

J.M.G. Le Clézio

Nobel Prize Winner for Literature 2008

&

Issa Asgarally

Doctor in Linguistics (Paris V-Sorbonne)

The
Intercultural
and the
Arts



Centre for Research on the Intercultural



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Table of Contents

Some Ingenuous Thoughts on the Intercultural by J.M.G.Le Clézio	1
A Certain Universality? by J.M.G.Le Clézio	9
Why the Intercultural? by Issa Asgarally	19

Some Ingenuous Thoughts on the Intercultural

by
J.M.G.Le clézio

Address at the University of North Carolina, USA

In our present day of global crisis and crony capitalism, perhaps we should reflect on the sense we want to give to the word “culture”? What culture? For whom? Following what modes of expression? And to what end?

The word “culture” is not a new word. However, it seems to have taken on during the last century a meaning it did not convey before. In France, at the end of the XIX century, they would speak of “race”, “customs”, or “literature”. I remember the time when, in France, the textbook of philosophy ended with Greek and Latin philosophy, from Aristotle and, Plato, to Ovid, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, or Saint Augustine. They made a brief reference to the “pre-Socratics”, but forgot about Manilius and astronomy.

Towards the end of the manual, a few pages made a mention of some of the oriental ideas, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. But the book’s comment was that those teachings could not bear the name of philosophy. At best, they would be moral codes, at worse mere superstitions. As for the prehispanic Americas, and the Pacific cultures or African people, they were not even mentioned. The greatest part of the world was then a black hole as to philosophy and culture. In Mauritius, at the same period, to say that someone was cultivated, they would say “well-groomed” — he,

or she had received enough education to show politeness, elegance, the use of the British understatement, and reluctance to “show-off”. In France, Malraux had a famous saying on culture, compared to marmalade: the less you have of it, the more you spread.

Nowadays, culture has an important role in social life. There are ministries of culture, whose utility is not proved. We have cultural attachés, cultural centres. The word replaces literature, visual arts, cinema, dance, and music. We even speak of “street culture”, “minority culture”, “subculture”, and even of “counter-culture”. We find in the same word oxymorons and opposites: if culture is the place for protest, it is also more than often the symbol of imperialism and oppression of identities.

During the reign of the Nazis, the German culture (so called Aryan, impregnated with the idea of pure race) did electrify the people and justified the oppression and elimination of the other cultures, deemed inferior. Such a violence has not been a unique example in history. Imperial Japan experienced the same downfall, and the colonial states of Europe before that tried to justify their conquests by the civilizing role they pretend to play towards “barbarian” nations of Asia and Africa.

In the name of culture, in a more recent past, some political powers managed campaigns of exaction and ethnic purification, in Cambodia, or in Africa. In China, the so-called Cultural revolution aimed at the total annihilation of the corrupt heritage. Culture then was identified as part of politics, not anymore the expression of individual identity, but of the whole of the influential forces of society. We know what disasters have followed such programs, and the

fully caused by the realization of utopias. Nevertheless, we know that such ideas are not dead, and from time to time we see them reappear, under different masks. If they do not express brutally ethnic purity, they still try to convince that some cultures are superior to theirs, giving rise to the illusory arguments of the followers of Samuel Huntington, that the world is divided by fractal lines, preparing the clash of civilizations. Noam Chomsky summed up the attitude in “The West, and the rest” – that is, we, and the others.

Culture, for whom, and by what means? As a writer, I prefer to speak about books. Literature is an important part of our present culture, because it is founded on language, linking the individual with the linguistic domain from which he or she derives.

Literature is the perfect place for exchange. Through the novel, poetry and theatre, the public has access to the truth of a territory, both material and spiritual. The portrait is seen in its most profound truth, not through tinted glasses.

Truth in literature has nothing to do with politics, propaganda, or even moral rules. Truth can be bitter as in *Shadow of thorny bushes* of the Korean novelist I Seung U, sensitive as in *Birth of the day* of the French novelist Colette, squalid as *Nausea* of Jean-Paul Sartre, militant as in *Grapes of Wrath* of American novelist Steinbeck, or emotional as in *Call it sleep* of the New York novelist Henry Roth.

By the grace and power of literature we can step inside an alien’s mind to the point that it becomes our own. Literature is found in the heart of a nation, of a language. The great question is access to literature: the percentage of people reading in France

is extremely low. And if we speak of poor countries, the number is insignificant. The causes of low access to culture are numerous: illiteracy (in Mauritius for instance, the percentage of illiterate is around 30% of the population, mainly women). Lack of resources, lack of public libraries. Printing was invented nearly a thousand years ago, and access to books is still an inaccessible luxury for the largest part of humanity. Literature is not only a social class privilege, as defined by sociologist Gramsci. It is above all an impossible world, for most humans as unreal and as far as the stars in the sky. In that imperfection in communication, culture then becomes a kind of elusive element, sometimes violent as a rude stream and sometimes slow and motionless as a marsh, where politicians find the nutriments for their personal battle.

As an illustration of the power of exchange in literature, allow me to share with you some personal data. One of the greatest emotions in my childhood was reading two books, whose authors I was not aware of at the time. One was the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the anonymous relation of a young boy accompanying an old blind man in his begging in the streets of a Spanish town. The other was the *Quixote* of Cervantes. Both books belonged to the private library of my great grandfather, who had been the Chief Judge at the Supreme Court of Mauritius and constituted the unique family heritage. Those books were by no means ordinary. They were, like all the books my ancestor bought during his life, collector's books, beautifully bound in leather and illustrated with engravings. *The Quixote* was translated by Louis Viardot and illustrated by Tony Johannot, a mid XIXth century edition. I spent many days reading and rereading those books, as if they had been written for me.

Then, when I grew up, it gave me matter for thinking. I realized that my great grandfather, a very wealthy man, had preferred books to anything else, and probably lost part of his fortune because he was more attracted to the adventures of the knight of La Mancha than by the administration of his sugar estates. Then, after he went bankrupt, he eventually escaped the company of his contemporaries in Mauritius and took shelter with all his books in the city of Bordeaux in France, and then in Montparnasse in Paris, where he died during the typhus epidemic at the end of the First World War.

In fact, the way he treasured his books more than his fortune gave me an explanation on what we call culture. It gave me the hint about what is at stake in the word “culture”: that reality is always challenged by creation.

In a way, that lesson seems completely at the opposite of what is cherished in our contemporary world. To have been so much attracted in Mauritius by the adventures of the ingenuous hidalgo, meant more than curiosity, the capacity to see the essential of the human mind in a totally exotic *décor*.

