

AFRICAN ARTS INSTITUTE
BOARD MEETING
Celebration of the AFRICA DAY
Johannesburg, South Africa, May 25 2009

Dear Colleagues,

1. I am privileged to address you on the double occasion of the launching of a regional cultural portal of ARTERIAL project coinciding with the annual celebration of the Africa Day. Both events merging in celebrating African creativity.

On African Culture

“The idea of Africa”, seen or imagined by Valentin Mudimbe, is in a complex of “multiple and contradictory discursive practices” having been evocated to describe it both in colonial library and in his own imaginary library which includes the best and the worst books and perspectives. And African Culture!

You probably remember.

2. A political leader of a former colonial power making his first official trip to Africa after he was elected, decided to address the intellectuals gathering in Dakar University and made a statement on characteristics of African culture, I quote “the problem with Africans is that they always look at their past, their culture is characterized by the lack of ambition, lack of vision, lack of capacity of transformation and of ambition of reappropriation of the future. Africa is still expected to enter in the History” Was this severe statement deliberate or was it due to ignorance? No less than 5 books produced by African intellectuals followed this now historical conference with a view to provide an answer, to contradict, correct and produce evidence of the Dynamism of African cultures and their impact on the development of African states and empires in the past, and their role in the current struggle and the hopes lying behind the development strategies today such as the famous NEPAD which shows some weaknesses precisely for having neglected to consider a cultural approach in its plan of action.

What is it, a cultural approach?

3. Revising in 2005 the Cultural Charter of Africa adopted in Mauritius 30 years before, the African Union decided to reconsider its global orientation. The African Charter for Cultural Renaissance adopted by the Summit in 2006 in Khartoum consider that the regional political and economic integration, a global objective of the Union, will be facilitated by a cultural plan. In this regard, African Member States are invited, by ratifying this Charter, to consider the main following aspects constituting the pillars of the document of the Cultural Charter:

- respect of human rights, including the right to culture for all, gender and youth in particular
- rejection of racism, slavery, tribalism and all kinds of discriminations
- promotion of a Culture of development, stemming Africa's development in Africa's Culture
- valorization of indigenous knowledge and practices and appropriation of modern technology
- recognition of the central role of the arts and arts productions
- development of a multicultural and intercultural education Programme
- reinforcement of the regional integration and the regional cooperation, including with the African Diaspora

4. African identities have produced what is called today African culture in its diversity but in its common identity. Archaeological evidences, confirmed by oral traditions data need the revision of historical perspectives. The restitution of the History should not be confined to the political aspects of racism, slavery and colonialism. It also need to integrate the technical aspects of knowledge and in this, not only traditional technics. Series of discoveries and findings, cosmologies and physics can be produced. The promotion of African culture should not be confined to the traditional data and descriptions of the ethnological approach. Current issues on creators, markets and public, social function and roles need to be equally considered.

Stakeholders

5. But this task goes beyond the public authorities responsibilities. It requires a contribution of all parties interested. Professionals and civil societies are expected to play a role. Indeed, in countries across Africa there is an increasing recognition of the role of arts and culture in development, and not only for African economies prosperity but also for the purpose of strengthening nascent civil society. The recognition of the role of cultural institutions in sustaining democratic dialogue, the need for cultural leaders to have a voice in human development policies and the impact of globalization in disseminating new theories and practices have all contributed to a shift away from using arts and culture for political power, to the acquisition of cultural knowledge for peace and development.

6. In this regard, it is with a great satisfaction that we have noticed a concrete and substantive follow up to the ARTERIAL first conference in Gorée Island in March 2007 and we salute the nascent African Arts Institute announced as an initiative coming to back the work in progress.

7. OCPA, the observatory of cultural policies in Africa indeed operates from the year 2002 and fully as from 2005 with a small secretariat based in Maputo and a large network covering the continent and abroad. Conceived as a service oriented resource centre and regional coordinating and monitoring body it is a network of experts and institutions involved in policy and decision-making, Cultural administration and management as well as research, training and information. Its website contains at this stage almost 15.000

data on cultural policies in Africa, Documents on national cultural policies for 30 countries, the 31st, Niger, expected to arrive after the adoption by the parliament one week ago, the most visible, the OCPA news reaching its 229th issue tomorrow.

A regional cultural portal

In this area of its activities, we were approached by Culture.mondo, a portal of portals for us to join the working group operating on the harmonization of existing cultural portals and cultural observatories. A first meeting was organized in Aichi in Japan in 2005 and a second meeting in Dubrovnik in 2007. A third meeting was foreseen for the current year in Taiwan.

Some statements and key questions were raised on the cultural portals phenomenon. Some of them were formulated as follow:

- Little is known about the management and public policy implications of these new public venues.
- While governments do not directly manage a majority of them, most operate partially or fully on public funds: what are the implications for cultural policies objectives, especially in providing for citizen access to and participation in a diversity of cultural content?
- How are these portals designed and managed and whose content is it anyway?
- How do they compare?
- Is the cooperative approach absolutely essential? Can a product that represents a cultural diversity of a country be delivered without having to rely on partners?
- What is the benefit of independence?
- We are all accountable to someone, but how is that accountability managed?
- Who really calls the shots in your portal? Is it government policy makers? Your founders? Your Board? Or your audience?

Need for joint efforts

8. At its second conference of ministers of culture, the Commission of African Union called a Round Table of significant Cultural Institutions in the continent preceding the Government Experts Meeting and preparing decisions for the governmental body in Algiers on 17&18 October 2008. The recommendation no 8, as adopted by the Experts Meeting and endorsed by the Conference of Ministers states the following: "The Round Table of the pan African cultural institutions ensure that the African cultural institutions, under the leadership of OCPA, create and launch an internet portal that will link cultural institutions across the continent and also identify other effective communications tools".

We are glad that an initiative takes place in this framework which will facilitate the follow up of this recommendation. A parallel initiative taken by the SICADIA (summit of cultural institutions of Africa and of the Diaspora) after Lagos in 2007 met in Yaoundé, Cameroun, last month, april 2009 and decided to set up a permanent secretariat which will be based in Maputo at OCPA.

9. Following up from our side on these initiatives will imply a clear picture of the interactions of similar initiatives, the preparation of possible agreements, the adoption of

shared strategies, and the need to accompany governments, ie, African Union strategies in participating in the pan African negotiations at the next agendas such as the Second Pan African Festival in July 2009 in Algiers and the African Union Third Conference of Ministers of Culture in 2010 in Abuja.

We will then, at the same time, and in the same move, pay our tribute to the Mother Africa and consolidate a necessary legitimacy for a great initiative in culture, a wonderful instrument for a “Smart Power”!

Johannesburg, SA, May 25, 2009

Lupwishi Mbuyamba