



Paper Babel: The Instituto Cervantes libraries as multicultural meeting spaces: Begoña Colmenero Niño, Head Librarian at Instituto Cervantes in Tunisia

Summary

The Instituto Cervantes is a public not-for-profit institution founded by the Government of Spain in 1991 to promote the teaching and learning of the Spanish language and knowledge of the cultures found in Spanish speaking countries throughout the world.

The network of Instituto Cervantes Libraries (RBIC) provides indispensable resources for the study of Spanish, helps raise the level of quality of the teaching of our language in the process of learning, research and training models and enriches and provides access to the information available to people throughout the world; people who may live in environments that are vastly different culturally and socially but who share a common interest in the languages and cultures found throughout the Spanish speaking community.

A second mission of the RBIC is to break down stereotypes and eliminate cultural prejudices. The libraries aim to promote the lesser-known side of our culture and our civilization. At the same time, the aim is to provide a setting where a common ground can be found and where personal contacts can be made which in turn can help establish a mutual understanding through activities that include cultural points as widely diverse as music, cinema, gastronomy, literature, cultural traditions, the art world, etc.

This position paper discusses some of the more relevant and more important activities carried out at the Instituto Cervantes libraries throughout the Mediterranean, libraries which function as cultural bridges that provide continuous access to its members who pass through its doors on daily journeys of discovery.

Introduction

The concept of a library has varied greatly in recent years. Until recently, libraries were considered nothing more than book depositories, study halls or, at most, in cases of libraries directly connected to educational institutions, as resource centers for formal education.

Although libraries have always played a basic social role, since when guaranteeing free and equal access to information they become a democratic space, free and open, (as has been the case in the last few years to the extent in which society has evolved toward the so-called **information age** and the demands of users have changed as the libraries have diversified their roles), their structure and services have been forced to grow at the same vertiginous rate at which society advances.

Today, information has become one of the most valuable resources possessed by man, and libraries are the centers that house it, process it, manage it and circulate it.

Libraries nowadays are public institutions for learning, where a continuous exchange of information develops; they are social centers in which users seek much more than mere information but also a space in which they can participate as citizens of their community, a space in which they can come into contact with other cultures, have fun, and grow as individuals.

We live in the era of communication. Due to the great technological advancements of the last few years, there has been an exchange of information, of goods, and of people which has given birth to one of the great phenomena of the 20th century- that of **globalization**. The interest in getting to know someone new, to broaden one's horizons, to learn a new language, to discover cultures different from our own is increasingly greater. Accordingly, libraries are forced once again to adapt to the needs of their public which, on many occasions, is no longer satisfied with having access to its local culture, with resources in its own language; rather, libraries become an access point (through literature, music, cinema, art) to exotic cultures which are far removed from ours.

Furthermore, our cities and our countries are less homogeneous. More and more countries are affected by the immigration phenomenon, in greater or lesser degrees, and for different reasons, but, in the end, the remaining population is increasingly varied and multiethnic.

RBIC: (Red de bibliotecas del Instituto Cervantes) Network of Instituto Cervantes Libraries

In the midst of this sea of changes, technological revolution, and globalization there appeared, 18 years ago now, the network of libraries Instituto Cervantes.

This institution emerged in 1991 with the intention to promote the teaching, study, and use of Spanish and to disseminate the culture of countries and peoples of the Spanish-speaking community. It started off timidly but in its short lifespan has grown at such a fast rate that it currently counts with 73 centers in 30 countries and 5 continents. It has a network of 61 libraries, which just as the institution itself, has been in continuous growth since its creation. It is now the largest network of Spanish libraries worldwide.

If we take a look at the geographical distribution of these centers, we see that while they are mainly expanding throughout America and Asia, the greatest concentration of centers is found in the Mediterranean area due to historical reasons, where there are currently 22 libraries situated in [Amman](#) (Jordan), [Algiers](#) and [Oran](#) (Algeria), [Athens](#) (Greece), [Beirut](#) (Lebanon), [Casablanca](#), [Fez](#), [Tetouan](#), [Rabat](#), [Marrakech](#), [Tangier](#) - one of the oldest network libraries (Morocco), [Damascus](#) (Syria), [Cairo](#) (Egypt), [Istanbul](#) (Turkey), [Madrid](#) (Spain), [Milan](#), [Rome](#), [Naples](#), [Palermo](#) (Italy), [Tel Aviv](#) (Israel) and [Tunis](#) (Tunisia).

