



death & diversity

newsletter update

This is the first in a series of newsletters to keep you informed about the project

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Death & Diversity Project, how it came about

In November 2009 Museums Wellington and the Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA) teamed up to develop a project exploring ethnic communities' experiences, rituals and practices around death and dying. Its particular emphasis will be on how ethnic communities in New Zealand have adapted their practices away from their homelands.

The Project

The project is made up of an exhibition, public programmes and a devised theatre work to be developed by Voice Arts Trust with young members from ethnic communities.

While the exhibition looks at individual stories, a series of public programmes will enable participation from across communities which we hope will include music, dance, stories and lectures, films and workshops. We welcome your participation and would like to hear any ideas or suggestions on how your community could be involved.

The exhibition and accompanying programmes will be staged at the Museum of Wellington City & Sea from November 2011 until May 2012 and is supported by the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand (FDANZ)

Background

For many, death is a subject which is approached with a degree of fear and trepidation. Thoughts on death are left until the 'last minute' and, until it happens to us or a loved one, we try and steer clear of it. This may be changing as an increasing number of people begin to take more control of their funeral and burial arrangements. One of the objectives of the exhibition is to highlight how the experience of death and dying can bring people together and both forge and strengthen community relations. It is our hope that through sharing ideas and experiences about some of the associated

ethnic rituals, practices and beliefs around death visitors will have a greater understanding and appreciation of the richness of cultural and religious diversity. Finally, we would encourage visitors to think about their own experiences of death and consider that death is a normal and inevitable part of the life cycle.

Where we are at

During 2010, we have spoken with participants from eight different community and religious groups. Interviewees came from Assyrian, Jewish, Mexican, Colombian, Muslim, Chinese, Hindu and Filipino communities. It has been a real privilege to listen to the different philosophies, practices and experiences from the contributing individuals. During the discussions we have been touched by the many ways in which love and respect are expressed through the enactment of rituals by loved ones and communities. Further thoughts and some images from the initial stage of the project are available on researcher Meena Kadri's website (see below).

In many cases, a death serves to bring not only family but whole communities together. The different experiences contribute to the considerable diversity and richness which shapes New Zealand's culture. Some common themes discussed were around funerals, mourning and memory. And attitudes towards death in relation to life and after life were also mentioned. Now that the initial discussions have taken place the team will be looking at the exhibition as a whole and deciding on which topics and whose stories to explore further.

We look forward to updating you on how the project is progressing in the New Year.

Jaqui Knowles, *Exhibition Curator*
Museums Wellington

Pitsch Leiser, *Ethnic Adviser*
Office of Ethnic Affairs

Museums Wellington





death&diversity
partners



Voice Arts Trust

Death & Diversity Theatre Project

We see the Death and Diversity project as an opportunity for young people aged 16-29 to re-connect with their cultural heritage, traditions and histories, and to celebrate their cultural identity.

Participants from diverse ethnic communities will come together to creatively explore the rituals and practices of death from a personal and cultural perspective. They will be guided towards the creation of a performance piece that speaks to that exploration and reflects the group's diversity. The performance will also reflect the experience of sharing, learning and working together.

The performance will be staged at the Museum of Wellington within the same space as the 'Death and Diversity' exhibition driving interest in and supporting the work created by the ethnic communities involved.

Nicola Pauling, Voice Arts Trust
nicola@voice-arts.org.nz



Caring Funeral Professionals

Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand, project supporter

The Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand is pleased to be associated with this project. From birth to death, rituals play a very important part in our lives.

As funeral directors, we are in a unique position to observe and be involved in the many varied ways in which our increasingly diverse nation deals with dying and death. We have witnessed the comfort cultural rituals give to our families and have seen some of them evolve over time as families become more integrated into the New Zealand community.

This project is a wonderful opportunity for New Zealanders of all cultures and ethnic groups to learn more about their brothers and sisters in New Zealand, and to promote greater understanding and tolerance

Robyn Grooby, *Executive Officer*
Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand





death&diversity
from a participant

Andria Pablo
member of the Mexican Community

The Museum already works with various communities and a regular event is the celebration of the Mexican Day of the Dead with an altar set up in the Museum and a procession.

One of the participants, Andria Pablo, describes what it means to her:

“Well the Day of the Dead means the celebration of life itself. Life is a duality at all times in which the whole is only possible with all its parts, and that means that life is only possible with death. Life, or existence, is a constant cycle.

To me the Day of the Dead is the celebration of the dead and to remember all the people that have already passed away; it should be a happy day full of memories about life, to remember and value why are we here in the first place to live, to perceive, to grow, to love, to die. In Mexico the whole country turns colorful and full of music. People will visit their beloved ones and have picnics in the cemeteries, sharing food, stories and music. It is believed that people who died come back to life in different forms, perhaps the soul goes back to mother earth to keep bringing life to new generations, in that way we all are one.... that's my perspective!”



*Andria Pablo and
the Day of the Dead
altar at the Museum of
Wellington City & Sea*

websites of participants

Museums Wellington

<http://www.museumswellington.org.nz>

Office of Ethnic Affairs

<http://www.ethnicaffairs.govt.nz/>

Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand

<http://www.funeralsnewzealand.co.nz/>

Voice Arts

<http://www.voice-arts.org.nz>

Meena Kadri

<http://www.randomspecific.com/lifes-inevitable-transition>