In fact, I could imagine there were common points between Spain at the time of Don Quixote and Mauritius, in the busy, gaudy, unruly life, in the common boldness of the people, their use of the Creole language, and their never defeated sense of humour. I could imagine my great grandfather and Hidalgo walking side by side in the popular streets of Port Louis – the Court of justice being very close to the bazaar – or going horse riding in the countryside, where the Hidalgo could have fought against the sugar mills, and look for the love of Dulcinea del Toboso in the midst of a materialistic and skeptical high society.

As a matter of fact, I found later, thanks to my great grandfather's love for books, that at the very same time the Judge was reading the book, Don Quixote was reborn in Mauritius, under the name of the poet Malcolm de Chazal-- an enthusiastic and inventive player of words, always ready to pursue his mediocre contemporaries.

Indeed, if the intercultural is a difficult dream, it is due to the fact that culture is too often affiliated to power. Most of the powerful nations of today are unicultural. They offer their social models and their cultural achievements as unique references, imposed on the rest of the world.

As I am strongly confident in the role of literature, I am convinced that it will contribute to the advent of the intercultural. Through translation, free access to books, access to other cultures, through public libraries, and from now on, through the miracle of Internet. The intercultural is not a fancy dream.

As sociologist Issa Asgarally wrote, the choice is clear: it will be the intercultural, or war. For realistic reasons more than candid optimism, I am convinced that the future will be embedded in peace and sharing.

Mauritius has a vocation towards the intercultural. Since “*létan lontan*”, as they say in Creole, since long long time, this small independent island has known the necessity of mixing the genes and the cultures. Today, even if the wicked prophecy of Mr Huntington has not proved right, and the policy prepared by the so-called Institute for War and Peace has been a total failure, the international situation is somewhat tense. Discrimination and radicalism seem to grow, in

the developed countries as well as in the poor dominated states. We have to keep always in mind the wise comment of the great humanist Erasmus, who was addressing Albert of Brandenburg, bishop of Mayenz, in 1519, on the subject of the religious wars: "All that does not please one, all that is not understandable to one, is called heresy."

It is not by chance that the Foundation for the Intercultural and Peace (FIP) was born in Mauritius in 2009. Thanks to the constant dedication of my friends, Dr Issa Asgarally and his wife Sarojini Bissessur, this ancient dream can be achieved, step by step, in a common good will. We need to carry on, together, not only in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean, but everywhere, by all means, to keep that dream going.

A Certain Universality?

by
J.M.G.Le clézio

Closing Event at Duke University, USA

If we think about it, is there anything less universal than literature? Bound to a language, to a culture, to a political milieu, literature expresses communalism, regionalism, and sometimes patriotism. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Tou Fou, were the glory and the honour of the countries where they were born, of the language they served — which they most of the time did not even choose.

Moreover, writers had a durable influence on their language, they gave it new forms, suppleness and truth. As French Renaissance poet Du Bellay expressed it, they illustrated and defended their mother tongue, by giving proof that it could be used to express thought and beauty as well as the ancient languages – in the case of neo European languages, which had to rival classic languages such as Greek, Latin or Sanskrit.

In a way, by their art, writers participated in the competition of languages, often unjust and unequal. They contributed to impose on plural and diversified countries the use of a unique language and a unique culture. Art has been since the origins at the service of a central power, and has worked out the invention of the “minorities”.

Has it been damaging? It is difficult to imagine what the world might have been, if, instead of the greatest currents of thought (religious, philosophical) the nations had been broken up into numerous languages and states, of which the greatest part would have been on the scale of a tribe. This would not have prevented communication, exchange of myths and techniques, nor the migration of ideas. The world might not have been more peaceful, but maybe it would have spared us bloody conquests and worldwide conflicts.

The American indigenous civilizations give us an idea of what could have existed in a state of division of languages, precisely regarding art and oral literature.

Ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss gave the demonstration of the constancy of myths, covering America in the two hemispheres, from the Behring straits to the tip of Patagonia – and thus, the coherence which appeared beneath an extraordinary complexity. The great recurrent themes are always present, as they can be found also in China: division of space in four directions and colors, balance between male and female, cyclical time and the omnipresence of the dragon. In Europe, we have a common structure of the society divided in three classes, the myths linked to stock breeding, and the heritage of the Semitic world, the quest for a lost paradise and the threat of the great flooding. Plus the interdiction of images, which has periodically affected the arts and literature, especially at the time of religious wars.

Literature is the product of a place and an era. Cervantes invents the satirical novel at the moment when in Europe the bourgeoisie is replacing the feudality. At the same moment, the painter Georges de la Tour makes fun of the petty aristocrats, and represents them as victims of the tzigane women who rob their money.

The chivalry novels are already out of fashion, only the ignorant conquistadores quote them, in particular the Amadis des Gaules to illustrate their combat against the indigenous people of America. What they do not know, is that the Aztec people they are trying to submit, are on the other hand, totally impregnated by a pessimistic prophecy, which makes their defeat ineluctable. Had the Spaniards been aware of this, it would probably have changed nothing, and their conquest would not have been less ferocious. Universality, for the conquerors, had no meaning.

Let us go back to the theme of universality. The author of this short essay, even if he does not belong to another century, does remember the time at school when the textbooks of philosophy were limited to the Greek and Latin philosophers. At the end of the manual, a few pages would mention some of the other streams of thought, in China, in Japan or in India. The comment was that those streams did not represent philosophy, but at best something like a moral code, and at worst mere superstition. Evidently, no mention was made of the other continents, Africa, America, or the Pacific Ocean. In terms of philosophy, those were blank spots in history.

Fifty years later I am not sure that this vision has changed. In France, for instance, is asserted the total superiority of the rational thought, and the heritage of the “Lumières”, which culminates in the Declaration of the rights of man and the citizen in 1789 – albeit not woman’s rights, as the radical playwright Olympe de Gouges found out, and was beheaded by the revolutionary tribunal of Robespierre.

The consequence should be a universal republic, the only system capable of offering peace and harmony to all nations. The corollary,

unfortunately, is the pernicious idea that all cultures are not equal, and that exists a hierarchy in languages, in arts, and in ways of life.

Let us speak of literature. This long preamble aimed at presenting the writer as part of an historical context.

So who is a writer? A man, a woman, born and educated in a country, who has inherited a language and a literary corpus, and has to put down the stakes to compose a new game. This heritage is an important part of the vocation of a writer. But it is not all. When the writer is not writing, he, or she has to make a living. Meaning that he, or she, most of the time, has to work to earn a living. The writer will be a teacher (like Mallarmé in English, like Sartre in philosophy, or Julien Gracq in geography); a doctor (like François Rabelais, Céline or André Breton); a seller of fabric and sheets, like Daniel de Foe, a priest like Thomas More, a soldier like Agrippa d'Aubigné or Cervantes; a telephone seller like Malcolm de Chazal, or an agent of the water company like Juan Rulfo.

