

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

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Globalization, Politics of Identity and the Heritage Work of the Museums

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Abstract

The current socio-economical globalization, with its different effects in terms of social mobility and migrations, spurs new question about identity. Immigrants and new social categories, like, for instance the youth, have to show, for themselves and for the others, particularities and signs of their identities (their new one, but borrowing from a mythic past of origins, that is the same of the one of all the social groups). Some countries have a national agreement on a tradition of communitarianism, others, like France, do not agree to keeping such particular communitary structures in society. Also, economical crisis in old European « rich countries » make difficult, and almost impossible, integration of new social groups. The disappearance of collective « rites of passage », the juxtaposition in the modern cosmopolitan city of different ways of life, which are not original ones but transformed by this very juxtaposition and by the unequal knowledge of traditions of the country of origin, create moral malaise for all, even driving to violence. The paroxysm of that phenomenon of rebuilding – often invented - some (but not all) traditions is the return of the religious. In France and in other European countries, the recent question of « islamic scarf » is indicative of the new role of « objects », as semantic of identity.

Sociological and ethnological studies are necessary for understanding what is happening, and it is not easy in front of very variable situations. But another problem is the position of museums which have to show that the politics and issues of identity, as they have items collections and, for some, representations of the « intangible heritage ». The experience of the new National Museum of European and mediterranean Civilizations (MUCEM), through its studies, collections, and exhibitions, is of special interest to discuss these questions and the relationship between the objects/items and the public : What are the significant items? How visitors understand what the museum shows? How different social categories react to them?