

## **The cultural issue at the core of international relations**

Koïchiro Matsuura

*The more the globalized sphere increases, the more the magnitude of the differences to be understood increases. The comprehension and the upkeep of cultural diversity are therefore imperative today, and thereby the need to develop veritable cultural policies, integrating all the players: international organizations, States, civilian societies, the private sector. The education and the conservation of heritage (in the wider sense of the term) undoubtedly constitute the most immediate stakes.*

*FOREIGN POLICY*

It has become regular practice to associate culture and politics in the area of international relations as testified by the words pronounced by the President of the African Union (AU) Commission, Alpha Oumar Konaré, in May 2005, at the head office of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco): “the cultural battle is also a political project aimed at giving a social content to the Union and at constituting around Africa an entire set of influence”.

These strong words illustrate a widely shared awareness, and compel us to reflect on the most opportune manner of doing a rethink on the place reserved for culture, relieved of its *soft issue* status to borrow from the vocabulary of lawyers, on the national and international agenda.

The fresh worries that plague us – development of terrorism and inter-ethnic violence, gender inequalities, poverty, pandemic diseases, the crisis of cross-cultural dialogue, threats on human security, etc. – render our societies more opaque to themselves, uncertain of their future and even of their past. We must urgently focus our action on global issues, in order to respond to the quest for meaning and intelligibility of our contemporaries. It is clear, especially since 11 September 2001, that the cultural issue in the broader sense of the term – cultural policies, promotion of cultural diversity, dialogue between cultures – occupies the centre stage of political preoccupations. Today, everyone is looking for a universal ethical framework whose principles could inspire and irrigate the entirety of the national and international policies, in a situation wherein it becomes imperative to reaffirm equal dignity of cultures. This orientation was most specifically reflected during the Global Summit on sustainable development held at Johannesburg, in 2002, during which it was acknowledged that culture was the fourth pillar of development, along with economy, ecology and the social aspect.

Keeping in mind the drifts, divisions, and at times the crimes arising in the name of culture, it is henceforth imperative to respond to this social demand in favour of a much wider acknowledgment of that which founds diversity and pluralism.

This naturally induces a few questions: can any debate on culture still be placed at the local or the national level? When cultures speak, who is actually speaking? Which are the regulatory mechanisms of cultural diversity in the world?

The manner in which we can answer these questions, including in the prescriptive field, arouses a number of hopes and fears. Unesco, the only organization of the United Nations system to be endowed with a mandate in the domain of culture, has a very heavy responsibility in this respect.

The ever increasingly differentiated functioning of societies and cultures obliges us today to think of history as a process, as a set of interactions, meetings, transformations between men and cultures. This modifies our perception of the role of cultural policies, which are at the very core of the contemporary debates on identity, on social cohesion, on sustainable development. Therein lies the entire issue of the "cultural challenge" which confronts the future architect of international relations, especially if we wish to give ourselves the means, within the space of globalization, to reconcile the universality of rights with the diversity of the human condition.

### *Globalization and cultural diversity*

The very principle of exchange implies the acceptance of diversity, but globalization at times seems incapable of taking this into account. More the sphere of the globalized world increases, more the extent of the differences to be understood increases. At the same time, such and such character, such and such originality, so far confined to a territory, a culture, a history, appear today as one of the common figures of the universal, and should learn to be exposed to an almost unlimited access.

The notion of "diversity" is essential here, because it reminds us that pluralism is the necessary breeding ground of liberties, that cultural pluralism constitutes the political response by the very way of cultural diversity, and that it is indissociable from a democratic framework. In this context, the freedom of speech, the pluralism of the media, multilingualism and the equality of access of all the cultures to artistic expressions, to scientific and technological knowledge, the possibility for these to be presented in the mediums of speech and broadcasting, constitute the essential guarantors of cultural diversity. Further still, we understand why cultural policies, veritable driving forces of this diversity, are today at the centre of everyone's attention: they can create the conditions conducive to the production and the distribution of varied cultural goods and services.