Sometimes, the writer might do extraordinary jobs, like Madame Colette, naked dancer at the Ba Ta Clan in Paris. Those professions were simply for food, but sometimes they did influence the authors, like life at sea for Joseph Conrad, or military aviation for Antoine de Saint Exupéry. Even when the writer is a stock holder, like Madame de Staël or Marcel Proust, the day to day life played an important role in their imagination. In fact the writer is very far from the issues of universality.

Cervantes criticizes his society, but altogether he seems to reflect that reality. He spends much of his time fleeing from his

creditors, solicits jobs with no results, and ends his life burdened with debts and embittered. The grandeur of the Quixote is abashed somehow by the author's disdain for the Arabs and the "Gitania", the tzigans of Spain. Amongst the contemporary French authors, Céline shows misogyny and shares with Dostoyevsky a sick hatred for the Jews. Is this really surprising?

The writer lives in a society, reads the papers, listens to the rumours, sometimes amplifies them. The distance between an author and his universal aura is sometimes astonishing: the playwright René de Obaldia reported once about one of his friends who met Franz Kafka in Prague at the time of his youth. This friend told him that Kafka used to leave the solitude of his bedroom (the window of this room opened inside a church) to meet some relations in a café, and that the writer would read to them excerpts of his works in process, stopping from time to time to burst into laughter.

That the author of *The Castle* and *The Metamorphosis* considered himself as a comic writer might be surprising for today's readers. It shows clearly what separates the writer from his writing, what escapes him. Maybe it is that part which could be called universal.

If sometimes literature approaches the universal, it is not by vocation. Paradoxically, it could be because literature is individual, particular and partisan that it might reach another dimension. In its narrowness literature realizes sometimes universality.

Allow me to give an example, that of Marcel Proust, author of the chronicle of the petite bourgeoisie of the so called Belle Epoque (the nickname due to being ephemeral), under the title *A la*

recherche du temps perdu (Looking for time lost). A contemporary reader might feel, like I felt myself, completely alien to such ego-centric, refined and grotesque milieu, so far from the angst of his times (after all, this Belle Epoque was in between two wars) and the cruelty of the colonial conquest in north Africa.

What attracted me, eventually, is close to a paradox: the perception I have that, under the frivolous disguise, are almost all the passions and the sufferings that compose the enervated derma of the human flesh. The obsession with time, the suffering combined with pleasure, the cruelty of Mr Swann's game who seduces Odette in order to dominate her, then the odious way he rejects her and leaves her prey to the despite of her relations, everything there I find moving and troubling, because it is perfectly understandable. If it was not for this identification process, I mean this obsessing play of consciousness allowing to decipher the field of obstacles, if intelligence was not the key to understand the human values in a completely closed and hostile environment — and furthermore, if it was not for the haughty elegance with which the writer invites us into his world, the charm would not exist and we would not feel the enthralling surprise we feel at every sentence.

In fact we get into this world as if we are burglars breaking into someone's dream, into the mind of this man (the narrator? the main character?) asleep who "*holds in a circle around him the sequence of the hours, the order of the years and worlds*" (*Swann's Way* translated by Lydia Davis, p. 5) .

What draws our attention in Proust's novel, what creates our emotion is the essence of the project: all this work is founded on the necessary and essential condition to discover the secret (or in

today's way of speaking, the pass word) that will allow us to get in. That secret is given just once, in the very first paragraphs of the novel, when the garden doorbell tinkles:

“On those evenings when, as we sat in front of the house under the large chestnut tree, around the iron table, we heard at the far end of the garden, not the copious high-pitched bell that drenched, that deafened in passing with its ferruginous, icy, inexhaustible noise any person in the household who set if off by coming in “without ringing”, but the shy, oval, golden double tinkling of the little visitors’ bell, everyone would immediately wonder: “A visitor, now who can that be?” but we all knew very well it could only be M. Swann.” (Swann’s Way, p. 14)

Thus, a magnificent entrance, which puts together all the future parts of the novel. Then we know that nothing in the history of this microcosm would be indifferent. We were uncovering sensations, smells, tastes, what could be named the real source of the lives devoured by time.

What was circulating between the words, between the images, is nothing else than the blood of existence.

To say that Proust’s novels are an exercise in memory would be feeble. In fact, as Proust says himself, literature is more than an exercise:

“A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause. I had immediately rendered the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me [...] I had ceased to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal” (Swann’s Way, p. 45).

I have extensively mentioned Proust to illustrate the necessity of apprenticeship in culture, any culture. I could have spoken also about James Joyce.

Universality does not exist by itself. If Ireland, in lieu of having been a tragic land, a kind of witch cauldron where a strange mixture of religious and political activism, Gaelic myths, and daily ordinary conversations was cooking, if Ireland had entered the century with the careful rationalism of, let us say, Switzerland, what writer would have dared to vaticinate on the deadly march of a drunkard named Finnegan?

The question, you have guessed it, is not only literature. I would like to extend my considerations to something more general that could be related to a moral rule.

We live nowadays a time where understanding the other seems less and less important. We even use the good principle of freedom of expression to refuse him/them the right to think otherwise.

In the name of universal democracy, the most powerful nations on earth assume to themselves the right to bomb the most feeble countries and impose upon them a new way of thinking and living. The consequence of this is that those vanquished countries close themselves into the affirmation of their identity and invent a radicalism which sometimes is murderous. Never have we needed so much to open our doors, not only to see what is happening on the other side, but also to invite our neighbours to share with us their views and their needs.

I shall end with literature. Though poets, playwrights and novelists express strongly a definite culture and an identity, what they write escapes totally the idea of nationalism. Shakespeare, Cervantes and Proust did not write only for their fellow citizens. Thanks to the translators, the publishers, they can be read outside of their borders, as if they belonged to other cultures. In fact they were the first discoverers of the intercultural, as it is probably why they gained universality, and naturally to some extent, something of eternity.

Why the Intercultural?

by
Issa Asgarally

Address at the University of North Carolina, USA

The century we have just gone through has been deeply marked by violence and war. Russell Jacoby quotes the opening sentence of Gil Elliott's neglected *Twentieth Century Book of the Dead*: "The number of man-made deaths in the twentieth century is about one hundred million." The major terrains of violence include World War I, China (mainly the Sino-Japanese War), the Russian Civil War, the Soviet State, Jews of Europe and World War II. Elliott was writing in the early 1970s. Today casualties in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Algeria, USA, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Mali, Syria and elsewhere would have to be added to the tally...The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict estimates that over 4 million have been killed in "violent conflicts" since 1989, over a half million in Rwanda alone.

