



FINAL COMMUNIQUE

Omani Cultural Days: focus on intercultural dialogue

6-9 June 2006, UNESCO, Paris



organized by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of the Sultanate of Oman,
the Permanent Delegation of the Sultanate of Oman to UNESCO
and the UNESCO Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue,
in the framework of the *Arabia Plan*

Paris, 9 June 2006

To celebrate the proclamation of Muscat as the Arab Cultural Capital for 2006, UNESCO hosted from 6 to 9 June 2006, within the framework of the Arabia Plan, the Cultural Days of the Sultanate of Oman, on the theme of intercultural dialogue. The event began with addresses by H.E. Mr El Sayyid Abdalla Bin Hamad al-Busaidi, President of the Financial Control Service of the Sultanate of Oman, sponsor of the Omani Cultural Days, H.E. Dr Musa Bin Jaafar Bin Hassan, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of the Sultanate of Oman to UNESCO and President of the General Conference, H.E. Dr Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri, Director-General of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), and Mrs Françoise Rivière, Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO. The event ended with addresses by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO and H.E. Mr Jaifer bin Salim al Said, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to France, Doyen of Arab ambassadors in Paris.

By virtue of its geographical location and its political and cultural investment throughout history, the Sultanate of Oman was well endowed to initiate these days of reflection at a time when deep-seated tensions are driving rifts between cultures and civilizations, threatening to bring them into conflict. Its endowment was perfectly illustrated by papers on such themes as “Islamic civilization and the role of the Omanis in consolidating its ties”, “Oman, a place for inter-civilizational meetings and exchanges”, “Omani archaeological sites and their reciprocal influence on intercultural dialogue”, “Oman: landscape, heritage and photography” and “The role of the incense trade in forging ties among civilizations”. Similarly, reference was made to the substantial contribution of the philologist and lexicographer Al-Khalil Bin Ahmed al-Farahidi on the occasion of the celebration at UNESCO of the 1300th anniversary of his birth: papers on this lexicographer’s experience and his discoveries in Omani poetry, his poetic metre and rhyme and their influence on other languages, his founding role in grammar, lexicography and Arab metrics, his techniques of knowledge and his compilation of the Al-Ayn dictionary gave rise to a wide range of comments.

Several artistic events (exhibitions of books, articles belonging to Al-Khalil bin Ahmed al-Farahidi, silver jewellery and works of art – sculpture, painting and installations – a musical evening and a film show) illustrated the quality of this dialogue in a wide variety of ways.

Among these events, an international seminar on “New Stakes for Intercultural Dialogue” addressed the challenges of intercultural dialogue at the international level, within the Arab world and in modern cities. The seminar shed new light on the nature and forms of intercultural dialogue in a world where intolerance and rejection of the Other are again on the offensive.

Bringing together participants from all geographical, disciplinary and institutional horizons: academics (philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, literary critics and architects), officials from international organizations (ISESCO, Council of Europe, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures and United Cities and Local Governments), writers and artists and many non-governmental organizations, the meetings went beyond a strictly conceptual approach to focus on the renewal of the intercultural dialogue in areas in which it has broken down or has been discredited.

Several key ideas emerged from the debates:

- first, the need to find an approach other than the clash of civilizations premised on the fact that no civilization is unitary and no culture is monolithic, as both are the product of exchanges and borrowings, both carry within them the potential for rifts and dissent

which in turn may create other units; the monolithic vision of a culture or the confinement of a culture within its differences is often merely the way in which culture is viewed from the outside. Care must be taken not to limit a civilization or culture to one of its major features, such as its language or religion, and to remember that it is an indivisible whole that constantly takes various forms, depending on the memory and aspirations of each individual and each group;

