

Dialogues, Between Nature and Culture

This project was jointly developed by the Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA) and the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales (MNCN), Madrid. Both institutions have large ethnographic and natural collections from five continents. *Dialogues, Between Nature and Culture* was set out as a meeting and conversation between two cultures around some of the objects belonging to these collections. The purpose was to provoke an exchange of views about the objects' use and symbolic interpretation, as well as the stories, contexts and experiences associated with them. The participants in the dialogues were museum professionals and immigrants from the Philippines, whose cultural objects were studied during the project.

Dialogues, Between Nature and Culture aimed to move away from a general trend in ethnographic and natural science museums, and to do so in two different ways: by creating a space for conversation, with room both for the scientific information common to a European museum and for the information stemming from the direct experience of people around objects that are part of their lives; and, subsequently, by sharing this experience with the general public.

Usually, collections from both Museums are displayed with a single interpretative voice, meaning that the information visitors receive has been developed from a scientific point of view by the museums' curators and researchers. This project tried to establish a different type of relationship between the object and the public. It also aimed to generate a relationship between the participants, and feedback between the scientific discourse of the expert (anthropologist, naturalist) and the viewpoint of the people who were familiar with the objects in their own cultural environment.

Objectives

- To provide a space where citizens, researchers or curators were able to engage in a dialogue around the cultures represented in the Museums through their collections;
- To help society become closer to the Museums and thus help the latter to become an element of social development, through discourse and collections;
- To facilitate community participation, in particular that of the immigrant community;
- To help the museum to become a "living place," which allows not only the exhibition of objects, but makes possible an interaction with them;
- To reinterpret, contextualise and enrich the museological discourse of the selected objects.

Project stages

During the preliminary stage of the project contact was made with some of the main immigrant communities in Madrid. The Philippines were eventually chosen for the project because of the importance of the Philippine collections of both Museums, the historical relationship between Spain and the Philippines, and the presence of a huge immigrant Philippine community in Spain, about whom very little is known. Three museum professionals from the MNA and MNCN and three members of the Philippine community were invited to take part, respectively selected by project coordinators and by the Asociación de profesionales filipinos en España. The spaces for the dialogues were set up, objects chosen as subjects of the conversations and a script developed in close cooperation with the Philippine community.

In the second, developmental phase a meeting was held with all participants, first in the Museo Nacional de Antropología and then in the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales. The dialogues around the selected objects took place and were recorded on digital video.

During the final phase the video was edited and produced, and the project evaluated. The video has been made available to a wider audience on the websites of the project partners, as well as in the libraries and exhibition spaces of both Museums.

Outcomes

- The creation of a discussion group where two cultural points of view – the scientific vision of museum curators and the “experiential” vision of the objects’ source community – were able to meet, meld and create a richer discourse, as well as showing a wider outlook;
- The active involvement of the Philippine “source community” in the production of knowledge;
- A deepening of the Museums’ knowledge of Philippine culture and natural environment;
- The interest of both Museums in giving continuity to the project by developing similar activities with other communities (from Latin America, Equatorial Guinea, Western Sahara and Morocco) widely “represented” in their collections.

Institutions

Museo Nacional de Antropología

<http://mnantropologia.mcu.es/>

Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales / Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas

www.mncn.csic.es/home800.php

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Target groups

Representatives of the local Philippine community (teachers, professionals), museum professionals (curators from different departments of both partner Museums), and a general public interested in learning about Philippine culture