

Making Change: Making History!

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Introduction

Pr. Samir El Azhar, director of Ben M'sik Community Museum (BMCM), stated in his welcoming address to the new BMCM members that:

“there is something you have to realize about being members of this museum; by the related projects you will be working on and by the activities you will be doing, you will contribute to making history of museums in your country and in our region of the world!”

I could not realize the depth of his statement when I first heard it. Although I was still fascinated by the idea of being a member of a museum, knowing that I have never got the opportunity to even visit one before, my fascination and zeal could not transcend logic: “Ben M'sik Community Museum is a community-centered museum that seemed to have very limited objectives and concerns. If the bigger, already established museums in Morocco are still at the stage of “telling history,” then how could a local, recently established museum “make history”?”

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1. The First Stairs

It all began two years ago when I added my name to the list of students who showed interest in joining the community museum project of our university. Initially, I did not know what it was all about, and the only guess that I could come up with, at that time, was based on this standard and general definition I had of what museums are: places where artifacts of a particular historical value were gathered and exposed to people. I discovered later on that it was completely different from what I had expected it to be like. The more I got involved and took part in some of the activities related to it, the more I realized what Pr. El Azhar's words meant.

Although the first task we were assigned was to collect any basic objects, tools and pictures that mirror the day-to-day life of people in the neighborhood, little attention was given to this mission, as opposed to the projects designed later on. This little attention to the artifacts collection task, in addition to the limitation of the artifacts to the daily life of the community members, made me wonder what the real aim of this community museum was besides artifacts collection. My humble definition of what museums are did not fully apply to BMCM; therefore, I had to figure out how this one could be defined. There was certainly an ethnographic tendency in the BMCM, but this interest was not predominant, in comparison to some more important goals I would be acquainted with later on.

2. The First Accomplishments

2.1 The First Contact With the Community

The word 'community' in Ben M'sik Community Museum, as I discovered afterwards, was not used there arbitrarily. "Creating Community Project", sponsored by the American Association of Museums (AAM) and the State Department, in partnership with the Kennesaw State University's Museum of History and Holocaust Education (MHHA), Georgia, U.S., was the first step in "making history." The BMCM and MHHA teams believe in the efficiency of international partnerships in achieving challenging objectives—such as the one of the "Creating Community Project". This project contributes to dispelling misconceptions, inaccurate stereotypes and pre-established prejudices about Islam and Muslims in both Morocco and the United States. Initially, I found this endeavor too ambitious for a community-centered museum, such as BMCM, but I could see how this can be feasible if adopted by larger museums in Morocco. Surprisingly, the

BMCM's achievements have eloquently demonstrated this. "Creating Community Project", which has targeted civic engagement, has sought, first of all, to build bridges between the local community and the museum, unlike traditional museums exclusively made for elite and educated people. But BMCM's central objective, through the realization of this project, has been to establish community dialogue, through which museum staffs — from BMCM and MHHA — have engaged in conversations with representatives of their surrounding communities to, firstly, listen to their thoughts and perceptions about Muslims in relation to the Western World and discuss the different issues that relate them together. The project also aims to correct inaccurate conceptions about both the Western World (here represented by the United States) and Muslims around the world. The BMCM, therefore, has embraced community change through education, a mission I, admittedly, have not seen as part of the list of missions and concerns of any of the local and national museums.

My task, along with the other members of BMCM team, has been to transcribe and translate the oral histories that were recorded by the previous BMCM team members, who, together with the previous MHHA team, performed the first part of the project: establishing community dialogue. I thought we would be less contributive in that part of the project, as the previous team had done the most challenging task — collecting the oral histories and data through conducting surveys and interviews with the community representatives, but it was not the case. This part of the project was as important as the first part. The members of my team and I have had the chance to work together for the first time. The challenging tasks of listening to the community members' oral histories, transcribing and then translating them into English have been anything but easy. We, however, have not been able feel the challenge, as we have been concentrating on a much more interesting objective: the content of the oral histories. We have had to learn how diverse, historically valuable and important the Ben M'sik neighborhood is. The community members' oral histories, which the previous team had video taped, have revealed interesting facts that even the students among us who are living in the Ben M'sik neighborhood have not been aware of. Some of these community representatives have gone beyond Ben M'sik area to talk about Casablanca and Morocco at large, which has been a very enriching experience for us. This task has completely shaped my perception of the role museums should play in society, and BMCM has really proved to have revolutionary objectives that will, hopefully, switch the interest of Moroccan museums to more important matters.

