

“Contact Zone”: Collections and Intercultural Dialogue at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin

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Introduction

In 2008-2009 the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin promoted the pilot project “Tongue to Tongue. A Collaborative Exhibition” within the initiative MAP for ID-Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue (www.mapforid.it), supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union (Bodo, Gibbs and Sani, 2009). The project was coordinated by the Centre for African Studies of Turin and was based on a partnership with HoldenArt, a cultural association committed to the application of storytelling techniques to cultural heritage.

Based on a participatory process of cultural empowerment and an unprecedented collaboration between museum educators and a group of citizens – mainly working as cultural mediators – coming from Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Italy, Morocco, Romania and Senegal, the project aimed to transform the Museum into a multi-vocal space of representation where the tongue of the museum (institutional, scientific and didactic) engaged in a dialogue with the citizens’ tongue (autobiographical, evocative and emotional) in order to challenge the monologic authority of the institution and explore its intercultural potential. At the heart of the project was a Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages which culminated in the collaborative exhibition “Tongue to Tongue” (17 November 2008 - 31 January 2009).

The project aimed to: a) enhance the Museum’s ethnographic collections through the experimenting of an inclusive proposal based on training, cultural accessibility and mediation of heritage; b) develop the Museum education staff intercultural competencies and skills; c) adopt the storytelling techniques as a mediation tool not so much from a linguistic point of view, as in order to share both individual and institutional knowledge and perspectives, create and/or consolidate the social value of the Museum for its audiences, and promote cultural citizenship as a relational process; d) plan and mount a collaborative display; e) produce, with secondary schools, an innovative proposal of heritage education starting from an intercultural perspective.

Materials and Methods

For our purposes, rather than illustrating the history of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin – which has been otherwise discussed by Rabino Massa and Boano (2003) – we will focus on the current institutional framework within which the pilot project took place.

Although the Museum has been closed to the public since 1984 for administrative reasons, it pursues its scientific activity through temporary exhibitions, conferences, seminars and educational workshops. Hence, the pilot project is to be considered as part of a specific route the Museum undertook in order to gain visibility to a heritage which, for a long time, has not been accessible to the public. The ethnographic collections – which consist of artifacts coming from different parts of the world – proved to be especially helpful both for the enactment of the intercultural dialogue and for the practical organization of the collaborative exhibition “Tongue to Tongue”. The selected pieces on display amounted to ten and belonged to Equatorial African, Chinese, Alpine, Aztec-Mayan and Mongolian collections.

The achievement of the aims listed in the introduction required an adequate methodology based on: institutional partnership, the experimenting of a participatory planning process, and the application of dialogic principles at every stage of its development. These were all key strategies that allowed to listen to and address the involved subjects’ needs through a process of mediation, while helping to transform individual and institutional constraints into resources.

Furthermore, participatory planning was adopted not only to involve and engage cultural mediators at all stages but also to create synergy among diverse experiences in order to build and share a common language, a platform of concepts, tools and objectives; mediate among different competencies and skills; ensure methodological flexibility; keep a constant (self)reflexive “eye” through an evaluative process that was undertaken both *in itinere* and *ex post*.

Results

According to the results of the evaluative process, the project succeeded in exploring the connecting function of

the Museum and in promoting it as an arena of meanings that generate knowledge, rather than reproducing it. Taking part in the project meant a great innovation for the institution, since it allowed for a renewed interdisciplinary approach towards scientific heritage, in order to see objects not as mere instruments of knowledge but as means for increasing intercultural understanding, thus contributing to social inclusion and cohesion. Taking its ethnographic collections as a starting point, the Museum tried to promote integration, becoming the actor of intercultural dialogue while strengthening its expertise in the fields of education and intercultural research. Furthermore, the re-contextualization of collections stressed the cultural resonance of objects, emphasising their evocative and emotional power. The European project MAP for ID provided the Museum with an exceptional opportunity to raise its profile by means of an approach that engages with a socially responsible mission. The project's outcomes serve, in this sense, to highlight a possible way in which the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Museum of Turin can contribute to the combating of social exclusion, promoting equality of opportunity and pluralist values, for instance. If social responsibility requires an acknowledgement of the meaning-making potential of the museum and an imperative to utilize that to positive social ends (Sandell, 2002), then the Museum of Anthropology has demonstrated to be socially responsible (Mangiapane and Pecci, 2011).

