

Creating Community Museum Creating a Bridge for University-Community interaction

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This article sheds light on the most important activities that the Ben M'sik project team was involved in during the Casablanca-Kennesaw Creating Community Museum Project, which has helped cementing strong ties of partnership in community development between the University of Hassan II Casablanca-Mohammedia and Kennesaw State University. Through a number of workshops, seminars, and special events the Ben M'sik project team engaged in some interesting and productive discussions with the KSU project team to conduct oral history interviews and surveys characterized by professionalism and scholarly rigor. The article is also an account of a personal involvement in the different stages of the project.

Workshops and Seminars

Community Museum Creation is an intensive workshop coached by Drs. Catherine Lewis and Cindy Vengroff when they visited the Ben M'sik campus of humanities and social sciences in February 2008. The workshop participants,

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mainly composed of undergraduate and graduate students who would then join the Ben M'sik research team of the project led by Professor Samir El Azhar, were introduced to the world of museum studies and its jargon in addition to the guidelines, tips and legal issues related to conducting oral history interviews. A year later, in June 2009, the members of the Ben M'sik team project had the honor to attend Drs. Karen Robinson and Hannah Harvey workshop on Intercultural Performance Ethnography together with KSU students from the department of Theatre and Performance Studies, who came to participate in the 20th edition of the International Festival of University Theater Casablanca, a yearly event organized by the Ben M'sik campus. Moving collected oral histories from the page to the stage was the core of the workshop.

To keep the flame of the audience concentration alive, it was a smart idea to integrate some French and Arabic passages in *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville's masterpiece that was re-adapted by the KSU acting troop to perform in the festival. The play succeeded in touching the mind and the heart of the audience because it mainly appealed to their imagination and emotions. When the members of the jury announced that the best performance in the competing plays went to KSU troop, everybody at Ben M'sik project team was happy about the well-deserved prize. The group really developed strong ties of friendship with the American delegation in a relatively short period of time. The Marrakech trip with the KSU troop was for me a source of some unforgettable memories. It was lots of fun to share Moroccan drumming rhythms and songs with Professor Henry Scott, who moderated an impressive workshop on Contact Improvisation in the festival.

In November 2009, The Ben M'sik Team was very pleased to attend an enlightening seminar by Dr. D'Khissy Majid, a distinguished Moroccan sociologist. The guest speaker reminded the members of the team that Ben M'sik is a fragile study field due the relatively recent history of the community and the diversity of its population. Hence, surveys and interviews conducted on the Ben M'sik community should be proceeded with so much caution in choosing the participants and making sense of their opinions. He also pointed out that when investigating the perception of the Ben M'sik community on the United States, the influence of media should not be played down, especially that the vast majority of the Ben M'sik population watch El Jazeera Arabic channel, known for its harsh criticism against the U.S foreign policies.

In December 2009, a KSU project team composed of Dr. Sandra Bird and other four history students (Emily Arp, Stephanie Green, Meagan Diedolf and Jay Lutz) visited the Ben M'sik campus and were our honorary guests in the opening ceremony of the Ben M'sik Community Museum. The KSU team delivered a series of presentations on American culture that were well attended by students and faculty from the American Studies department. With a Moroccan friend from the History department, I had the pleasure to accompany the KSU team in guided tours to Rabat and Marrakech where we visited lots of historic sites and bazaars that sell Moroccan artifacts and traditional clothing.

Practicing Ethnography in Jamaa El Fna Square

What I learned in the Ethnography and Performance workshop made me look at the Square of Jamaa El Fna in Marrakech with a different eye. Despite many changes taking place in Moroccan culture and traditions, one aspect of life here has remained the same for many centuries: the Halka. Handed down from generation to generation, the Halka, the Arabic word for circle, still survives in 21st century Morocco with its story teller still standing in the center. He – for it is always a he - entertains his audience with ancient stories and myths.

Lemsseyah, a man with an old wrinkled face and a few missing teeth, stands in the square in his fancy old green djellaba. The green color has been devoured by the sun, as it has been exposed to the glare of the rays for 50 years. “I have been possessed by a Jinni since I was five years old. At the age of 10, he ordered me to tell stories to people,” he says. “I’m 60, I have been telling stories for 50 years. I’ve got no choice; I am fated to be a story teller.” Morocco, too, is possessed by the Jinni of illiteracy that has made almost half of the population illiterate. Moroccans tend to rely on oral sources to discover new things, and this has paved the way for this tradition to flourish.

The tradition is not only a form of entertainment, but also of marketing; the storyteller entertains his audience by telling two or three legend stories and then asks them to show their appreciation – with a few dirhams. Like television, which makes money through advertisements during a movie, Lemsseyah pauses his story every now and then to ask for tips to win the bread of the day. The pauses are not at random; he usually stops when his story just as it is reaching its climax.

Interviewing the Ben M'sik Community

We started interviewing members of the Ben M'sik community as soon as we finished tallying and presenting the findings of the surveys that were conducted inside the Ben M'sik campus about the perception of the different departments of the United States. We were very surprised about the unexpected positive responsiveness of the community to accept being interviewed and videotaped for the oral history project. El Haj Lamlih, a man in his late seventies and one of the funniest people that I had the honor to interview, said that he was overjoyed that Ben M'sik hosted such a museum, where his life stories and legacy can be handed down to the coming generations before they are out of reach. He even expressed his willingness to take some language courses at the Ben M'sik campus. The museum would surely contribute in destroying the fences that disconnect El Haj Lamlih and other members of the Ben M'sik community from the sphere of the university. I strongly believe that the Ben M'sik museum is an ideal venue to have the voice of the community heard, its problems discussed and public and individual histories preserved, as well as a bridge for university-community interaction. Although the museum is oral history-centered, it places a great emphasis on preserving not only the intangible Ben M'sik traditions, customs and stories but also material objects associated with the oral history of the community.