Russell Jacoby has charted the technology of killing: it is straight and goes from clubs to nuclear bombs through stones, spears, bows and arrows, guns, rifles, automatic weapons, tanks, combat aircraft ... He has also charted our ability to live together: it is serrated; to international solidarity against natural disasters succeed wars, civil or international, in all genres. In short, the technology of death "progresses", but not the art of living together.

The root causes of violence and war do not change with time. They are always greed, injustice, inequality, arrogance and what the Ancients called “la démesure”, immoderation. We must recognize that culture is paradoxically to be added to the list. Paradoxically, because it is in theory associated with peace, reconciliation and communion between men and women. In practice, however, culture can lead to war or peace. Let us remember that colonization and slavery had a cultural foundation and were based on a hierarchy of races which justified that the so-called superior races “civilized” the so-called inferior races. Or culture may be associated with inhumane acts: survivors reveal that the music of Wagner was broadcast in Nazi concentration camps...

What is the Intercultural?

We urgently need a new way of seeing and acting. This is the challenge of the intercultural. That culture fuels no more violence and war, but helps us to live together.

It is a new way of conceiving identity, transcending multiculturalism, promoting genuine exchange among cultures, thinking and formulating historical experiences, denying the thesis of the “clash of civilizations”, defusing the “ war of languages “, analyzing the relationships between culture, information and communication in the era of globalization, building bridges between the literatures of the world, training and developing critical thinking through the contribution of philosophy , exploring not the ritual but the cultural dimension of religion. And finally, introducing this new way of seeing and acting at school, the meeting space for a

shared common life. Such a perspective includes the anthropological as well as the aesthetic sense of culture, that is to say, on the one hand, all the customs and ways of life of a people, on the other, painting, sculpture, music, dance, theater, literature and history .

What are the foundations of the intercultural? We should go back to the divisions and conflicts that fueled decades of hostility and war, and revisit them. Not to reduce the difference, because we must recognize the constitutive role of natural and cultural differences in human relations. But to question the idea that difference necessarily implies hostility, a set of reified and unchanging antagonistic essences and a reciprocal knowledge built on this opposition, which sees the other as an adversary.

It is also developing another vision of society and the relationships between individuals and groups to ensure that the democratic struggle for the right to difference does not lead to legitimating the process of segmentation and fragmentation.

Intercultural awareness is the representation of the “other” in an acceptable manner, the study of other cultures and other peoples in a libertarian perspective which is thus neither repressive nor manipulative. It is a real challenge for civilization. The aim is to “unlearn the spontaneous spirit of domination”, that is to say, invent an attitude almost unprecedented, for in its dealings with other cultures, the most advanced cultures have more often offered to the individual imperialism, racism and ethnocentrism. The intercultural can and must contribute to the solution of the current crisis by providing analysis of the established opinion, myths and stereotypes that have become both the symptoms and the causes of the current situation.

The intercultural is based on re-reading the canonical texts on culture not to belittle, but to re-examine some of their statements.

What are cultures? They are not commodities that one can have like cars or shoes. They are in a state of continuous development and of dynamic change, while maintaining constant interaction with other cultures. These are multi-polar configurations with shifting boundaries. That is the reason why the intercultural sees different cultures not as competitors for the title of “the greatest” or “most developed”, but rather as the movement of a majestic, symphonic Whole, the history of humanity in all its variations and differences.

What is human history? A kind of darwinian race, governed by the law of the survival of the fittest, towards domination and supremacy? Or rather a large common venture? On these two visions, fundamentally incompatible, depends war or peace. The intercultural is the second vision. It is the other name for peace.

The Proscenium Arch of Identity

The issue of identity is not only a theme for academic discussion but has at the heart of a grim human tragedy.

The ease with which men of diverse faiths, origins and conditions become killing machines is indeed stunning. Why is it so easy for fanatics on all fronts from diverse quarters to establish themselves as defenders of the distinct identity of a particular group? Is it because the prevailing definition and understanding of identity provide a slippery slope? The writer Amin Maalouf who had first-

hand experience living in a perpetually war-torn Lebanon with his pregnant wife and toddler, believes that tribal definitions of identity inherited from the past will be rejected if these are critically examined. However, we continue to adhere to such definitions either by default or through sheer habit thereby compounding human tragedies both present and future. What Amin Maalouf calls “Deadly identities” relates to a definition of identity which is embedded in a single affiliation – a dangerous trend which occasions sectarian, oppressive, partial and, at worse, suicidal attitudes. It generates a biased and distorted vision of the world.

It is high time to adopt a different conception of identity that is neither reductive nor static. Neither reductive so that it does not become deadly. Nor static so that it can be as rich as possible.

When a person is born, he will automatically grow, albeit in a cultural universe with its own codes and references that will influence to a large extent his identity. But the construction of identity is part of a dynamic process. The individual builds up his own identity with imposed collective affiliations or with others that are freely chosen, as well as others he rejects. Contrary to what some activists and pressure groups, and even some intellectuals claim, human identity is neither natural nor stable. This definition of self and others is not the result of a simple mental exercise, but of a historical, social, intellectual and political process that is highly developed. The construction of identity is linked to the exercise of power in every society, and has nothing of an academic debate. Actually, identity is not something that we give ourselves up to. It is not inherited, but we build it incessantly, and we do it together, with all the conflicts involved.

What we are in terms of identity is the intersection, changing over time, of this variety of affiliations. As Michel Serres writes, identity is a Proscenium Arch that we sew and weave perpetually, which is more flexible and free than the map of our genes. Why defend at all costs one of our affiliations? The more we increase them, the richer we are, the stronger and happier we become. We will honor it best in giving up the affiliation that we want to defend.

Thus, neither reductive nor static, the new concept of identity is based on the multiplication of its affiliations in order to enrich one's identity. Far from the deadly identities, "my identity is such that I am not identical to any other person." In this sense, two adults of the same family or two twins may not be "identical" in all respects. The sum of the appurtenances of one is not necessarily that of the other, so they have two different identities.

One can even avail oneself of several affiliations in a single case. I like Port-Louis, where I was born and where I grew up, but I also like Quatre Bornes, where I live. I belong to these two cities in Mauritius, but my heart is also in Saint Denis de La Reunion, Paris and Nice, where I studied. And what about London, Dakar, Helsinki and Hué (Vietnam), where I stayed and that I also like? Do not ask me to renounce one or the other. I like them all!

Beyond Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is represented in Mauritius by the slogans: *Unity in Diversity*, *Rainbow Nation*, etc. It is a simple juxtaposition -- just like in a mosaic structure -- of cultures, of different ways of

living. Of course, in multi-ethnic countries, such as Mauritius, colonized over the centuries by European powers, multiculturalism is an asset, and it is a great achievement to have preserved the cultures of our countries of origin against all odds.

