

**Understanding Different Civilizations Through Active Inter-Civilization Dialogue
- The Role of Education -**

By

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**A Discussion of Papers Presented at the Closing Session of the
International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations**

Four papers presented at this session centered on the need for active inter-civilization dialogue as a means for understanding different civilizations. The papers highlighted the Hindrances, Pre-requisites, Strategies and Role of Education in active inter-civilization dialogue and understanding of civilizations. This discussion is based on these highlights.

Hindrances to Active Dialogue and Understanding Among Civilizations

The papers, like others presented at the different workshops and other sections of the final conference, identified factors that have led to misunderstandings among civilizations. These include negative perception of diversity among civilizations, distrusts, disrespect and, malicious and negative reports. Blames were apportioned to several sectors, some of which were Science and Technology, the Media, Education, Ethics and Leaderships.

Science and technological inventions are accused of producing gadgets for the oppression of some civilizations. Some of these inventions and activities of science are also known to be responsible for the health and environmental hazards that plague different civilizations of recent. The media, often are biased, sensational, and carry exotic news about some civilizations (especially the so called “poor/underdeveloped/developing/third world nations such as Africa). Such biased coverage of events of other cultures has promoted diversity that exists among civilizations as negative rather than positive characteristic, and as a result has aided misunderstandings among civilizations. By implication media has not been an intermediary between different civilizations, but a source of misunderstanding. Education was not left out in this identification. Curricula are biased, emphasizing elitist knowledge. Contributions from certain civilizations are not given due recognitions and are often not included in the school curriculum. Some indigenous knowledge that should form part of the school curriculum is described as

primitive or superstitious. Ethics, value systems are failing. Civilizations no longer feel for the suffering multitude of other civilizations. Leaders often do not provide philosophical and physical meeting grounds for effective dialogue. Having highlighted these and many other factors, the presenters identified pre-requisites for effective and active dialogue among civilizations.

Pre-requisites for effective and active dialogue among civilizations

Deep mutual understanding, tolerance, objectivity, adaptivity, patience and political imagination, and mutual respect, (among others), were identified by the presenters as pre-requisites for active inter-civilization dialogue, and which may eventually result in in-depth understanding of civilizations.

Kawada stressed that to begin an active inter-civilization dialogue, people are not to take their value or viewpoints as absolute and universal. Rather, people are to objectify their own perspectives by reflecting it in the mirror of other civilizations. He is of the opinion that interpretation of a phenomenon of another culture should be in terms of that culture. According to Nizami, there is need for adaptivity, which if engaged with sufficient patience and political imagination, will enable the different societies of the world to co-exist with peace and some measure of justice. For Kemp, there is need to respect every civilization not only for the scientific and technical achievements but also for historical coherence of cultural values and beliefs.

In effect, the presenters suggest that cultural bias should be a thing of the past. People should learn to appreciate other cultures. Indicators of growth, development and achievement of peoples should include history and culture rather than the present science and technological fame. It will pay therefore for human beings to refrain from such discriminatory words as “savage”, “primitive”, “underdeveloped” etc for civilizations. For example, that Kenya or any other African country is known for variety of animal species, is not an indication that Kenya or that African country is home for snakes or animals rather than humans, or that the people are not to be reckoned with or are savages. Such cultures are to be respected and appreciated.

Strategies for Active Dialogues Leading to Understanding of Civilizations

Kawada suggested a tripartite comparison of cultures, which he referred to as triangulation of civilization. He also recommended public and open dialogue among young students. Nizami and Kireilis further support these types of dialogue in their presentations. Kireilis stressed the importance of involving youths if an active dialogue for understanding different civilizations is to be achieved. He stressed that openness, which is a pre-requisite for active dialogue is found highly among the youths. Youths are more dynamic and more inclined to socialize or engage in talks that may lead to friendship. Youths are highly result oriented. Nizami stressed the need for co-existence and open dialogue to replace mutual fears and suspicions, and surreptitious efforts to manipulate and manage. He also suggests dialoguing on line using Internet facilities. However, Kemp makes us realize that active and true dialogue between civilizations is not only a superficial exchange of information on the purely technical level (in particular by Information Technology), but a deeper communication, which exchanges

