

“My business” – Ethnic Entrepreneurs in Berlin

Museum of European Cultures (MEC) and the Association Neighbourhood Museum (NBM), Berlin

1. Current Situation

A functioning middle class is the economic backbone of any society. But that the corresponding potentials of ethnic minority or migrant economies are not to be underestimated and increasingly have an important role to play in the economic growth and stability of the overall community has not yet been fully realized in the German public consciousness. Given the latest social developments in the wake of globalization processes, demographic shifts and radical changes within the economy, the number of business start-ups in what could be described as the so-called ethnic economy is expected to grow, particularly in larger cities.

2. Content

The MEC and NBM are reflecting on these developments by presenting small and middle-scale businesses or their owners, respectively, from various cultural backgrounds as examples. The objective being an analysis of the entire process, from the conception of a business idea right through to the current situation.

Businessmen and -women with migration backgrounds are conversant with at least two cultures and hence regarded as bridge builders between these – particularly owing to their transnational activities in terms of exploring new markets and developing new marketing strategies. But this attribute can also benefit an urban district’s entire community and social life. Which shape does this benefit take in concrete cases?

The significance of the binational experience of the main protagonists is underscored in the process. These main players include clothing, food, travel, and skilled craft retailers, but also cultural entrepreneurs, for example in the media or music industries. Of central concern in this is an analysis of the interaction between the countries of origin and residence of migrants under a generational aspect.

3. Aim

The project aims to inform the museum’s visitors on innovation potentials within ethnic economies by showing various examples, while simultaneously engaging it in a public dialogue with the project’s participants. Thus it is designed to sensitize the public to the not to be underestimated significance of the ethnic economy and the added value created within a society by cultural diversity.

In addition, the project addresses specific social groups in Berlin from various cultural backgrounds who have not yet been actively featured in an ethnological museum context or only to a very limited extent. By virtue of its cooperation with the protagonists of these groups, the museums hope to open up to a new public who will hence be put in a position to discover familiar items within its walls and perhaps even be able to identify with the museum as a location of its very own memories.

4. Methods

The following methods are applied: general scientific research concerning the various trades and industries; interviews with entrepreneurs, their clients, families, business partners and neighbours; situational observations and accounts; the documentation of product paths and the lifestyles of entrepreneurs and clients; a general documentation of the project via text and photography; finally and most of all the acquisition of characteristic everyday and business-related objects and their documentation.

The scientific research for the project is partly carried out in cooperation with the *Institute for European Ethnology of the Humboldt-University in Berlin*, whose profile embraces above all the subjects “migration and (trans)nationalism”, “transnational networks”, “identity politics”, “urban cultures and ethnic representations”.

Further on cooperation has already been realized with the (organization) International Youth Arts- and Cultural Centre *Schlesische 27*, a platform for intercultural youth education in Berlin and the Carl-von-Ossietzky-School. Here a kind of artistic approach based on photography, video and text was pursued by selected entrepreneurs who were interviewed and (filmed) documented by adolescent pupils within project-weeks. With the help of the corresponding artists they presented the results of their documentary-works in the *Schlesische 27* to an audience consisting of their classmates, teachers, youth workers and of course the relevant entrepreneurs.

5. Sustainability

The essence of the project results will be presented in a small publication and exhibition in the MEC from the beginning of November 2009, followed by a final documentation.

The cooperation with education, economic, pedagogic and youth networks as well as migrant organizations will ensure a sustainable anchoring for the project. The fact that it is being hosted by a museum for European ethnology and cultural history ensures the professional archiving of not only the entire documentation material, but first and foremost also of any cultural testimonies collected to illustrate this particular subject area within the everyday life and business environments at the beginning of the 21st century in Germany.

Photos by Ute Franz-Scarciglia, 2009

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- Tailor-workshop of Mr. Turan, Berlin
- Hairdresser Mrs Hill, Berlin
- Cosmetic studio in Berlin run by Asian woman
- Newspaper shop of Mr. Sengül, Berlin