The origin of each of these libraries is as diverse as the country in which they are located. In countries which historically have had some connection with Spain, North Africa, the Arab world, and the Philippines especially, libraries and educational centers which already existed aboard were absorbed by the RBIC and became part of the network, bringing with them their collections, facilities, services, and staff. In other cases, the libraries are an entirely new creation and their openings in many cases are the first launching of a Spanish cultural institution in that country.

Therefore, we find libraries that, while pursuing a common goal, respond to very heterogeneous profiles, due as much to their diverse origins as to the differences amongst the host countries in aspects as important and as diverse as the level of development, their library tradition, the number of languages spoken, their colonial tradition or their historical relationship with Spain.

Thus, something that characterizes the RBIC library network is that, unlike other libraries that have had to adapt and to reinvent themselves against the phenomenon of cultural diversity, this network was already born with a multicultural spirit.

The Multicultural Nature of RBIC

Bibliographical content: A journey through multiple languages and cultures without leaving the library

The bibliographical content of the RBIC is a clear example of the multicultural nature we refer to. It consists of more than one million volumes, ranging from modern and classical culture to subjects as varied as music, art, history, literature, and architecture, with which we intend to offer a wide, up-to-date, objective and varied view of the Spanish culture as well as to meet the needs of a varied audience, which changes and is renewed continually. The predominant language in these works is Spanish but there are also numerous works in the other official languages of the Spanish State (Galician, Basque, and Catalan). Due to the

center's international aspect and its status as a multicultural meeting place, its resources include works published inside and outside our borders.

Two of its most important departments, both in the number of volumes as well as in the number of loans are **language and literature** and **Spanish language teaching materials**. These sections meet the objective of supporting its teaching activities in the center but they are also of great value for low-income people who are studying Spanish on their own and they serve users who have already studied Spanish keep up with their knowledge of the language.

The **local section** is another key section in any Cervantes library. It creates the true link between Spain and the host country where the library is located by encompassing:

- works about Spain and translations of Spanish and Latin American literature into the local language. In this section are found works that are difficult to find in Spain and thanks to which we are able to reach a public that is interested in learning about our culture and which can access this information in its own language.

- works published in any language spoken in the state where the library is located and translations of its literature. This content is accessed by the Spanish speaking community living in the host country, who often does not speak the local language; it also constitutes a reference source for other libraries and Spanish institutions that access it regularly when organizing certain activities about the host country.

- works about the political, historic, and economic relationships between the two countries in any of the languages spoken in the host country. It is here where some of the **special collections** are housed, which have been growing in the various libraries- a fact which we mustn't overlook. One of the most extensive collections is the one dedicated to Africa and the Arab world in the Tangierian library. It is one of the best collections on the history of Spanish in North Africa over the past few centuries, composed of about 9000 documents encompassing colonial literature produced in Morocco in the area of the Spanish Protectorate, the French Protectorate, and the international zone of Tangier, a Hispanic-Arab section with works on Al Andalus, Arabigo-Andaluzian literature, in Spanish and Arabic, works on Morocco, Ceuta, Melilla, Gibraltar, Strait Zone, Canary Islands, former colonies of Ifni, Sahara and Equatorial Guinea and works on Tangierian themes of great value since many of these copies are the only remaining copy of its kind. This collection is broadened with some resources (materials) currently available in the libraries in Rabat and Tetouan.

Moving along the Mediterranean area, we find the Sephardic collection, where we find documents related to Judaism and Spain or to the Jews who were forced to abandon Sepharad after the Expulsion Decree in 1492 (including abandoning Ladin in all of its manifestations and throughout the world). This collection is comprised of some copies belonging to the Tel Aviv and Istanbul Cervantes libraries. In the latter center, what has carried the most weight when deciding on what works to acquire, has been the Sephardic or Ladino, a very active language in Istanbul and one which is highly treasured in families that still speak it.

A collection dedicated to the most universal and most translated work in Spanish literature could not go unacknowledged. Traducciones del Quijote ([Quijote Translations](#)) is a collection that was created on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the first edition of Don Quixote and which currently boasts around 200 works in the following languages: Albanian, Arabic, Basque, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Galician, Georgian, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Lithuanian, Maltese, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, Swedish, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese and Yiddish.