understanding and interpretations of existential experiences in life and practice. He stressed that purely technical dialogue may not contribute to mutual understanding of basic human experiences. This is very true in the case of Africans with little or no Internet facilities. For this suggestions to truly promote active inter-civilization dialogue and understanding of civilizations, new technologies (mobile telephones, televisions, computers, satellite and the like) must be accessible by all the world population. For these reasons, an important issue for immediate discussion among civilizations is on the improvement of economies of different civilizations. There is need for free trade between the North and the South, between Africa and the West. African countries should have equal access to the Western economies as the West does to Africa. Only then will the economies improve and new technologies acquired if not invented, developed or manufactured by these civilizations.

Kemp also suggested the importance of dialogue in ordinary life and practice (dialogue in which people from different cultures can meet and discuss or involve in common tasks and common practice), dialogue in intellectual exchange of interpretations of life and practice, dialogue in mutual effort for discovering common experiences and complementary interpretations despite differences and dialogue between human beings sharing the same historical experiences of values and beliefs. In effect, active inter-civilization dialogue requires multiple paths or levels to dialogue. There is need for dialogue among professionals who are the stakeholders, professionals such as the media, education, scientists and leaders. Active inter-civilization dialogue should involve civilizations at different ages, gender, religion and culture. It may be between and within nations. This means that active dialogue should be inclusionary (involving as many civilizations as possible), inter-changeable (e.g. through the use of mobile phones, televisions, computers, satellite and the likes of modern communication) and face-to-face. As workshop on leadership put it, such dialogues should be at macro (global tectonics) and micro (inner city life) levels. An important point is that dialogue through new technologies, as effective as it may be, may not present realities of cultures and values. By this suggestion, the importance of face-to-face dialogue, as at this conference, cannot be ignored. The presenters also suggested the importance of education in achieving such active dialogue and understanding.

The Role of Education in Active Inter-Civilization Dialogue

It is an acknowledged fact that education is essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice. Education no doubt can contribute to active dialogue and understanding of civilizations in many ways.

Cultural and Educational Exchange Programs

Cultural and educational exchange programs were suggested as educational means for achieving active dialogue and understanding of civilizations. Nizami recommended the importance of exchange programs in education as vital tool for the spread of understanding and the ethics of collaboration among peoples. He suggested programs like the Erasmus Project within the European Union and the Japan Foundation. Kireilis suggested programs that can bring youths all over the world together, such as the plan to host hundreds of young persons from more than 40 countries in a weeklong “Global

Youth Dialogue” in Vilnius, Lithuanian - a program in which youths will dialogue, discuss, communicate and learn about cultures and traditions from different civilizations. Interestingly enough many such programs exist even at present. For exchange programs there are many more such programs as the Fulbright fellowship, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) etc.

Two anecdotes to support the importance of such programs for understanding civilizations are illustrated with my experiences. The first is my experience before coming to Japan. My friends sold the idea that I will encounter problems in the area of religion and clothing while in Japan. The impression was that Japanese ladies are small and short and I may not be able to buy clothes for my size. As a result, I had to come with several of my clothes and paid for excess luggage. I came and I found I was short in the company of some of my Japanese female friends. The males are as tall as I saw in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, most of the clothes were not quite suited for the Japanese climate. The other problem is that I will not be able to attend church as a Christian. One of my Japanese colleagues, for two days, helped me to identify my Christian denomination and today I attend church when I wish to. I quickly took pictures of myself with Japanese friends, in the church and at school and sent back to my friends disputing their views. Today I have friends who would want to visit or accept a fellowship in Japan.

The second is on my experience first month in Japan. As a JSPS fellow, I started my exchange program at an elementary school in Japan. A welcome activity was held on my arrival at the school. Unfortunately, mixing with pupils to discuss was not easy during the first week of my attendance. This was not only as a result of language, but also as a result of the negative perceptions that are portrayed of Africans by media, as people with various problems ranging from war, hunger and disease. I told an adult in the community that I would love to invite him to my country. His response was “I will not go”. When I asked for the reason he said, “I’m told it is dangerous to go”. I could not blame these little young fellows who have been given this negative impression of blacks through media reports. Then the visits and classroom observations continued. We went to the fields for sports, we carried out several activities in which I participated, we sang and danced and I taught Nigerian (African music), I taught home science on Nigerian cooking of coconut rice and pupils found it as delicious as other meals and it had no health hazard for them. I attended a meeting with parents and gave talk on the role of a Nigerian mother in the education of her child or children. Within few weeks the pupils became so used to me and I could hear “Christy sensei” even before entering a classroom. Pupils began to hold my hands, touch and ask about my hair and invite me to launch in their classroom rather than in the staff room, life became comfortable for us all.