However, multiculturalism, which is by far preferable to interethnic confrontation and civil war, is an inadequate concept in this new century. We cannot content ourselves with multiculturalism, because it can become the breeding ground for ethnicism. In a multicultural perspective, national unity is “the sum total of all ethnic gratifications”. The risk of multiculturalism is to put people in different boxes and make our overriding vision of society an essentially ethnic-centered one. It reduces “the person to a category and the individual to a group.” And “representatives” are assigned to these groups who are only entitled to talk about their respective “cultures”. The field is left free for fanatics of all hues to impose their “deadly identities.”

If it remains at the stage of multiculturalism, new dangers which appeared are likely to lead the Mauritian society to dislocation and civil war. Already in 1968, just before the accession of Mauritius to independence, there were so called racial riots that had opposed the Muslim inhabitants of Plaine Verte, a suburb north of the capital against those of Christian faith living in Roche Bois, another neighboring suburb. Peace and order were restored by British troops. Not later than February 1999, the sense of injustice felt after the death in police cell of a popular singer - accused of smoking hashish in public - quickly placed the country on the brink of an ethnic confrontation this time among the people of Hindu faith and those of Christian faith. The ‘Rainbow’ faded; it is in its nature

to be ephemeral. The mosaic was shattered, revealing its fragility. Basically, when people live in mental compartments - and sometimes physical compartments, as ghettos exist - when they see society in terms of “tribes” or “communities”, with accredited chiefs, feelings of injustice and frustration quickly become catalysts for a social explosion.

This is probably why there is a most vigorous reappraisal of multiculturalism in countries where it is institutionalized, for example, in Lebanon and in Britain.

The Intercultural, Arts and Humanities

1. Language

In the effective exchange of cultures, languages are the first concerned.

Even before 1860, the date of attachment of the county to France, the shepherds of Tende and La Brigue in Alpes-Maritimes, had opened in their own way the European route, because they could barely read and write, but could speak four languages – the ‘Brigasque’, the ‘Piedmontese’, the ‘Nissart’ and French - to follow their sheep transhumance towards the Po valley, then to sell them at the ports of Nice.

One of the common features of languages is their permeability, as shown by their history. The current form of language can no longer allow us to recognize the foreign elements that are introduced

into each of them, and sometimes for so long. Each took and gave to each other leading to an interlacing of these borrowings and these gifts took such proportions that it becomes impossible, in some cases, to know who gave to whom. The example of English and French languages is a good illustration. Their vocabulary reflects the intimacy and frequent relationships between the most Latin of the Germanic languages (English) and the most Germanic of the Romance languages (French). For a long time, since the Norman Conquest in the middle of the eleventh century, English has borrowed for more than half of its vocabulary from French; the movement is now in reverse with a significant contribution of English words to French. Thus, a few centuries later, many words have been back and forth, and often with a change of meaning.”

Sometimes these interweavings concern several languages altogether. Languages are somehow places of transit. The history of the word ‘sketch’ illustrates this. The Italian word *schizzo* (“sketch”) became *Schets* in the Dutch language. English has borrowed it from the Dutch and then turned it into *sketch* “drawing”. It finally arrived in this form in French, but with the new special sense “a short scene, usually comic”! Similarly, the word *mango*, which is native to the Tamil language, spoken in Tamil Nadu, South India, came in French through Portuguese. The words *chocolate* and *tomato* are, of course Spanish, but their native language is the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs of Mexico. Moreover, Swahili, one of the major languages used in Africa — spoken in Kenya and in Mozambique — is a Bantu language, whose vocabulary includes about thirty percent of Arabic as well as English and German words.

We should not forget that a borrowing, as a creation, is always an enrichment and a renewal of opportunities for expression. As long as there are languages, says Henriette Walter, they continue to exchange words without fear of losing their soul, because a living language is a language that gives and receives.

We see that the concept of purity of language is as dangerous as the purity of the race. It is the aim of purifying the language that led for example, Nazi Germany to replace some international words with Greek roots as *Telefon*, *Geografie* and *Television* by purely German neologisms *Fernsprecher*, *Erdkunde* and *Fernsehen*. Creole languages have also been described as impure languages, bastard languages, and have long been considered unworthy of the interest of linguists.

Purification of language often precedes ethnic cleansing and mass graves ...

2. Literature

Just as the identity of an individual cannot be reduced to one of its affiliations, the nationality, color, class or gender of a writer cannot summarize the richness of his work. Who cares about nationality when reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*? There may be more connections, convergences between a man writer and a woman writer rather than between two women writers (or men)! Maryse Condé is perhaps closer to Edouard Glissant or René Deprestre than to Marie N'Diaye. We are writers first and foremost. The rest is not unimportant, but it comes right after.

Consider the case of Yann Martel. The francophone Quebecois who won the Booker Prize in 2002, one of the most prestigious Anglo-Saxon literature awards, for his novel *Life of Pi!* Actually born in Spain, Martel spent his childhood in Europe, Latin America and Asia, where his parents were both diplomats and translators. When he entered school in 1972, in Costa Rica, the only educational institution open to foreigners was in English. And so he is familiar with the language of Shakespeare and also with Spanish. His father found it “truly extraordinary” that his son to whom he “always spoke French at home” reached “the summit” of the British literary world!

This very recent case of Yann Martel, the writer who got one of the greatest literary prizes for a work written in a language that is not his mother tongue, makes us remember Samuel Beckett. Irish by birth, the author of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *The Unnamable* moved to France, where he produced a rich and complex literary work that earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Similarly, born in Calcutta, India, novelist and poet Vikram Seth studied in the United States and Great Britain. His mother tongue is Hindi. This did not prevent him from being recognized internationally for his English texts, *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*.

Borders are artificial not only on the side of literary creation, but on the other side, that of reading. The readership of a great writer transcends all boundaries, languages or nationalities. I know most of the texts, novels and essays, of Umberto Eco. And yet he writes in a language, Italian, that I do not understand! I read Eco in French and English translations!

On this translation issue, why not insist on its importance in the field of the intercultural? Translators, when they do not betray the work they translate, are true intermediaries between people and cultures.

I like this sentence quoted by a publisher to demonstrate the complexity and difficulty of moving from one language to another, from one country to another: ‘I do not know how I feel until I have touched steel!’ It is necessary to be familiar with everyday life in the United States to know that the speaker makes no mention of the “feel of steel” – which would be incomprehensible! – but to do weightlifting, to “move iron”: “I do not know how I feel unless I have moved iron.’