- secondly, the fact that intercultural dialogue mobilizes not only States but civil society as a whole, even in defining the role of the State and local government, in an effort to influence not only those who already believe in intercultural dialogue but also those who do not feel concerned. Intellectuals and artists play a major role in shared responsibility for the dialogue since thought and imagination are both fertile seedbeds. The urgent need for linkages between the three levels – global, regional and local – in order to promote intercultural dialogue, which is both vital and fragile, was stressed. One possible response lies in the definition of the middle ground in which the debate within each culture – transcending its own divergences – is the condition that must be met for all debate on external matters, even in the most ordinary spaces characteristic of our “being together”, namely our cities and neighbourhoods;
- finally, it was proposed that the idea of dialogue between societies on the basis of everyone’s experience of interpersonal dialogue be considered anew. The discussion showed that engaging in dialogue is not an easy solution but a risky one, entailing the risk of each person’s cultural identity and thought being transformed, the risk of misunderstanding which makes it necessary to weigh words, question translations and attempt to anticipate the thoughts of others, and the paradoxical risk of being too well understood, that is to say, the risk of unwillingly revealing some deeply-held doubt or conviction that may weaken us. The following question, which may be the subject of another seminar when dialogue moves too far ahead, too quickly and without due vigilance, was raised: if too much attention is paid to cultural differences, would that not cause intercultural dialogue to fail as a result of the over-heightened awareness of the various groups? Should the “right to difference” and the “right to resemblance” not be promoted concomitantly?

These are risks to be taken, courageously, to permit actual dialogue, suffused with the requisite measure of improvisation and endangerment and enriched by recognition of the intrinsic differences of each culture and of each individual’s cultural identity. If these differences are overlooked, intercultural dialogue would ultimately be relegated to being the poor relation of the political dialogue.

During the debate, reference was made, at the regional level, to the Arab world, both as a mediator and as a place where cultures flow together, a melting pot for intercultural dialogue, whose wealth is reflected in the heritage, in innovative philosophical and scientific thought, in the rich and highly diversified arts and letters, all treasures of humanity, which many speakers brought to life by portraying them within the dynamics of exchange, both ancient and modern. The seminar participants endeavoured to answer more precise questions: how have geography, language, religion, science and human ingenuity helped to shape intercultural dialogue throughout history? In response to the new challenges posed by globalization and heightened by the development of communication technologies, have new forms of intercultural dialogue, notably its virtual forms, changed its traditional structure? To what extent has intercultural dialogue mobilized the cognitive abilities and the imagination and diverse sensibilities of dialogue participants?

The exchanges provided an opportunity to evaluate a number of local intercultural policies based on numerous micro-initiatives, with reference to the basic components of ancient cities, drawing on the example of Baghdad, the “universal city”, among others. The discussants emphasized various aspects of the city as a vital arena for everyday dialogue with a view to sustainable governance. The public arena should not be regarded as residual space but as a space for shared walks, conviviality and the promotion of social ties. The contribution of creativity – in the form of the heritage but above all in the form of “urban literature” – was analysed as an area of freedom in which people, in their own way, appropriate an imaginative world, adopt it as their own and thus feel imperceptibly transformed.

Such local projects, in the same way as those implemented internationally, raise questions as to the relationship and the approach to otherness: at the local level, one of close proximity, and at the international level, stigmatization – stemming from the other’s view of things or from distorted public opinion – generates stereotypes that perpetuate differences and close any openness to dialogue. Just as there can be no negotiation with the other without negotiation with oneself, so too is dialogue, understood as transvaluation, necessary, in that it entails looking at oneself in an informed manner as a result of contact with the other. The scope for dialogue does not therefore depend only on openness to discussion but also on a much wider dimension of interpersonal communication, in which eyes meet and looks are exchanged.

During the Omani Cultural Days the profile of intercultural dialogue in the world today and lines of action to preserve, conduct and refine it, from the local to the global levels, were defined.

Such specific and innovative courses of action will help UNESCO to continue to fulfil its primary mission, which is to build peace in the minds of individuals, founded upon mutual understanding between peoples and their intellectual and moral solidarity. This is an inalienable feature of the work of the Organization, which considers culture, diversely expressed as heritage or in modern forms, to be a vector of dialogue and social linkage.