It is from this reflection on diversity that cultural policies were debated upon in various inter-governmental and non governmental bodies in the recent years<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in the wake of the

adoption by Unesco, in October 2001, of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, several were the international initiatives aiming to nurture reflection on the strengthening of the prescriptive action in the area of cultural diversity<sup>2</sup>.

Referring to culture in this context is somewhat risky, since this term has known so many different acceptations and interpretations in space and in time. That is why it is appropriate at this juncture to specify what the term "culture" may mean today, and hence, "cultural diversity".

### *From culture to cultural policies*

When the Unesco was created in the aftermath of the Second World War, "culture" essentially referred to artistic production, the fine arts and literature. Besides, the memorandum of association of the Organization urged it to work towards "ensuring to the Member States the independence, integrity and the rich diversity of their cultures", postulating thereby the existence of distinct cultures coinciding with the frontiers of the United Nations.

In the '60s, in the context of decolonization, more stress was laid on the recognition of equal dignity of cultures and the need for policies aimed at cultural cooperation in the service of the countries having just attained independence<sup>3</sup>. This new step made culture, acknowledged as a factor determining identity and development, a key element for the endogenous development of the countries<sup>4</sup>.

It is the Declaration of Bogota, at the culmination of the Intergovernmental Conference on the cultural policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, in 1978, which put the finishing touches to this evolution, by clearly setting forth that "culture, as a set of values and creations of a society and the very expression of life, is essential to this and is not just a means or ancillary instrument of social activity<sup>5</sup>".

Gradually, in the wake of the works carried out on cultural anthropology, we have come to consider culture, or rather cultures, no longer as a homogenous whole of distinct and static isolates, but as a node of active and dissymmetrical relations. This lays the foundations, from the '80s onwards, of the numerous debates on cultural development, cultural pluralism, multiculturalism and the necessary "dialogue between cultures and civilizations".

Today, the reference definition of culture, as written down in the Universal Declaration of Unesco on Cultural Diversity of 2001, is inspired by the conclusions of the Global Conference on Cultural Policies of Mexico in 1982 (Mondiacult), the works of the Global Commission of Culture and Development ("Our creative diversity", 1995) and the Intergovernmental Conference on cultural policies for development (Stockholm, 1998). "Culture must be considered as the

entirety of the spiritual and material, intellectual and emotional distinctive traits that characterize a society or a social group; it includes, besides arts and literature, the lifestyles, the manners of collective living, the value systems, the traditions and beliefs"

The valorization of this "creative diversity", particularly in aid of the most ill represented cultures, in particular in the exchanges of cultural goods and services, constituted a profoundly political act.

The recognition of the expanded horizon of culture thus outlines the principle of a cultural policy founded on the acknowledgment of diversity within societies, and among them. It also legitimizes the interaction between cultural policies and development, through five objectives: to make the cultural policy one of the key elements of the development strategy; to encourage creativity and participation in cultural life; to reinforce policies and practices, with a view to safeguarding and bringing into focus the tangible and the intangible heritage, moveable and immovable, and promoting cultural industries; to promote cultural and linguistic diversity within the scope of and for the information based society; to allocate more human and financial resources to cultural development.

This overall approach to culture as a driving force of development will contribute towards de-enclaving cultural policies for making them essential elements of a sustainable development. Developed at the national level and within the scope of an international environment of consultation and cooperation, cultural policies are henceforth conceived as areas of confluence between social and economic, educational, teaching and research, and information and communication related policies.

On the eve of the new millennium, all this leads to the unanimous adoption of the Universal Declaration of Unesco on cultural diversity, and the appointment of cultural diversity as the "common heritage of humanity".

Taking into account the new stakes related to globalization, this declaration therefore lays emphasis on the notion of cultural rights, which apply equally among States and within the States as well, and emphasizes the dynamic nature of each culture. Furthermore, by upholding the need to accompany developing nations, or the nations in transition, in the promotion of their cultures and the implementation of viable and competitive industries, it restores the principle of international solidarity and cooperation in the cultural arena. Last but not the least, it calls upon each State, in abeyance of its international obligations, to define its cultural policy and to implement the same through means deemed to be the most appropriate ones: "In the face of present day economic and technological change, opening up vast prospects for creation and innovation, particular attention must be paid to the diversity of the supply of creative work, to due recognition of the rights of authors and artists as well as to the specificities of cultural goods

and services which, as vectors of identity, values and meaning, must not be treated as mere commodities or consumer goods" (article 8).