Translation fulfills its function as a bridge between people and cultures when translating certain types of text from one language to another. The translation into Arabic of a text of Primo Levi, the writer who lived in a Nazi concentration camp, or the translation in Hebrew of a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian writer, contributes to the cultural enrichment of readers and to the promotion of peace between peoples.

3. Philosophy

Philosophy should have been the field *par excellence* of the intercultural. It is not.

In France, one of the rare countries where philosophy is a compulsory subject to be taken at the end of secondary education,

India is not to be found in most textbooks. China is absent, Persia has been ignored, and Japan remains unknown, Arabic names as well as Jewish names must have been unpronounceable. As written by Roger-Pol Droit, philosophy is supposed to be — or is being affirmed — Greek by birth, European by its development, and Western by essence ... Yet, from Sankaracharya to Lao Tzu through Al-Ghazali, these countries have given the world philosophers, there are Sanskrit treatises on logic, Chinese classical analysis of power, an ontology of light from the Platonists of Persia. And it is therefore reasonable to ask: “When shall we have a conceptual text of Asia or of the Middle East set for the baccalaureate students?”

Consider a specific example of this ‘forgetfulness’ which is very similar to an outright exclusion of non-Western philosophy. ‘Of Philosophy’ is a book for terminal classes, preparatory classes for the ‘Grandes Ecoles’ and the first cycle of higher education. Here is what can be read in it: “We baptize today indiscriminately ‘Indian philosophy’ or ‘Chinese philosophy’ old Indian or Chinese wisdoms. Wisdom is indeed a lifestyle. It corresponds, in the regulation of human action, to what crafts are in the mode of production. Wisdom is therefore a mixture of judicious advice and of happy and tasteful inspiration — with a hodgepodge of outdated regulations, customs adapted to circumstances and retained by habit and prejudices that are more or less obscure and backward. “

Intercultural philosophy is not only the discovery and study of the works of philosophers, of all nationalities. It concerns, above all, the training and the development of critical thinking, the cornerstone of the intercultural.

Intercultural exchange, as opposed to the “clash of civilizations”, is a peaceful but critical exchange between civilizations that have the same importance rather than a confrontation between the more powerful and the less powerful. And to develop a critical, if not skeptical, consciousness of the world, it is important to consider all knowledge with respect, but not meekly or without reflection. This applies not only to the knowledge in the humanities or social sciences, but also to scientific knowledge, such as medicine or civil engineering, where you should consider whether it is helping or not the common good of humanity. Memories of “medical experiments” in the concentration camps are there to remind us of the abuse of science without conscience.

The second requirement is to distinguish between what is considered real and pragmatic on one hand, and what is humanly desirable on the other. The construction of a giant dam to produce electricity and irrigation can be economically viable. But what about moving a large landless population, changing radically their way of life, or disrupting the ecosystem? This core issue remains to assess the human costs of any enterprise, not forgetting that the critical and skeptical intelligence, views reality as dynamic and believes that we can think of a more just alternative to what is presented dogmatically as a cold inevitability.

Finally, critical intelligence adopts a skeptical stance with respect to most orthodoxies and dogmas, whether nationalist, religious or philosophical. Human history is primarily the history of the efforts of men and women to overcome obstacles and establish institutions. And this is achieved not by adhering to dogmas or absolute and eternal laws, but by hard work, determination and human rationality

harnessed to confront the forces of superstition, organized ignorance and unjust authority. However, opposition to the dogmas and orthodoxies is not purely defensive or negative. It relates to the exchange, solidarity and understanding between men and women.

At a time when the various fundamentalisms — religious, economic, political — are on the rise, when the shadow of hegemony of thought and ideas looms large, when ready-made opinions and ideas have become fashionable, the intercultural becomes salutary as it reinstates the need to think!

4. The Arts

There is a real exchange between two cultures when there is a mutual influence and respect.

We are in China under the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the most prestigious in Chinese history. The capital Chang'an welcomes businessmen, diplomatic envoys and students from Persia, Dashi (name given by the Tang Dynasty to the Arab world), Tianzhu (now the countries of the Indian subcontinent), Japan and the Byzantine Empire. Through them, the Chinese techniques of making paper, cloth and porcelain reached Dashi, then Africa and Europe. In return, music and dance, under the Tangs are strongly impregnated with foreign cultures, the result of frequent exchanges by land or by sea between China and some 70 foreign countries.

We are now in Andalusia (Spain). From the VIIth to the XVth century takes place one of the biggest cultural adventures in the

Middle Ages. Christians discover Arab culture, philosophy and architecture. Jews, deeply Arabized, rediscover Hebrew. Universities and scholars of Al-Andalus become the primary couriers of civilization in what is described as “a paradise of libraries, gardens and palaces, haunted by poets and men of science.”

It is in fact in the arts — painting, sculpture, music — that we find many examples of intercultural exchange.

An Exhibition: *Trading places: The East India Company and Asia*, at the British Library, London. Hanging on the wall is a painting, *The Virgin and the Child*, made around 1630 by a Mughal artist. The Mughal emperor Jahangir, son of Akbar, prides himself on being a connoisseur and patron of the arts. His interest in the outside world encourages many artists of his court to copy and interpret aspects of life in Europe. The paintings the British brought for him as gifts inspire Mongolian artists of the time. Hence, the picture of *The Virgin and the Child*.

At the same exhibition — in fact, the ‘British’ vision of the encounter between the East India Company and Asia — another picture, that of the “Political Resident” of the East India Company at the court of Delhi. This gentleman, Sir David Ochterlony (1758-1825), wears an Indian dress, sits the Indian way and smokes his hookah, the Indian pipe, attending a ‘nautch,’ an Indian dance and music concert, watched by his ancestors whose four portraits are hung on the walls! Rare encounters, before the East India Company gives way to the British Army, with trade and commerce transformed into relations of power and domination ...

Another exhibition: *Matisse – Picasso* at the Tate Gallery, London. Two paintings show that these two European masters have been under foreign influence before they, in turn, influence the visual arts in the world. As if Art knows no boundaries! The first painting of Picasso, *The Nude with Raised Arms*, (1907) shows a woman's face that resembles an African mask. One learns that Matisse introduced Picasso to African art in 1906 by showing him a small carved figure. Picasso then plunged himself in the collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Paris. He was inspired not only by formal principles of such artefacts, but by the hidden forces that drive them. The result is a work which, while belonging to cubism, is nourished by the sap of African sculpture.

Further, a painting by Matisse *The Moroccans* (1915-16) evokes memories of architecture and life in the streets of North Africa. But it is on a formal plane that one sees the Islamic influence on Matisse. In fact, the painting on the canvas extends itself suggesting a continuation beyond the picture frame. This feature of the painting of Matisse comes from his appreciation of Islamic art, with its decorative appeal, richness in color and resistance to a centralized point.

