

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International Symposium
“Cultural Diversity and Globalization:
the Arab-Japanese experience, an interregional dialogue”

UNESCO, 6 May 2004

Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you this morning to UNESCO, on the occasion of the international symposium entitled “Cultural Diversity and Globalization: the Arab-Japanese experience, an interregional dialogue”.

It may seem paradoxical, or at least a little curious, to place side by side the Arab world and Japan, when it would seem that everything divides them, whether it be language, culture or religion.

UNESCO has emphasized ever since its foundation the importance of developing dialogue as a means of bringing about understanding between cultures and civilizations. That is why I welcomed the proposal by the Arab Group in UNESCO and by the Ambassador of Japan to organize a symposium – conceived from a totally new and original angle – on the dialogue between the Arab world and Japan, which gives an opportunity to depart from the beaten tracks of dialogue (North-South or East-West) by directing our attention towards cultural entities generally regarded as having little in common. This symposium, which comes within the scope of the Arabia Plan, is the product of assiduous collaboration between the Arab States, Japan and scientists of the two regions who have agreed to lend their support to UNESCO. May I take this opportunity here and now to express my appreciation to you all.

UNESCO wishes, as part of its international mission, to act as a major forum for encounters. Its founders included in its Constitution a fundamental mission for the Organization, i.e. “to develop and to increase the means of communication between [the] peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives”.

Our Organization has fulfilled this task in various ways. I am thinking, for example, of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works which was launched as far back as 1948, and which seeks through translation to transpose from their original cultural sphere masterpieces of literature which have not, on account of their language of origin, been accessible to a wide public. It is on this basis that the works of Arab geographers and travellers have been translated into several languages, works such as the *Picture of the Earth* by Ibn Hawqal, or the *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, who is well-known to all orientalists. We shall be celebrating the seven-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ibn Battuta in June 2004, an event with which UNESCO will have the pleasure of being associated.

This collection also includes a considerable number of the great classics of Japanese literature, such as the *Gengi Monogatari*, an anthology of Japanese poetry and texts on Japanese Buddhism.

Also in the context of intercultural and, in particular, inter-religious dialogue, a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue was organized at UNESCO Headquarters in May 2003 on the theme “Global Ethics and Good Governance”, which provided an opportunity to compare and contrast different cultural systems and civilizations and the contacts and interactions that they have inspired.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I shall not go into detail on the relations extending over centuries between the Arab world and Japan. The experts who are here will develop that aspect much better than I could.

Those relations reveal the changing nature of the cultural links forged in response to political circumstances and reinforced by the interest they aroused, establishing a lasting dialogue. This symposium thus has a double purpose since it covers both the dialogue of cultures and civilizations and the defence of cultural diversity, as defined in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted in 2001.

Your work looks to be full of promise. It will examine fresh ways and means of conducting a dialogue between cultures, founded upon modern experience.

The first session will involve a comparison of the processes of modernization in Japan and the Arab world, in particular during the Edo period in Japan and the Ottoman and Mameluk period for the Arab world.

The second session will examine how cultural diversity is received and perceived in the Arab world and Japan. How are globalization and the intensification of exchanges which it brings viewed in both areas? What can Japan bring to the Arab world, and vice versa, in this context?

Finally, the third session will involve a discussion on the capacity of our societies to open up new paths of dialogue, meeting the double challenge of cultural identity and openness. This challenge is not new. What is new, however, is our capacity to examine all of its implications and to define both the collective and the individual methods that will help to stimulate a form of cultural understanding that has shared loyalties and is open to change in our world.

Finally, two great calligraphers, one Japanese and the other Arab, will help us the better to seize this opportunity through demonstrations of their art, a heritage of both cultures. This will show that intercultural communication may develop into the sharing of a common language, through the expression and emotion that such a language induces. I have already received many enthusiastic reactions to the graphic representation of the word “dialogue” in Arabic and in Japanese by the two masters, Shinghai Tanaka and Hassan Massoudy, on the logo of your symposium and the various places where it is reproduced.

I hope that this symposium will provide an opportunity to encourage new forms of exchange, to gain a better understanding of the processes of modernization, to examine more deeply the concept of cultural diversity, to formulate recommendations to promote interregional dialogue and to devise a methodology which could serve as the basis for the development of dialogue between other geographical areas.

It has become a matter of urgency for us today to advance our knowledge of other cultures through a recognition of cultural diversity as an essential part of being human. The promotion of intercultural dialogue, the sole guarantee of genuine development and lasting peace, is an opportunity that we must seize. Thank you for doing so today.

Thank you for your attention.