Discussion

Starting with an anthropological notion of cultural heritage conceived as a social construction and a relational and negotiating process of meanings (Béghain, 1998), we adopted not a static and essentialist view of heritage – only to be safeguarded and transmitted – but a dynamic, dialogic and process-oriented perspective concerning both objects and people, tangibility and intangibility. Our practice was informed by Clifford's theory of the museum as a *contact zone* (1997) concerning the power relations implicit in museum collections. This theoretical choice enabled us to explore new ways to re-interpret collections and create new purposes and meanings of the Museum through an articulated collaborative process that ranged from the selection of objects to the conception of exhibits, from the writing and performing of narrative routes to the educational activities carried with students and visitors. Finally, we assumed heritage mediation both as a process of cultural empowerment for participants and an exploration of the intercultural potential of the Museum's ethnographic collections. These last assumptions found practical translation and application in the Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages and in the development of an *expographic storytelling* technique. The training course was primarily conceived as a process of cultural empowerment aimed to:

- promote awareness of the right of every citizen to take part in culture;

- develop social and cultural responsibility;
- enable an exchange and transfer of competencies and skills;
- explore and build the power of a voice, of a language that gives new sense and meaning to heritage.

In other words, we understood empowerment in terms of personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship: an increasing personal autonomy and agency that participants achieved through the transfer, acquisition and development of knowledge and of personal and social skills. The Course was attended both by cultural mediators and by the Museum educators, thus engaging subjects bringing diverse professional knowledge and competencies to share and exchange.

Storytelling was used to empower participants with a voice and provide them with the means to explore their past and present, possibly focusing on their migratory experience; (re)construct their own histories and biographies within the framework of a shared discussion and interpretation; become agents of their own subjectivity. Trained mediators, recognized as "new interpreters" of the Museum's heritage, were finally involved in the planning and mounting of a multi-vocal exhibition, in close cooperation with the Museum staff and an architect / exhibition planner. Each mediator was free to choose from the ethnographic collections the objects with which he/she identified culturally and/or emotionally. The Museum's ethnographic collections were used to bring out a range of perspectives that addressed aspects of the past and contemporary lives of mediators. Objects were chosen either because of their being particularly illustrative of symbolic and social functions (e.g. sculptures and baskets belonging to the African collection, musical instruments belonging to the Chinese and Japanese collections, a wedding case belonging to the Alpine collections from Northern Italy) or by virtue of their being aesthetically attractive (e.g. a head covering belonging to the Asian collection). Some were selected instead on the basis of distinctively striking features (e.g. a Chinese tea box carrying a peculiar idiographic inscription). Every single choice was, in the end, driven by the power of objects to evoke cultural traces and inspire memories and stories. For our project's purposes, cultural mediators were in fact invited to participate as individuals, not as representatives of ethnic groups or communities, thus disengaging objects from the prevailing rationale of "cultural representation".

Such a methodological space of freedom was supported by a museological principle – pertaining to the *muséologie de la rupture* practiced by Jacques Hainard at the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (www.men.ch) – according to which objects should be considered as "pretexts" which are in the service of a discourse or of a story, and not the contrary.

The selection of objects from the collections was followed by the planning of "narrative routes" in which the Museum staff also took part. Creative writing workshops encouraged participants to find ways to express their biographical experiences in order to translate them in expographic terms and then perform them orally during their dialogic narrative routes in museum. From

this methodological intertwining derives the expression “expographic storytelling” (Pecci and Mangiapane, 2010). Some of the mediators decided to bring *personal objects* during collective discussions around the key themes of their tales, and sometimes in response to new ideas and suggestions generated by the storytelling tutor and/or the architect. Hence, they brought in a number of objects of relevance to them – *objets d’affection* – such as special photographs, clothes, travel souvenirs, books, etc. The final result consisted of a non-hierarchical display, a space in which the act of juxtaposing museum pieces with personal objects and the blurring of the boundaries between tangible and intangible heritages created a new arena of meanings leading to a re-interpretation and re-contextualization of collections.



Fig.1. Abderrahim Benradi’s showcase: ethnographic objects and *objets d’affection*. Courtesy of Centre for African Studies (Turin).

Finally, the objects were displayed in showcases alongside the “subjective heritage” of the mediators (Fig. 1). The exhibition consisted of a set of nine autobiographical showcases – very similar to installations – which were not inscribed in a thematic framework but rather juxtaposed in order to create a range of different stories whose peculiarity consisted in the complete absence of an explaining textual apparatus and the fundamental presence of a cultural mediator and a museum educator as “storytellers”. The traditional guided visit was therefore replaced with a *dialogic narrative route* performed by the mediator/author of the showcase and a museum educator who exchanged knowledge and perspectives about the objects selected from the ethnographic collections (Fig. 2). The exhibition was open to the public upon request from mid-November 2008 to the end of January 2009. Mediation and education activities were planned for local students attending the last two years of secondary school; general public; non-visitors (e.g. youths, migrants). This choice responded specifically to the expected objectives and outcomes defined by the European Lifelong Learning Programme. To conclude, through the acknowledgement of the objects’ polysemy, museum educators and cultural



Fig.2. A *dialogic narrative route*: on the left Abderrahim Benradi, on the right Gianluigi Mangiapane. Courtesy of Centre for African Studies (Turin).

mediators finally succeeded in revealing both the formal/scientific qualities and the biographical contexts – the lives, worlds, and histories of which the objects were part and which gave them meaning – of the ethnographic collections.

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