This set of influences in art reminds us of a sculpture of the Buddha that we can admire at the British Museum in London and which dates back to the first century of our era. At that time, Northern India was ruled by the kings of the Kushan dynasty, whose empire stretched from Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges, to the Oxus river, passing through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Balochistan and Bactria. Under the patronage of these kings the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha began to become popular in art while the symbolic representation of its presence by a wheel

was gradually abandoned. In northern India, a unique image of the Buddha was carved in local grey schist using a Greco-Roman Apollo type as the model! The sculpture, of about one meter high, is a portrait of the Buddha with youthful features and wavy hair, clad in a monastic robe draped in heavy classic folds, reminiscent of a Roman toga. The transition to this picture was certainly facilitated by the Greco-Roman tradition which had always been intensely anthropomorphic. The Greeks had their gods modeled as examples of a male with a perfect physique. This Buddha sculpture is the result of an encounter between two worlds, in a spirit of sharing and respect: the Greek Mediterranean, illuminated by Aristotle's philosophy and Vedic India, by the Buddha.

5. History

In the field of history, the intercultural rethinks and reformulates the historical experiences that were once based on the geographical separation of peoples and cultures. For example, the Levant, which has long been portrayed as a battlefield between Arabs and Jews, can become an area of Mediterranean culture, common to both peoples. Areas that we thought concerned only one people, one sex or one class when subjected to re-examination show that others are involved.

The intercultural approach in terms of history consists also in opposing a different view to that which is hitherto dominant in various societies. The vision of the Crusades is Eurocentric, biased: of brave knights flying to the rescue of Christians in Palestine and fighting the wicked Saracens. But you can "tell the story of

the Crusades as they were seen, experienced and reported on the other side”, that is to say, the Arab side, seeking only the testimony of Arab historians and chroniclers of the time. The latter does not talk about the Crusades, but of wars or of Frankish invasions. “Their writings are all “references to go further in the understanding of this other vision.”

These events, which are believed to have ended seven centuries ago, are still influencing, even today, the attitude of the Arabs, and Muslims in general, towards the West. It is because the Arab East still sees in the West a natural enemy that whatever political or military action used against him is but a legitimate revenge. And we must recognize that the rupture between these two worlds dates back to the Crusades, felt by the Arabs even today as a rape. To change the perspective and bring the “two worlds” closer, it is important to oppose the classic tale of the Crusades seen by Christians to the Crusades seen by the Arabs.

The intercultural approach in the field of history is also the uncovering of possibilities of actually creating a civilization retrospectively and making that creation into a frozen definition, in spite of the evidence of great hybridity and mixture. The conception most of us have today about classical Greece, says Martin Bernal in *Black Athena*, does not at all correspond with what Greek authors of that period say about it. Ever since the early 19th century, Europeans and Americans have grown up with an idealized image of Greek harmony and grace. They imagined Athens as a place where enlightened Western philosophers like Plato and Aristotle taught their wisdom, where democracy was born and where prevailed in every significant way possible, a Western mode of life, completely different from that

of Asia and Africa. However, when we read many ancient authors accurately, we note that many of them have commented on the existence of Semitic and African elements in Attic life. Bernal goes further and demonstrates, through the skillful use of a large number of sources, that Greece was originally a colony of Africa, specifically of Egypt, and that Phoenician and Jewish traders, sailors and teachers contributed most of what we now know as classical Greek culture, which he therefore sees as an amalgam of African, Semitic, and later northern influences.

Deconstructing the colonial narratives which oppose peoples and cultures, uncovering the “retrospective” creation of civilizations that wipes out proofs of hybridity and mixing: we would sometimes need to combine these two approaches, as in the case of the city of Vijayanagara, in India. The fate of the city is often referred to as the last bastion of the great “Hindu” civilization destroyed by the Muslims in 1565. However, the study of the rather complex evolution of the kingdom of Vijayanagara, probably founded in the mid-fourteenth century in today’s Karnataka, brings a different story.

In historical accounts of a traditional character, a key date is often mentioned: in January 1565, when the armies of Vijayanagara were defeated on the battlefield by the alliance of five Sultanates of South India. However, Sanjay Subrahmanyan points out that the historical materials available allow us to have varying ideas of the religious character of this kingdom. Firstly, it is clear that there was a cultural symbiosis between the Vijayanagara kingdom and the neighbouring Sultanates, both in the fifteenth and in the sixteenth century. All were part of a culture heavily influenced by that of Persia: the rituals of the court, the way they dress, and even the tax

practices of the Bahmanaide Sultanate and the Kingdom said to be “Hindu” were the same. If the Bahmanids, as their successor the Sultans of Bijapur, employed many Brahmins as administrators in their court, it was also a common practice among the kings of Vijayanagara to employ Turkish, Persian captains and other Muslims on the battlefield.

Moreover, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, in the ruins of the city of Vijayanagara there are few mosques used by these groups until the middle of the sixteenth century. In addition, the Vijayanagara rulers placed great value on Arab horses and cavalry. To summarize, one must entertain a strong ideological bias to see Vijayanagara as a purely Hindu zone, engaged in a relentless struggle against the Muslim invaders. This does not mean, of course, that the religious identities of each other have never played any role in the periodical conflicts between Vijayanagara and its neighbors. But conflicts revolved around territory rather than religion. The Islamic domes, vaults and arches, which are recurring features in the courtly architecture of Vijayanagara, testify to the cultural and artistic exchange between neighbours.

Dangers

Many dangers threaten the concept and the practice of the intercultural.

The first danger is that the success of this word is such that it is likely to be stuck to anything. Everything and nothing could be intercultural! *Créolité*, for example, is not the intercultural. Not yet. But

it can lead to it. I had pointed it out in a communication exchange at the 14th Festival Kreol in the Seychelles. Allow me to quote here the end of my address: “This is the challenge of the XXIst century for us islanders of the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean: to profess and to demonstrate through concrete actions a greater openness towards other cultures. The world in its diversity and richness should be reflected in Creolité. *Les Misérables* of Victor Hugo and Molière’s *Tartuffe* have been translated into Mauritian Creole. This must be commended. But why only Shakespeare, Molière and Hugo? Why not the great playwrights of Africa, of the Maghreb, of Eastern Europe and Asia? Why not Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize winner for Literature, the great Kateb Yacine or Farid Uddin Attar? It is at this price that *Creolité* will find its place, all its place in the world, but in a world re-invented and reconstructed as a ‘new public space for expression, creation, citizenship and work.’ A space where operates without discrimination the multiple richness of humanity, where both the particular and the global will coexist in an original way. “

Moreover, in an introductory speech at a Conference on intercultural education, we heard that “we are the products of our culture!” In a preparatory Conference for the creation of an institution for promoting intercultural exchange, one of the speakers stated that “if reason is Greek, emotion is African!” Such remarks, which are at the opposite of the intercultural are likely to compromise it. We could then blame those who speak of this controverted subject. If we are products of our culture, no more talks of the intercultural! And if we arbitrarily assign, as it was done in the colonial era, specific “attributes” (reason, emotion, etc..) to civilizations, why promote their “dialogue”? Unless we want to display each of these attributes in a larger cultural space!