2.2 Okba Bnou Nafi Primary School: Drawing Smiles

Ben Msik Community Museum has had more interesting ventures in store for us, and the oral histories transcription task has been a prelude to more challenging projects. Thanks to BMCM community engagement, we have had a chance to volunteer as teachers at Okba Bnou Nafi Primary School in Ben M'sik neighborhood. This teaching experience has been both very rewarding and enriching. Each one of us has chosen a particular subject to teach to this primary school pupils, but most of us have chosen to teach them English. The location of the school, the unavailability of the basic teaching tools and the difficulty that we have faced while teaching these poor pupils have been some of the challenges we have encountered. However, our commitment, willingness and eagerness to serve our community have been our incentive to go over these challenges. In fact, it has been a learning experience for all of us. This experience has testified how committed the BMCM is with its surrounding community, how meaningful its existence is and how unique and significant its goals and concerns are. With every experience in the BMCM, I realize the true value of Pr. El Azhar's statement: we are really making history!

3. Identities: Greater Objectives

3.1 The Acquaintance

My venture in BMCM has been pursued with another promising initiative: "Identities: Understanding Islam in Cross Cultural Context," also co-sponsored by AAM and the State Department. This project, which has been designed to reinforce the strong partnership between MHHE and BMCM, consists in building an online exhibition focusing on themes of identity, migration, sense of belonging, and community. The main objective is to use stories and experiences from the previous project—Creating Community—to generate content through an ongoing photography project that describes the way Islam and Muslims are perceived in the world. The exhibition also contributes to changing the negative worldviews towards Islam and Muslims, views often based on inaccurate, extremist and unreal facts and prejudices. This initiative provides a further evidence for the global relevance of BMCM endeavor, in addition to local contributions as previously described through the community-centered projects.

"Identities: Understanding Islam in Cross Cultural Context" is a new experience and a valuable and challenging opportunity. The project has very ambitious objectives, but we have used creative ways to reach our goals. This online

exhibition is a practical tool to accomplish the designed objectives and a platform to realize our own personal project in future. The challenges that we have been facing while performing the different related tasks have helped us to develop new professional skills and enhance our expertise and knowledge on a great deal of activities. The photography project, which is incorporated as an essential part of the online exhibition, has been a real learning experience. The selection of the photography themes has increased the degree of the required precision during the process of photo-taking. In addition to precision other principles have been adopted such as consistency, creativity and professionalism.

4. The MHHE Team Visit

The recent visit of MHHE team provided us with a good opportunity to work effectively on our common the project. In two days, we achieved what could take weeks to be achieved. Their visit did not only have a positive impact on the project, but went far beyond to have an impact on us, members of both teams. The face to face conversations allowed us to get a better understanding of each other's culture through series of curiosity-incited questions. Even the funniest situations of intercultural miscommunication between some members of the MHHE team and ordinary people in Moroccan streets were instructive. Even though we are already friends through virtual social networks, that friendship had never been significant till it took place in real life. We gained more knowledge about each other's costumes, values and other cultural features, reached advanced stages in our work on the exhibit project and established valuable friendships.

On Monday, December 19th, 2011, the MHHE team came to Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Ben M'sik, Casablanca, to visit the BMCM, where workshops on the online exhibition were conducted with BMCM team. During those workshops, both project teams shared and discussed their findings. The BMCM and MHHE teams combined their efforts and ideas to come up with much more creative, precise and rich data for the online exhibition: homepage introduction and suggested sections for the exhibition were exposed and discussed; there were several common points shared between both teams, which made the combination process easier. A workshop was fully dedicated to the photography project. Both teams excitedly presented their photos and provided additional information to illustrate their works. Professionalism and commitment were evident in the proceedings of the workshops, which clearly shows how meaningful the BMCM and MHHE collaboration is.

BMCM: Making Change, Making History

What I have understood throughout my journey with BMCM is that its numerous projects, engagements and great accomplishments are not very typical of any other Moroccan museum. BMCM is the Muslim world's first community museum and can be taken as a model in Morocco and in this region of the world. I have learned, through the different projects and activities that I have been involved in, that the value of a museum is determined by what it can offer to the local and global communities. Since its foundation in 2006, BMCM has been making significant contributions not only in its community, but far beyond Moroccan borders. "Identities: Understanding Islam in Cross Cultural Context" project is a case in point. BMCM has been connecting with people, raising awareness among them about their own historical and cultural heritage and fostering their acceptance of cultural and religious differences. "The museum lives for the community, and the community lives for the museum," says Pr. Samir El Azhar, director of the BMCM, in the *Creating Community Collaboration* documentary. Though the BMCM's main mission is "to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region," its most significant role is manifested in the full community engagement.

"Making history...!" I have finally realized that those words were not merely part of a welcoming statement that Pr. El Azhar made as we embarked on this journey. BMCM is far beyond an ambitious community museum that endeavors to have a voice in its surrounding community; it has set up a number of objectives summarized in the following:

- to preserve community memories by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region,
- to raise awareness among the community members about issues related to their cultural and historical identity and cultural diversity,
- to reinforce values related tolerance, civic education and human rights,
- to contribute to the prosperity and the sustainable human development of their community.

My dream as a member of the Ben M'sik Community Museum is to witness the emergence of a new generation of museums which serve their local and global communities and which contribute to "making change" rather than just "telling history".