In June 2010, The "Coffee and Conversation" ceremony that the Ben M'sik Community Museum organized was a great success in terms of attendance, media coverage and the positive echo it created on the community. All the members of the team were quite touched for the readiness of the interviewees to contribute in a social outreach program with 50 dollars, the sum that was supposed to be given to each interviewee for accepting to be interviewed. With the assistance of the Ben M'sik campus, the money was spent to equip a primary school with a computer science lab that has eight computers with excellent specifications. In the light of a partnership signed between the Ben M'sik University and that primary school, pupils with most of them coming from underprivileged families would benefit from theatre workshops and English courses given by volunteering Ben M'sik campus staff and students.

The U.S Trip

At Hartsfield Jackson Airport, I had to go to a special bureau to have the customs and protection police fill in more information about my entry to the U.S.

borders. As there were lots of passengers already sitting in the waiting room for the same reason I entered that office, I had to wait for almost an hour for my turn to come. When I got out from the bureau at about 9:00 pm., I had no idea where I could find the group. The huge Atlanta airport is a place where one can easily get lost. “No worries! He who has a tongue can never get lost”, I kept repeating the Moroccan saying to myself in an attempt to get more self-confident I asked the security agent who inspected me about the direction to the baggage claim, even if I could see it clearly written on the sign board. I took several moving stairs to get to the underground. The last terminal was my destination; I was still not sure if I would find the group there. As I was getting closer to the baggage claim, I noticed some-body waving in my direction. I quickly realized that it was Jay, one of the kindest people I have ever met. Shortly after, I saw Dr. Catherine Lewis and the rest of the team members.

The metropolitan Atlanta is a city that has a wealth of attractions to offer its visitors. The CNN studio tour gave us the chance to explore how this giant channel broadcast the news to the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District, where The King Center’s Freedom exhibition displays a number of priceless objects related to the private and public life of Martin Luther King, is a site that I was very lucky to visit. His tomb that stands elevated in the center of a pool, his birthplace and home, and the large collection of the first hand articles let the visitor experiences an emotional exhibit of Dr. King leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Led by Dr. Jennifer Dickey, we had a wonderful tour to Georgia State Capitol, the gold-doomed building, where we were received by the governor of Georgia.

Coffee and Conversation was one of the events that I will never forget about the trip. The attendance was very diverse in their ethnicities, nationalities and religions. In the symposium, I was very happy to meet with almost all the members of the acting troop who participated in the International Festival of University Theatre in Morocco. Reciting one of my best passages in the Qur’an was something I did with so much pleasure under the request of Ali Abedi, the President of the Muslim Students association at KSU. One more thing that I am not likely to forget about that day is doing verbal interpretation for Mrs. Khadija Sabbar, one of the members of the group who participated as a panelist in the event; it was an enjoyable experience although I would tremble whenever she mentioned a verse from the Qur’an. Sacred texts are very challenging to translate and the Qur’an is no exception.

The baseball game at Turner Field Stadium between the Braves and the Rockies was a fortune moment to witness and appreciate the strong ties that bring Sports and the Americans together. Although the rules were very strange to me – for baseball is not widely practiced in Morocco, I very much enjoyed the game. Two breaks before the game was over, a man and a woman who were sitting in front of us jumped on each other to kiss. I turned my face to look elsewhere just to see them kissing passionately on the huge screen installed on the top of the stadium. I had no idea what was going on. Noticing the perplexed reaction that could perhaps be easily read on my face, Meagan, a very gorgeous and courteous lady who visited Morocco last December, explained to me that it was the Kiss Cam, one of the funniest parts of the game. The video camera continued to zoom in at couples, who would kiss without any slight hesitation. I was waiting for my turn to come!! Unfortunately it did not.

Directed by Dr. Karen Robinson and performed by KSU Performance Studies students, *Fences* is a show that we were invited to watch while in Kennesaw. The play sheds light on the life of an African American family during the early days of the civil rights movement. Everybody was amazed by the strong presence of the characters on the stage. I very much liked the after show discussion, where the audience is given the chance to indulge in an intellectual discussion with the performers and the director; it is an admirable practice that I will try to persuade my theatre friends in Morocco to observe.

The trip to Washington D.C. was just amazing. We had a chance to attend a seminar colored by the presence of some distinguished figures from the world of the academia who share similar interests in community-centered museums as well as some high officials from the U.S. State Department and American Association of Museums, the grant provider for the project. In the museums we visited, ranging from American history to Air Space, we were in awe in front of the professionalism and talent shown in displaying, interpreting and preserving the artifacts. Having free admission to some of the worldwide legendary museums and historical monuments in Kennesaw, Atlanta, and Washington D.C. was an experience full of learning and sensations. Dr. Jennifer Dickey, the brilliant public historian, was very impressive whenever she started talking about the history of each of the colossal buildings we visited. Not only did the trip enlighten me about the hospitality and sociability of the American people, but it also taught me about their open mindedness and their eagerness to discover other cultures and civilizations.

Being involved in “the Casablanca-Kennesaw Project”, as a member of the Ben M’sik project team, has given me the chance to serve my community by helping to preserve its rich traditions, customs and oral histories. It has also made new overseas acquaintances possible. I am very thankful for the American Association of Museums for sponsoring the project and for all the parties that have contributed in making the project a success. I am very obliged to our KSU project partners for their gracious hospitality and for making our visit to the U.S. amusing and enlightening. Last but surely not least, my deepest gratitude to Dean Abdelmajid Kaddouri and Professor Samir El Azhar, the coordinator of Ben M’sik community project, for their trust and unceasing encouragement for the members of the project team.

