

## **Animals in heaven and earth: discovering African myths and legends**

The Museum of Natural History of the University of Parma, established in 1766, comprises a rich collection of African animals from Eritrea and Congo. Alongside display and education, one of the key functions of the museum is to carry out research on environmental zoology, behavioural biology and naturalistic museology.

Googol, a cultural association founded in 1998, promotes the public understanding of science. Initially connected with the Department of Physics of the University of Parma, it now offers a diverse range of expertise, including biology, philosophy, food sciences, mathematics, astronomy, art and communication. Its activities include interactive exhibitions, conferences and seminars, training courses and projects in schools.

### **Objectives**

- To facilitate Parma's citizens of African origin to become chief protagonists in the reinterpretation of museum collections and constellations, by actively involving them in a comparison between African and European cosmology;
- To explore new forms of interaction and dialogue with African communities through the discovery and recognition of their living heritage (in particular, oral traditions);
- To train African storytellers to have an awareness and understanding of the museum and Googol's programmes and activities;
- To explore themes connected with astronomy, ecology, biological evolution and animal behaviour in order to help all citizens, young people in particular, to know and respect nature and diversity.

### **Phases**

The project began with a one-day conference presenting *Animals in heaven and earth* to the city. Two meetings targeted at schools, plus an evening event open to the whole city were held in the Great Hall of the University. Speakers included Thebe Medupe, an astronomer from South Africa, and the poet Cleophas Dioma, who lives in Parma and described through his poetry the immigrant's difficulties in becoming an integral part of society.

In the following months, the complex process of participants' involvement began. The original idea, based on formal contact with local African community associations, proved difficult to implement. Project partners, therefore, focused their efforts on establishing personal contacts through the mediation of external facilitators (among whom was Cleophas Dioma, creator of the local festival *African October*).

About ten people from Burkina Faso, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia and Cameroun actively took part in the project. Some had been teachers or artists in their respective countries, but now worked in unskilled jobs in Parma. Working group meetings and several visits to the museum gave rise to memories which led to the collection and transcription of tales and legends in a booklet. This publication was distributed to schools and the general audience at the final events, together with an annotated bibliography edited by the City Libraries of Parma.

Four conclusive days were held at the museum, where Googol mobile Planetarium was mounted: the meetings, open to students and all citizens, were run by the African

storytellers, who took on the role of museum guide and fascinated the audience by conveying the myths and traditions of their countries of origin.

### **Outcomes**

Among the most significant outcomes of the project were:

- Exploration and validation of the knowledge and experience of African participants, with an extraordinary impact on the audience and development of new competencies in the museum staff;
- The motivation and training of a group of new citizens, who may now become interpreters and mediators of the museum;
- The opportunity for the museum to reach a wider audience and to make its collections come alive through new perspectives and interpretations;
- The chance for everybody to challenge their own assumptions through the observation of the stars from different parts of the world and the reflection on the similarities and differences of points of view.

The project team also met some difficulties: the focus on interpersonal relationships with the many people who took part in the project was very time-consuming in terms of planning, organisation of meetings and production of materials.

From the partners' point of view, the connection between people and institutions promoted in the project's framework 'enriched everyone, but should find a permanent space in order not to be wasted,' for example by creating new training opportunities for mediators.

### **Institutions**

Museum of Natural History of the University of Parma

<http://museodistorianaturale.unipr.it/>

[www.biol.unipr.it/index.rvt?func=sezioni&sez\\_id=6](http://www.biol.unipr.it/index.rvt?func=sezioni&sez_id=6)

Googol Cultural Association

[www.googol.it](http://www.googol.it)

### **Project coordinators**

Maria Grazia Mezzadri, Scientific Director, Museum of Natural History,

[mariagrazia.mezzadri@unipr.it](mailto:mariagrazia.mezzadri@unipr.it)

Lara Albanese, Googol Association, [laralbanese@googol.it](mailto:laralbanese@googol.it)

### **Target groups**

Main target group: adult citizens from the local African communities.

In the final phase of the project: schools, families, migrant communities, general public