This exhibit is currently available in the Instituto Cervantes Library in Madrid, but a virtual catalog is also available.

Finally, similar collections include: Fortificaciones Españolas en Oran ([Spanish Fortifications in Oran](#)), found in the library of that same city, el Fondo AISPI ([AISPI Collection](#)) where we find all of the works published by the Association of Italian Hispanistas, which were donated to the library in Rome, and the Imagen de España, which aims to analyze and show how we have been perceived and how we continue to be viewed abroad. Another collection, found in the headquarters in Madrid, includes chronicles of travelers in Spain that date back several centuries, studies on our image of prestigious Hispanistas such as Kamen, Thomas, Inman Fox, and studies on our international relations country by country. Authors such as Orwell, Anderson, Washington Irving, and Dumas are also included in this last collection in works in which they narrate their travels through our country.

Also, out of an attempt to find common ground between both countries (Spain and the host country) and in order to individualize each of the libraries in the network, comes the idea of baptizing each library after an author who has generally had a special relationship with the city or country where the library is located. Thus, we encounter cases such as the library Max Aub in Arge, Vicente Aleixandre in Tetouan, and Maria Zambrano in Rome. Libraries which have been baptized as such are responsible for promoting the life and work of their respective author, for acquiring a special fund dedicated specifically to the author and his works both in Spanish and in the local language and to implement activities which promote these authors, who are clear examples of the fusion of cultures we are exposed to today and which aim to represent our libraries in these sections.

In recent years, the number of [electronic information resources](#) available through our web pages has increased considerably. This specialized service is requested more and more frequently because it provides data and content that's both rigorous and of high quality; it is made available in its academic and scientific aspect to potential users who otherwise would not have access to it because they live in an environment that's precarious at times, technologically as well as academically.

Because of this, this service is of great value and it is especially valued in countries with a low or nonexistent development in funds, facilities, and library services, as it serves to alleviate some of these shortcomings.

Activities: Participation, enjoyment, and enrichment for everyone

We all have stereotypes and prejudices usually due to ignorance. Although the image of Spain is gradually changing throughout the world, there are still, much to our regret, many people who associate it mainly with flamenco, bulls, and the sun and beach. When we ask people outside of our borders about their knowledge of Spain, we realize how limited the majority of the references are concerning our country. Concerning literature, the best-known names are Lorca or Cervantes, and if we ask about art, films or music, we hear mainly Gaudí, Picasso, Almodovar or Julio Iglesias. There are far too many people who do not know much more than this about us. Our mission is to broaden that image, to publicize new names that, while they may not be universally known, they certainly are not uninteresting.

We must not forget that in many countries, our centers are the only link to the Spanish culture, both for interested locals as well as for the Spanish expatriates, and they are the main source of information about our country abroad.

In order to end with cultural prejudices, stereotypes, and ignorance, we need to not only support the cultural life that's carried out in the center, but also create a cultural program with our own activities, new activities (guided tours, exhibitions, book launchings and

readings, workshops, contests, concerts, debates, film screenings) in which our users, our members, can feel engaged. It is through these activities that the human factor enters into play and where our libraries achieve an added value which can only come from interaction, exchange, and communication about our knowledge and our experiences.

Therefore, in addition to having an extensive and varied collection of volumes, as has already been mentioned, we need to know how to promote it. We shouldn't wait until the users discover it on their own because we run the risk of having the users limit themselves to what they are already familiar with. There are many ways by which this goal can be achieved, and as a demonstration, I will share some of the most interesting approaches undertaken in the RBIC network in the Mediterranean area.

One of the activities that works well is a **bibliographical exposition** of part of our collection which for any number of reasons is considered important enough to show, as was done with the exposition "Traducciones del Quijote" ([Translations of Don Quijote](#)), or samples of a series of works, generally literary, in Spanish and in the local language as was done with the exposition "From Spanish to Turkish and from Turkish to Spanish", organized in 2003 by the RBIC library in Istanbul, which was exhibited in Istanbul, Ankara, and Bursa in cooperation with several local libraries. Another good example of such an activity was the exhibition "Ex libris: Network of the Instituto Cervantes Libraries", which included a group of international experts on Spanish literary collections who gathered in order to create a line of work that would promote a dialogue between Spanish professionals and professionals from abroad.

