

Tunis-Kairouan, June 2, 2009

International conference on

DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS
AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Address by

H.E. Mr. Abdou Diouf, Secretary General of the International
Organisation of *La Francophonie*

The spoken text shall prevail



Mr. President,

Mr. Director General,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here, in all awareness, to prepare for the fully justified judgment of future generations.

We are here to design the future and notably a more equitable, democratic and peaceful future.

We are here to turn our desire to promote responsible and fruitful dialogue among civilisations that respects cultural diversity into concrete action.

We could not have wished for a more emblematic host country than Tunisia, a leading Mediterranean nation and a founding member of the International Organisation of *La Francophonie*, a country, which as you so rightly pointed out, Mr. President, “has contributed significantly to world culture”.

We could not have wished for such prestigious high patronage as the one you honour us with, Mr. President. Please accept my most heartfelt and fraternal thanks. Allow me to pay homage to the Statesman under whose guidance modern Tunisia has become a nation open to the world and to the future, while still showcasing the treasures and genius of the prestigious influences of the past. Allow me too, to pay homage to your skilful and unrelenting efforts to develop cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean and further dialogue among civilisations.

We could not have wished for a more fruitful and inspired alliance than the one which now unites the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Organisation of *La Francophonie*. Our two organisations share similar missions, values and ambitions. Together, Mr. Director General, they represent 120 States, including several that are members of both. Given the numerous and diverse cultures they represent, our two organisations are automatically and legitimately fated to pave the way for exemplary dialogue, to prove that a clash of civilisations is not inevitable and that humanity is not condemned to self-destruction.

We are here because we believe that cultural diversity is to Man what biodiversity is to Nature and that we are taking an immeasurable risk for the future by not safeguarding both now.

We are here because we believe that every culture can preserve its identity without obliterating the Other's.

We are here because we believe that all religions can tolerate and open up to one another in the shared language of humanity.

Yet, we are also here because we are lucid enough to admit that the promises that came with post-Cold War globalisation are far from fulfilled: the promise of more equitable sharing of information, knowledge, progress and wealth; the promise of more democratic management of transnational problems which concern the future of all peoples and nations; the promise of fairer exchanges between cultures and of greater solidarity and mutual aid.

Because regulations, humanisation and ethics are missing, universal real-time communication, free trade and the disappearance of frontiers have meant society and individuals have lost their bearings and are afraid of an uncertain future. As a result of this precariousness, they have turned inwards on themselves, seeking refuge in the familiar and in the past, succumbing to the temptation to cut themselves off in a bid to preserve a cultural identity they fear could be diluted or scattered. Because truly democratic and equitable world governance is lacking, some strive to dominate, control and colonise both territories and minds. Consequently, hundreds of millions of men and women feel scorned, humiliated and forgotten by progress and decision-making.

We are here because we are lucid enough to admit that, though the threat of cultural standardisation is real, what is at stake is not just the survival of cultural diversity itself, but also how this diversity will be exploited.

Just look at how cultural values are often misappropriated to serve belligerent designs, strategic interests and power struggles. Just look at the identity wars and ethnic and religious conflicts that have multiplied over the years even within nations. Just look at the shameful justifications brandished by some as excuses for war or blind terrorism.

We are here because we are lucid enough to admit that, as a consequence of increased mobility and unprecedented migration, the Other with all his differences, is now a neighbour though seldom a fellow-countryman. Ignorance and suspicion continue to fuel discrimination, racism, exclusion and volatile clannishness.

So, we are here because we refuse to allow the rule of the strongest to impose a cultural Darwinism upon us.

We are here because we refuse to allow culture or religion to be used to justify political oppression and violence.

We are here because we refuse to allow prejudice, suspicion and the lumping together of Muslims as terrorists or Westerners as infidels to prevail in human relations.

We are not here to engage in smokescreen dialogue. We are here to find concrete solutions so people with a history, traditions, values, beliefs and different cultures can talk to and understand each other and become sources of mutual enrichment. We are here to incite genuine curiosity and open-mindedness towards the Other. In short, we are here to trigger a real intellectual and spiritual revolution.

However, we are here with the certitude that true dialogue is only possible if it is based on the acknowledgement of the other person's difference and identity and on the awareness of the fact that ultimately we all share the same Planet and the same human destiny.

We are here with the certitude that fruitful dialogue is only possible if it is based on reciprocity and mutual respect between cultures restored to an equal, dignified footing. Or, to put it in the wise words of the Arab proverb: "One hand cannot clap".

We are here with the certitude that lasting dialogue is only possible if it is based on the desire to promote sustainable development as well as democratic relations and international organisations.

These certitudes incited the International Organisation of *La Francophonie* to join forces with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and launch an innovative dialogue among civilisations aimed at transforming good governance of cultural diversity into concrete action. These same certitudes have led it to develop cooperation with the Portuguese and Spanish-speaking worlds, with the Latin Union and also with the Commonwealth.

However, though international and regional organisations and national governments should indeed lead the way, provide the impetus and create the conditions for this dialogue, social players, global cultural and educational stakeholders and the media must also work daily to anchor and foster this dialogue. Historians, philosophers, social science specialists and theologians have a vital role to play too and, ultimately, responsibility also lies with each and every one of us.

This is the only way we can claim to offer future generations the promise of a new dawn, the promise of a more united, more democratic, more peaceful world, the promise of a universal civilisation devoted to peace, reconciliation and progress.

To conclude, I would like to formulate the wish that Kairouan, 2009's Capital of Islamic Culture, will always be associated with the beginnings of this new civilisation where every man will want to and will have the right to declare, in the words of Khalil Gibran that: "the Earth is my fatherland and humanity my family."

Thank you.