Armed with its plan of action, the declaration thus intends to take up the two pronged challenge posed by cultural diversity: on the one hand ensure the capability of individuals and groups to build a harmonious "togetherness" by relying on an intercultural dialogue within societies or among them, i.e. build a cultural pluralism as a political response to cultural diversity; on the other hand protect and bring to the fore the multiplicity of the forms which express cultures. In other words, defend creative diversity so that this remains the space for the dialogue between cultures.

### *From cultural diversity to intercultural dialogue?*

Intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity are at the very core of the debate on the future outlines of international relations. Cultural expressions, as we know, translate the richness of the imaginary, the knowledge and value systems. They are the compost of a renewed dialogue, which can lead to the integration and participation of each and every one in the "wanting to live together" of the societies. This bet can be won only if it is founded on a creative diversity which is respectful of each and every cultural expression, insofar as it comes within the scope of the upholding of human rights and basic values.

From culture to cultural diversity going through intellectual and moral solidarity, through cooperation for development, through intercultural dialogue and conservation of cultural diversity as the collective heritage of humanity, the commitment of the United Nations, upheld by Unesco, remains unchanged: it is founded on the paradigm of a plural humanity, wherein the cultures are as many dynamic processes and continually reinvented by the very fact of putting them in dialogue. To the vision of a world made up by a handful of "civilizations" corresponding to unchanging and shut cultural units, and against the paradigm of the "shock of civilizations", one must contrast it with the vision of societies whose very richness stems from dialogue, exchanges, transfers.

The debates caused by the publication in the press of the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed in September 2005 reminded the international community of how these issues were loaded with meaning and signification. No doubt at all at this juncture that one must first of all forcefully reaffirm the inalienable character of the principle of freedom of expression: the very basis of democracy, this can not be questioned, and we must worldwide see to upholding and defending it.

The media, the vehicle of analyses and information useful for a better understanding of the world, is a particularly important element of dialogue between cultures and civilizations. However it is imperative not to allow situations to settle in wherein two principles which are equally necessary for human dignity are likely to clash: the freedom of expression and the respect for individual moral and religious convictions. Over and above this, this debate made us come face-to-face with the manner in which each society negotiates and demarcates, in a distinct manner, the frontiers of that which may be said and that which can not be said, of that which may be represented and that which can not be represented, of irony and of blasphemy. These frontiers are fluctuating, and therein lies the complex relationship held by each individual, group or community with history, with culture, with the sacred. May we therefore learn to recognize that there is no consensus on the positioning of these frontiers, and that it becomes our responsibility today to get to know better the outlines, the bends, and the evolutions of the same. This is a discussion that the international community must lead, by bringing the concerned parties closer. On this condition, we will succeed in reinstating, as Unesco is striving to, the means to a serene dialogue, devoid of violence, respectful of each and everyone.

### *Which partners?*

It is within this context that we must think of new roles for new players, or at least roles that have been reconsidered in the light of the new deal. Given the fact that the equilibrium of international life has been profoundly altered, the roles of its players find themselves radically transformed.

The objective is to gather forces which work in favour of cultural diversity: the States and the public sector, the civilian society, the private sector. As contributors and beneficiaries of cultural diversity, we should all be the guarantors of the same as well. By the sides of the States, the commitment of the non governmental organizations (NGO) and the constitution of international networks in favour of the respect to be given to diversity are the concrete signs of international responsibility already at work.

This responsibility should be able to be handed over to a political arena which does not allow itself to be entrapped by divisions, but relies on consultation and local, national and international coordination. Today, the policies of protection and promotion of cultural diversity go beyond the field of cultural policies in the strict sense of the term, and necessitate a concerted action at all levels. At a time when globalization is from day-to-day tightening the links of interdependency between Nations and wherein cultural diversity proves to be a major issue in cultural, social, political and economic terms, this perspective is vital for cultural diversity, which can not be the subject of a Manichaeian debate between the "all cultural" and the "all commercial".

