a process of homogeneity based on white immigrants and a disregard for aboriginal cultures and Afro-descendant minorities. Phoenix palms, used to decorate and structure public spaces as well as private spaces in the early and mid-20th century in Uruguay, represent the rectitude and order of white, homogeneous Europeanness. A crisis of national identity gave birth to a pluralistic, heterogeneous and curvilinear identity were native palms play a symbolic role as visual and spatial arguments.

Butiá and Pindó palms are elements of that image, constructing representations which have a significant cultural impact in Rocha. Changes in these material and visual representations are part of a complex process of mental modifications together with symbolic, economic and biological variables (Criado Boado, 2012). Tourism reconfigures this mental and symbolic framework, while it is also reconfigured by it. The palms contribute to portraying this touristic destination as a beach destination, thus becoming more regionally widespread, which affects their ecological and biogeographic configuration. The image of these palms is used by public institutions as well as by private companies to make the destination more appealing. Pindó palms are increasingly used to decorate private spaces, such as beach houses, due to their rapid growth and tropical look. Butiá palms, however, are not only intimately associated with aesthetic, tropical elements, but also make reference to local, traditional aspects which are opposed to modernity and encouraged by postmodernity (Touraine, 1994).

In this sense, there is a tension expressed at different levels. On the one hand, a neocolonial global model (green beach tourism) is being adopted to leave behind another colonial model (“neo-European national identity”), using specific elements such as native palms. However, the use of native palms also entails a tension of local order expressed in two different destination images: one associated with the traditional and the other with the tropical. This proposal is therefore comprised within a strategic contradiction that, according to Touraine (1994), is at the very base of the success of a modern and neocolonial project: the production of minorities that are absorbed by homogenizing majorities that, in turn, need such minorities to reinvent themselves and continue working. In this context, tourism is the perfect argument that supports this functional contradiction.

Following the idea that wild nature is closer to a representation consisting of a jumble of curves, and that the man-made world of culture is usually represented by straight lines (Leach, 1976:51), the attempt to become more tropical situates these destinations of the Global South within a natural, curved, irregular world, characterized by exotic wilderness, to be consumed by western culture. The use of palms to convey the image of a natural and exotic destination (which often wishes to be tropical and/or traditional, as in this case) is part of a symbolic and material postcolonial process that affects the Global South, based on a new type of ecological imperialism which strongly focuses on the aesthetic and iconographic features of the landscape. This new version of ecological imperialism is a useful concept to analyse the role of tourism in postcolonial contexts, where the development of the destination image is related to the exotic and/or natural aspects.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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