The **literary social gatherings** are commonplace activities that take place in many of the Cervantes libraries. On one hand, people who are learning our language are offered an environment where they can practice it and be in contact with native Spanish speakers who attend these gatherings. On the other, it's one way to meet or discover authors or lesser known aspects of literature. These gatherings also serve as a forum for discussions and exchanges of ideas where everyone's experience is enriched. Often, they serve as an opportunity to make comparative studies of different aspects of the host country's literary tradition with our country or with other countries, and finally, they serve as an opportunity to compare ideas about topics in which all interlocutors are interested. For example, looking for similar story characters that are found in both traditional Arabic literature and Spanish literature or exploring imaginary geographies in Mediterranean literature.

Oral tradition is another approach to involving users in the library world in general and in textbooks in particular. Activities as basic as a gathering of users in which they share an anecdote, a story, a riddle, or a tongue twister from their own culture are greatly enriching and so simple to implement that they are widely welcomed by the users themselves.

A widely used approach is a **literary competition**, in which participants often search for themes that symbolize the cultural fusion, cultural intermixing, that is sought out through these activities. On one hand, users have the opportunity to show their creativity and understanding of literature. On the other, they also have to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge as quite often these competitions are carried out in Spanish. An example of such a competition is the "Literary Competition of Traditionally-Oral Tunisian Tales" carried out at the Instituto Cervantes in Tunis in April of 2007 in conjunction with International Book Day, where participants presented orally, in Tunisian dialect, an unpublished Tunisian tale which forms part of the Tunisian oral tradition, and which was later read in Spanish in front of an audience.

Cinema is another field that usually awakens much interest in the center's users. Besides screenings of classical films in the local language or multiple cycles of current topics, there have been other interesting activities that have accompanied these screenings, such as encouraging the audience members to select part of a movie, translate it into Spanish and then dub it. If the activity ends with a screening of the dubbed scene, then this activity is certain to be a success.

And why not organize a **cooking contest** in which participants are required to write their recipes? Later, these recipes can be organized and published in book form. This would help our students display their competency level of our language and would also help many others discover the culinary delicacies found in the Mediterranean countries.

Often, many of our users aren't accustomed to using our catalogs or are unaware of how the library functions and of the services provided therein. To achieve this goal, **guided tours** are offered in the local language. These tours are part of the services provided to new students but they are also offered to all new visitors. As part of our mission as a center for training, for informational literacy, and lifelong learning, special sessions are organized in order to share resources devoted to a particular sector of our users, such as teachers of Spanish, or those who aim to improve specific skills such as "How to research a topic" or "Use of electronic information resources".

Story time, literature, writing and drawing workshops, chats, participation at book fairs, conferences, and book readings, ect.,... there are so many ways to learn about someone else, to broaden one's horizons, that we often surprise ourselves when we realize how much more there is to learn.

The library on file: Documentary works

Documentary works compliment the activities carried out at our centers as well as the collections housed within them. Each library has its own web page and its own paper guide which must be, at least, in both the local language and in Spanish,

Perhaps the most popular documentary product is our collective catalog on line where all of the information pertinent to our collection can be accessed. We mustn't forget that when we speak of a network of libraries, regardless of where each collection is located, they all form part of the same common catalog which, in turn, makes our resources accessible to all of our users in countries where we have a seat, thanks to our interlibrary loan service.

Quite often, users who are not familiar with Spanish artists, authors, the Spanish film industry, or Spanish culture in general find the process of selecting a book or a film a difficult task. These are the users who find **thematic guides** very useful. Guides such as "Films about immigration/ immigration from the perspective of Spain, Africa, and Latin America" and "Literature guide on Dariya, a Moroccan Arabic Dialect", were developed by the Cervantes Library in Tetouan. These guides often offer a more practical approach to finding what the user needs. They provide information and advice on common topics such as requirements for enrollment in a Spanish university, how to attain a university degree, or course catalogues from Universities in Spain.

A recent addition is the **thematic dossier**, prepared by the Department of Information Science based in Madrid and available on line. These dossiers are born out of the need to respond to the demands for information, something which is commonplace throughout our

host countries as these are themes that the majority of our users are interested in. The majority of these dossiers has been well received and has been widely used by our users. There have been instances where the needs of our users were anticipated, when creating these dossiers. A few examples of such dossiers are: [Scholarships for Foreign Students in Spain](#), [The State of the Spanish Language around the World](#), and [Perceptions of Spain Abroad](#).