## *Perspectives*

In this context, the political issue of the years to come about is to place this discourse on diversity at the very core of international relations, by making sure that the cultural aspect is approached in its entirety. Each form of creation, from the time it is conceived in complete respect of universal values and in a spirit of openness to the Other, contains the seed of a meeting, a dialogue wherein each one draws the capacity and the freedom to be transformed. Several areas for action appear to be essential in this regard.

- *Education*, first and foremost. It should be used for understanding the complexity of the cultural issues, for putting them in perspective in a lucid and critical manner, by adapting them to the educational contexts of the concerned societies. A reform of the contents of textbooks, teaching material and study programs, keeping in mind the challenges of interculturality, is a priority issue today, and urgently necessitates greater coordination on the bilateral and international plane. At a time when societies are increasingly learning to live in multicultural environments, and when symbolic conflicts from memory are coming in the way of the theme of integration, the issue of teaching, owing to cultural diversity, becomes essential. This implies a rational and critical pedagogical discourse, a discourse for the deconstruction of the national myths, for putting in the right perspective of the national past, with a fresh outlook on the status of the Other – in particular the revision of history textbooks, indispensable if we wish to contribute to the emergence of communities with freely consented memories and open to difference.

- *Action in favour of the heritage*, after this. On the normative plane, Unesco, for quoting only it, has developed and adopted not less than seven international conventions ever since the '50s for conserving the numerous aspects of cultural diversity, seen under the double view-point of heritage and contemporary creativity.

In its heritage aspects, cultural diversity is incarnated in material built heritage, with numerous cultural sites and monuments protected on account of the 1972 Convention on the protection of world heritage, cultural and natural, but also on account of the Convention for the protection of cultural goods in case of armed conflict (first protocol of 1954, second protocol of 1999). As for the moveable property, it is protected on account of the 1970 Convention pertaining to the measures to be undertaken for banning and preventing illicit imports, exports and transfers of property of cultural goods, reinforced by the 1995 Unidroit<sup>6</sup> Convention on stolen or illicitly exported cultural goods, as well as by the Convention on the protection of sub-aquatic cultural heritage adopted in 2001.

The intangible cultural heritage, which, for a long time, has not received a sufficiently sustained attention, is today the subject matter of an International Convention for the safeguard of the intangible cultural heritage in 2003. Languages, oral literature, music, dance, games,

mythologies, rites, customs, the know-how, architecture, as well as the traditional forms of communication constitute admirable testimonials of the diversity of cultures. To continue to safeguard and promote these far too often neglected intangible cultural heritages, with the help of the States and the participation of the concerned communities, requires a great deal of courage, especially on the political plane. These heritages install diversity at the very foundation of our reading of the history of societies.

Contemporary creativity, which had till now only benefited from the 1952 Universal Convention on copyright<sup>7</sup>, revised in 1971, has also been endowed with a normative instrument in 2005: the Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, which put the finishing touches to the normative edifice developed by Unesco for promoting cultural diversity. The foremost vocation of this convention was aimed at reinforcing, in an interdependent manner, the five inseparable links which pave the way for the diversity of cultural expressions to manifest themselves, renew themselves and be profitable to societies as a whole: creation, production, distribution/circulation, access and enjoyment of cultural expressions.

While simultaneously recognizing the sovereignty of the States for developing cultural policies at the service of the diversity of cultural expressions, and the specificity of the "cultural activities, goods and services", distinct from the goods of regular consumption, the Convention created for the first time ever in international law a sphere dedicated to culture. This was indeed a major innovation, which places culture at the forefront of the international political agenda today.

These instruments, which constitute the synthesis of the strategy of Unesco in matters of protection and promotion of cultural diversity, translate in legal terms into article 7 of the Universal Declaration on cultural diversity: "Each creation draws its inspiration from the roots of cultural traditions, but blossoms when it comes in contact with other cultures. This is the reason why heritage, in all its forms, must be conserved, brought into focus and transmitted to the future generations as the testimonial of human experience and aspirations, in order to nurture creativity in all its diversity and inspire a veritable dialogue among cultures."