Let us not therefore consider the intercultural as a new syncretism. For syncretism is not only the combination of different forms of belief or practice, but it tolerates contradictions, which gives it hints of fascism. We cannot, in the name of the intercultural, say things which are different and incompatible.

Another danger threatens the concept of the intercultural: to freeze cultural groups while identity construction is a permanent and dynamic process. The individual rejects certain allegiances and adopts others during his life.

In general, the risk to institutions and cultural centers related to ethnicity or a type of culture, as it exists in Mauritius, is that they practice a form of patronage for members of the community to which they are attached.

Let us not minimize the risk that the intercultural quickly becomes an avatar of multiculturalism, a more active form. We will glorify the intercultural, it will be gargled after putting the people and cultures in watertight compartments! The intercultural is not a bridge between ethno-cultural ghettos. Instead, it is an opening up of cultures. If multiculturalism is a state, the intercultural is a process.

Let us finally not make the intercultural fashionable for decorative purposes, to be in tune with the times. One does not get involved in the intercultural merely for the sake of paying lip-service to it. It is not only an object of study for a thesis or a subject for seminars. When we go to the bottom of things, when we question stereotypes and misconceptions, we then realize that the intercultural crystallizes vigorous and disparate oppositions, which howev-

er, have one thing in common: they focus all on deadly identities. Thus, racists of all stripes do not like the intercultural because they favor race, color to the detriment of all other identity affiliations.

For religious fundamentalists, who believe that a religion is self-sufficient and that the culture it contains does not need to interact with other cultures, the intercultural is heresy. Political fundamentalists - if they are not the same! – denounce the intercultural because for them, life is a long series of brutal conflicts for power and authority. If one remembers that racists are embodied by Hitler and his six million deaths in concentration camps, religious fundamentalists by the Inquisition and countless bonfires, and political fundamentalists by Pol Pot and his two million victims in the death camps, we can be reassured about the relevance of the intercultural which creates an assembly of such opponents, all of them notorious agents of suffering and death...

The Challenge of the XXIst Century

While we were following a television report on the war in Iraq, a friend told me that the Iraqis have Indian features. I expressed my agreement to him by adding that they actually had a pair of eyes and hands, a nose. He smiled...

Similarly, when I held in my hand a stone, which I removed from a cave from La Mer des Glaces on the site of Montenvers in Chamonix (France), another friend pointed out to me that this stone was probably millions of years old. I at once added that the hands too, that held the stone – to the extent that I belong to the human race! – also have a very long history ...

The intercultural focuses on the fundamental unity of men and women as human beings before exploring their essential difference. Multiculturalism is the opposite approach. It emphasizes the difference and then calls for unity, hence the slogan “Unity in Diversity”. If there was a need for a slogan for the intercultural, we should turn the first inside out like a glove: “Diversity in unity!”

In fact, if some cultures have condoned murder, cannibalism, physical humiliation, it may be because they restricted the concept of the ‘Other’ to that of their own tribe or ethnic group and considered strangers as inhuman. The awareness that the stranger is a human being like ourselves, the recognition of his importance - because it is him, it is his gaze that defines us - , the necessity to acknowledge that he has needs which are similar to ours, are the foundation of the intercultural.

It is therefore a real challenge.

It is necessary to cultivate in each individual a sense of common belonging while respecting his autonomy and his legitimate cultural differences. In other words, we must promote cultural identities that are plural, without weakening the valuable identity of a shared citizenship. If we fail, and I’m not just talking of Mauritius, but of the world, the future will be even more violent. This will result in the dislocation of multicultural societies. In Mauritius, we had an idea of this in 1968 and in 1999!

Any intercultural perspective should include a few basic points. It must be recognized that if a human being grows and lives in a culturally structured world, he organizes, however, his life and

social relations in terms of his system of meaning and significance. We must also recognize that all cultures are themselves plural and represent an ongoing dialogue between different traditions and different schools of thought. The intercultural exchange allows us to explore them and then to appropriate them individually and / or collectively. But above all, we must remember the close relationship of the intercultural to social and economic justice, democracy, and to the “high demands of human brotherhood.”

The intercultural can bring this revolution in our mindset and in our vision of the world. Today, the philosophical question that should arise in the mind of every human being is to choose either intercultural exchange, that is to say, the recognition that we are all related, all different, or conflict. In other words, it is either the intercultural or war! What is happening in the world shows us that human beings are caught in this kind of dilemma.

The intercultural is the challenge of the twenty-first century. Can we face it? There are times when I have doubts. When I see students, accompanied by their teachers, visiting warships in the harbour of Port-Louis and when journalists speak with enthusiasm about it. When I read ads requiring a Chinese, Creole or Hindu actor, for the casting of a film by a young filmmaker. When I see that academics endorse the promotion of deadly identities.

But in those moments, I think that humanity begins at the other end of despair, that one should never give up. We are not helpless pawns of natural forces. There is no inexorable law of historical development. If we assume historical inevitability, our efforts will be paralyzed, our initiatives destroyed and our dignity violated. My

commitment to the intercultural lies in this other perspective. Having a “taste of the future”, that is to say, fighting fatality, and building this future to make it less violent. And this depends on you, on us...

"Though poets, playwrights and novelists express with strength a definite culture and an identity, what they write escapes totally the idea of nationalism. Shakespeare, Cervantes, Proust did not write only for their fellow citizens. Thanks to the translators, to the publishers, they can be read outside of their borders, as if they belonged to other cultures. In fact they were the first discoverers of the intercultural, as it is probably why they gained universality, and naturally to a certain limit, something of eternity."

J.M.G. Le Clézio

"As well as the identity of an individual cannot be reduced to one of its affiliations, the nationality, color, class or gender of a writer cannot summarize the richness of his work. Who cares about nationality when reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*? There may be more connections, convergences between a man writer and a woman writer rather than between two women writers (or men)! Maryse Condé is perhaps closer to Edouard Glissant or René Depestre than to Marie N'Diaye. We are writers first and foremost. The rest is not unimportant, but it comes right after."

Issa Asgarally

This publication presents the addresses of J.M.G. Le Clézio and Issa Asgarally at the University of North Carolina and Duke University in April 2003.



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