These myths would not have been solved without the exchange program with the JSPS. There is therefore the need to intensify exchange of staff and students as integral part of the educational system.

Multicultural Education and Curriculum Reform

The goal of a multicultural education that will influence active dialogue and understanding would be to transform self, schools and schooling and the society. Such an education will help learners learn a lot about diversity among cultures or civilizations. This is possible through several ways and means. Nizami stressed the importance of teaching materials that identifies what common and differences exist between cultural and religious traditions especially in elementary or primary schools. Multicultural curriculum should be developed for all levels of education including preschool level. This is because children begin to recognize differences among persons from this stage. In the past what we have had is a situation where the curriculum further alienates students. Perhaps, this is the reason of Nizami's stress on the need for a multicultural education in which the goal is integration and not assimilation of differences, in which curricular and extra-curricular activities produce confident young people. Citing example in History, he stressed that formal history should not be confined to the story of kings and conquests but on the story of *all*. The teaching of other cultures through subjects such as history, language, literature and social sciences is important.

In a multicultural education, contributions of all civilizations in subjects such as science and technology should be recognized and documented and should form part of the curriculum. Kawada recommends the development of indigenous technological culture. This further supports the need for indigenous knowledge as part of the school curriculum. Faraday, Einstein, Dalton and the like are famous scientists in science texts all over the world. How many science school children in the world know that the automatic traffic lighting system used all over the world today, is an invention by an African-American, Garret Morgan? That a Nigerian Philip Emeagwali performed the world's fastest computer computation in 1989? That Patricia Bath, an ophthalmologist, invented the Laser Photo Probe, which revolutionized cataract surgery? There are so many others whose little contributions should be recognized and included in the school curriculum. Therefore for multi-cultural education to promote active inter-civilization dialogue, there is need for inclusion of diverse materials and perspectives into the school curriculum as well as more inclusive of traditionally underrepresented groups. Teaching the desire for dialogue perhaps is also now a vital consideration for inclusion in the school curricula. It is also possible to make dialogue a strategy for teaching school subjects in school. It is through such education that individuals will develop skills and tools for mutual and deep understanding of oneself and of others. Education should make all effective cultural brokers

Conclusion

Understanding different civilizations requires active inter-civilization dialogue. It requires the concern, contribution, involvement, participation of all and sundry. However, it does not mean doing same thing at the same time or having same economic strength. We at this conference have taken the lead. Let what we have gained through this dialogue be practiced in our immediate community, extended community, nations and the world. It is no doubt a difficult task, which may not be realized in one day. Even with the

declaration of 2001 as year of dialogue among civilizations, current reports and situations show the great tasks that lay ahead.

According to Kawada, one's viewpoint in relation to others is vital for an active dialogue and for understanding others. He suggests that human value orientation is more important than political, military or economic power. This is a vital point especially if civilizations like Africa are to be understood and respected. Underdevelopment in Sub Saharan Africa is the result of the international economic relations that dates back to the slave trade through the colonial era. Since the past is what makes the present coherent, the past will remain horrible for as long as it is not honestly assessed. Until honest assessment, mutual respect and in-depth understanding among civilizations are achieved there will be no active inter-civilization dialogue. It is not late to start and to remedy the situation. Every civilization needs to be respected for whatever contribution it can make no matter how little. Today we at this conference represent different civilizations and are involved in a relatively active dialogue. It means that we have begun to practice this theory of understanding different civilizations through active dialogue.

In conclusion, this is not the end but the beginning. Although the closing session of the International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations, it is the beginning of active inter-civilization dialogue that will promote better understanding of different civilizations. Achieving understanding of different civilizations through active dialogue may be slow but let our watchwords be "slow and steady to win the race".