Conserving heritage is in fact conserving its diversity, thinking in terms of identity and difference. Unesco, on its part, has not stopped ever since the post-war years to make the international opinion aware of this imperious necessity. It is in this spirit that the first big international campaign in favour of the temples of Abu Simbel was launched, as far back as 1959, following an appeal from the Egyptian and Sudanese governments. This success, which made it possible to at last dismantle, move and reassemble the temples of Abu Simbel and Philae, was followed by other big conservation campaigns and appeals for international cooperation, in particular for saving Venice and its lagoons (1966), the archaeological ruins of Mohenjodaro in Pakistan (1974-1997) or the Borobudur temple compounds in Indonesia (1972-1983).

Besides these big international campaigns, a great number of projects were undertaken on the request of Member States – for example, ever since its registration on the World Heritage list in 1995, the conservation works, in Easter Island, of the gigantic personalities made of stone, or the *moai*, megalithic statues which create an unequalled cultural backdrop, in perfect harmony with their natural environment, which are so fascinating to our contemporaries.

The integrating role of heritage in the prevention of tensions and conflicts or in their resolution should also be emphasized. In the course of the past years, in Mostar, Bamiyan or Baghdad, we strove to place the cultural heritage at the core of national policies for reconciliation and reconstruction. The aid for the return of the Aksum obelisk to its original site, at the behest of the Italian and Ethiopian governments, comes within the scope of this perspective. In South-East Europe, if one were to take only this example, the concept of "cultural corridor", promoted by Unesco, is an example of this will to put cultural heritage at the service of creativity and a deeper dialogue among communities. These cultural corridors, around which cultural and commercial links have been forged between countries over a period of several centuries, can thus serve as the framework for strengthened regional cooperation and understanding, in an open dialectic between cultural identity and plural identity. More recently, in Lebanon, Unesco successfully reminded with immediate effect the Israeli and Lebanese authorities – in their capacity as signatories of the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural goods in case of armed conflict and of the 1972 World Heritage Convention -, of their imperious duty towards the protection of Cultural Heritage.

Last but not the least, the media and information and communication technology are today, more than ever before, at the very core of the device aimed at revitalizing and promoting a critical and enlightened dialogue on the creation and circulation of cultural expressions, as well as intercultural dialogue.

A great part of cultural contents (artistic expressions, information, values, etc.) are henceforth circulating thanks to the Internet, with a tremendous impact on the imaginary of individuals and their perception of the world. Their creative diversity is being put to test, as the sources of these contents are limited in scope, as also their access. Therein lie the consequences of the digital divide, which does not only translate in an unequal distribution of networks but also in a lack of training as regards their use and an unequal distribution of the expertise for creating content. It is in this context, a noteworthy fact, that the World Summit on the society of information has made the defence of cultural diversity and linguistic diversity one of the eleven broad orientations of its plan of action.

These involve immense scopes of action, which should find the international community laying great emphasis on the development of local cultural contents and expressions, on the promotion of multilingualism in cyberspace, on the use of new information and communication technologies

for the conservation of heritage and the memory of humanity, in order to enrich the range of cultural diversity available for future generations.

If we do not intensify our efforts, we run the risk of witnessing an even more serious fragmentation and ratifying the break-up of the deepest links of social cohesion in the short term. The magnitude of the challenge which consists in opening the scope of international relations to the plurality of cultures, to the circulation and transformation of knowledge, practices and memories is very vast indeed. Only the international community in its entirety – international organizations, the States, civilian societies, in their broader sense of the individuals who comprise it and organizations which represent these individuals or the private sector – could take up this challenge.

### **Koïchiro Matsuura**

Former First Secretary of the Japanese delegation to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), he has had a long career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan: in 1994 in particular, he represents Japan at the G-7 summit. In 1999, he is elected General Director of Unesco and is today serving his second term in office.

