

Confronting the ravages of neo-liberalism in Africa

I am an essayist and former Minister of Culture and Tourism of Mali. In the past few years I have taken part in the emergence and construction of a social and political conscience which is more sensitive to the ravages of neo-liberal globalisation in Africa.

From my point of view, the most significant challenge with regard to the current state of this continent is eminently cultural. I try to prove this point in my essays, among which are "The Vice" (Actes Sud 1999) and "The Rape of the Imaginary" (Actes Sud-Fayard 2002). I was involved in the activities of UNESCO in the 1980s and 1990s as a consultant and thereafter as a resource person and key note speaker during many meetings in Paris, Tokyo and Porto Alegre.

This partnership was, of course, a source of enrichment for me not only because of the extent of the fields of reflection and activities of the Organization, but also because of the quality of the debates.

For peace to reign in the world it would be enough that the powers that be had the objectives of UNESCO at heart and that they adhere to them in all sincerity with no double-talk or slight of hand. The logic of profit that they profess, in all domains and more and more often in relations between nations, is the worst obstacle to the realization of UNESCO's mandate. The majority of the local initiatives with which I have been involved, including the valorisation of traditional knowledge and local materials, suffer considerably from the unfair competition of rich and industrialized countries who invade our markets with subsidized goods while obliging our States to dismantle all barriers. African cotton is in this respect a case in point. I do not allow myself to become discouraged, however, and remain persuaded that culture and religion, which are now perceived solely under the guise of communitarism and terrorism, actually constitute the diversity and the richness of the earth.

I strongly believe in the power of social, political and economic transformation and because of this I attach the greatest importance to the construction of an autonomous and critical African approach. From this point of view I feel that a clear and honest reading of past and present events can dissipate many misunderstandings, and illuminate the path to be taken in solidarity and mutual respect. For example, Africa could have been spared many of its conflicts if it were not the victim of what I call "the rape of imagination".

The idea of democracy which the West has succeeded in selling to us and which translates as a struggle for power and nothing more, is setting the continent on fire. How does one convince others that transparency at the ballot boxes and the organization of elections do not by themselves constitute democracy? How to get the message across that it is useless to be at each other's throats for false pretences as long as access to and control of the riches of Africa which is of high interest to the masses and which is the only way to strangle poverty, are discussed elsewhere by anonymous and faraway actors who are not accountable

to Africans? Peace will reign in Africa and elsewhere when the powerful of this world, who often have the last word in international organizations, bind the act to the word.

A strong global civil society which is aware of the stakes and risks of untethered liberalism can play the role of planetary counterweight which can challenge the masters of the world and give sense to the preamble of the UNESCO Constitution.

Perplexed by undue influence on the UN System

The extent and the context of the sphere of activity of UNESCO are such that it is difficult for me as an individual who intervenes there only from time to time, to detect the importance and the impact of my specific contribution to its action. I only know that the exercises for which I was associated with UNESCO, comforted me in my position concerning the imperial necessity of tapping more deeply into our cultures in order to create a more just world. Since the trade and consumer society has revealed its destructive capacity, the re-articulation of economy and culture becomes possible. I hope that future generations will learn from our errors and thus provide new chances for UNESCO in the fulfilment of its mandate.

The difficulty for UNESCO, as for other international organizations, to be in coherence with its mandate, because of the weight and influence of certain rich nations on the mechanisms of financing and decision-making, often leaves me perplexed. But I also know that it is one of the rare organizations which is able to understand the sense of my search for alternatives to "imitation" and my combat on the personal and professional level for a world which is more just and with more solidarity.

The challenge which beckons UNESCO and the international community as a whole is considerable and without precedent: acknowledging the failure of the idea of a single model. Such a model cannot in any case, serve human rights in general or those of women, nor cultural diversity and religious tolerance. News today abounds with examples which prove that other and different worldviews are necessary.

From 1975 to 1998, I occupied the post of Director of studies and programs in the Ministry of the Female Condition of Côte d'Ivoire, the first of its kind in Africa. I was convinced at the time that the fight for gender equality would considerably enhance the situation of African women and of women in general. I then invested all my efforts, as did other women of my generation, in the realization of several micro-projects and in-depth discussions promoting equal opportunity for men and women in the fight for a prosperous and interrelated Africa. Even though many women have emerged on the political and international scene, the continent is unfortunately no more advanced today than at the time concerning the living conditions of its population. During this time men, who for the most part were better off than women, have lost what was seen as their advantage; they are now unemployed or, worse, destitute and often constrained to emigrate.

Neo-liberal reforms are not kind. They compromise all acquired social rights, including the progress made in the status and situation of women. The wage freezes for public office; the destruction of the agricultural and the crafts industries; the privatisation of services, have caused serious damage. I deduce from this that an unjust world economic system cannot guarantee equal opportunity between men and women. Women, often more entrenched in their cultural roots, are better able to counter the dominant order and create the basis for a new relationship between nations. What can UNESCO do for women and girls who are entitled to education in countries whose education system is completely dilapidated at the end of three or four decades of structural adjustment?

Young women who work with UNESCO today must be perfectly aware of the paradoxes which hinder States, civil society and UNESCO from realizing that for which the Organization is mandated, the pursuit of society's ideals.