Finally, we mustn't forget the advantages of the emergence and incorporation of information and communication technologies, which offer us the opportunity to create broader networks and communities, eliminating the physical borders that were an obstacle until recently. With social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, the library has become more participatory, leading to far more fluid and constant communication and more information exchange with our users overall, something which helps us get to know and understand them better.

The great advantage of social networks is that because they are free, very flexible, and easy to navigate both by users as well as by the librarians who administer them, they are widely used, which makes it a vehicle that increases our center's presence and visibility on line and helps us reach a larger audience, including people who would normally not visit a library. Through these social networks, we create ties between persons who do not even know one another but who share common interests. For example the [blog created by the library in Tunis](#) or the one by Algiers titled [Libraries, development and the Arab World](#) can be interesting to a Tunisian as well as to a Jordanian, or perhaps even a Greek. The links and the comments posted on [Twitter](#) by the librarian in Naples can turn out to be very practical to a reader in Oran, or the links recommended on [De.li.ci.us](#) by the librarian in Rabat can be of great value to someone who reads up on them in Cairo.

The Human Factor: interaction between librarians and users

Another of the key factors in the RBIC is its personnel. The librarians are, along with its users, the ones that give these institutions its special character.

The attention devoted to the public is essential on a daily basis. That is why it is fundamental that those who are responsible for the libraries, and above all, everyone who interacts with library users on a regular basis, besides being adequately trained, technically and professionally, needs to be hospitable, communicative and tolerant. It is very important that they are able to interact with users in their native language, to facilitate communication, to break the ice with newcomers, or to help new visitors overcome their shyness. They need to be able to accept and overcome potential cultural differences and adapt to the norms of how the library is run within the context of the host country.

It is they who have to put into practice the values and principles that guide the activities and management of the network of libraries, becoming agents of change who create libraries engaged with civil society, meeting places that promote an intercultural dialogue and a participatory environment for all those who see themselves as part of the library.

A large part of the RBIC workers are expatriates who have themselves experienced what it takes to adapt to life in a new country, learn other languages, learn about different cultures and assess what all of this adds to their overall personal growth and enrichment. That is why they represent a very valuable aspect of the library network, because their experience and their cultural and personal 'baggage' are essential when managing a library that encompasses these characteristics.

Another quality shared by the personnel at the RBIC is their cooperative nature, since they work within a network made up of a team of professionals who all share resources, experiences, and subject-specific knowledge. They also play a role as links between local library centers, education centers, cultural centers and Spain since, among other tasks, they promote and supervise the exchange of information specialists between Spain and the host country or the geographic zone in which they are located, they assess the management or creation of networks of libraries between countries lacking a library infrastructure, and they are part of international associations that work towards the development, modernization, and improvement of libraries of the host country. Examples of such organizations that we belong to are: [Committee for the Support of Libraries in Greece \(CLS\)](#) [Innovative Library Initiatives Promotion Group \(ILIPG\)](#) in Istanbul, and [The Egyptian Library Association International Committee \(ELIA\)](#), which this year named the RBIC library in Cairo as the Best Library of the Year.

I cannot end this article without mentioning our users, since it is for them whom we work and without whom all of our efforts would not have any sense. More than 700,000 visitors pass through the doors of the RBIC every year and the informational needs of more than 56,000 users are addressed every year. All of these people have something in common as they all come to our libraries searching for cultural references, a place where they can broaden their cultural knowledge, a space where they can be accepted regardless of their ideas, religion, nationality, or native language. Many of them seek an opportunity to practice the language they're studying; others seek people who live in the countries they would like to visit, a country they come from, or a country where they have a relative. Students, journalists, architects, diplomats, vendors from the Great Bazar, expatriates, tour guides, Spanish professors, translators, philologists, Hispanistas, lovers of flamenco or salsa, Greeks, Turks, Italians, Tunisians, Jordanians, Syrians, Moroccans, Algerians, Spaniards, Egyptians, Israelites... all of them have talent, they all have something to contribute and we all should share our language, as well as our artistic and cultural richness, because it is in this way that we will be able to create true social spaces and share the feeling of belonging to one single community.

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