1. For the sake of taking but a few examples, the European Council has adopted a Declaration on cultural diversity (7 December 2000), which emphasizes the specificity of the audio-visual sector with respect to other industrial sectors, by specifying in particular that "cultural and audio-visual policies which encourage and respect cultural diversity should be considered as a necessary complement to commercial policy". The international organization of Francophony (OIF), through the Cotonou declaration (June 2001), adopted on the occasion of the third Ministerial Conference on culture, upholds on its part that cultural goods and services should constitute special treatment, and that the free determination of the States and governments to adopt their cultural policies constitutes the best guarantee of the plurality of cultural expression. One can also think of the International Network on cultural diversity (RIDC), which brings together artists, cultural activists, cultural bodies and creative industries, whose works have laid emphasis on the need for an instrument guaranteeing support extended to artists and participation of the civilian society, and which encourages the States in adopting a proactive and non defensive stance in the matter of cultural policies.

2. One can cite, among other examples, the round table entitled "Cultural diversity and biodiversity for sustainable development" within the scope of the World Summit on sustainable development (Johannesburg, 3 September 2002), the Francophony Summit (Beirut, October 2002), the annual meet of the International Network on cultural policies (Cape Town, South Africa, October 2002), the adoption of the resolution A/RES/57/249 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, proclaiming 21<sup>st</sup> May as "the World day of cultural diversity for dialogue and development" (20 December 2002).

3. From 1960 to 1980, emphasis has been laid on international cultural cooperation for meeting with the needs of the countries which had just attained their independence. This initially translates in the adoption in 1966, by the Member States of Unesco, of the Declaration of the principles of international cultural cooperation, which expresses a

political will of cooperation in order to attain the goals of peace and prosperity as defined in the United Nations Charter. The role of the "national cultural policies", for its part, will be fully recognized only on the occasion of the Inter-governmental Conference on the institutional, administrative and financial aspects of cultural policies which was held in Venice in 1970, stipulating in its final report that "the public authorities can and should exercise in this domain, as in many other domains which concern the dignity of individuals and the development of communities, the functions of stimulation, organization and assistance which have become an integral part of modern societies". The adoption of the Convention on the protection of world cultural and natural heritage, in 1972, brings out to the fore this double responsibility, both national and international, with respect to world heritage, through a series of provisions set forth within the scope of a "national protection and an international protection of cultural and natural heritage".

4. In 1988 the United Nations launches the "world decade for cultural development", which in particular calls upon the States to grant more importance and recognition to cultural development, cultural identities, to the conditions of participation in cultural life and international cultural cooperation.

5. It is interesting to note that this conference has played an important role for the recently independent countries in their affirmation of the role of culture and cultural policies as an instrument of political and economic liberation. This conference also marks an important stage by introducing the idea of "hybrid cultures" and by upholding the importance of the cultural diversity of people as a "factor of equilibrium and not of division".

6. The International Institute for the unification of private law (Unidroit) is an independent inter-governmental organization whose vocation is to study the means of harmonizing and coordinating the private right of the States or of groups of States and to gradually prepare the adoption by various States of uniform rules of private law (NDLR).

7. Presently, two conventions promulgated by Unesco dealing with the protection of copyright (Universal Convention on copyright of 1952, last revision in 1971) and related rights (Rome Convention for the protection of artists, performers, producers of phonograms and radio broadcasting bodies of 1961). The scopes of application of these conventions have been recently updated, with the adoption by the World Trade Organization (WTO), in 1994, of the Agreement on the aspects of intellectual property rights which relate to trade (ADPIC) and the adoption of Internet Treaties (1996) by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Certain aspects relating to the status of creators and artists are dealt with in the Recommendation pertaining to the artist's condition (1980), a non-restrictive instrument which continues to be feebly followed in the cultural policies of a majority of States. The scope of application of this recommendation was revised during the World Congress on the artist's condition (Paris, 1997), which insisted on the aspects relating to the funding of arts, aid extended to creation, artistic education, art and new technologies, the working conditions, the tax system and the health of artists, the right to collective negotiation and the mobility of artists. Measures of harmonization and the adoption of international instruments of a restrictive nature have been recommended by the Congress.

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