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## **From the East-West Major Project (1957) to the Convention on Cultural Diversity (2007): UNESCO and Cultural Borders**

**Chloé Maurel**

### ***Abstract***

*For more than 50 years, UNESCO has been questioning the delimitations and the reality of cultural borders. The East-West Major Project (1957-1966) illustrates UNESCO's initial universalist conception and its will to encourage cultural unity. It reveals a progressive turn around in UNESCO's cultural politics, which led UNESCO to develop a more synthetic conception, allying promotion of both cultural unity and cultural diversity. Since the 1960s, UNESCO has tried hard to safeguard the world cultural heritage, notably in Africa, where it appeared to be endangered. The creation of the World Heritage List in 1972 and the attempt to set up a "New World Information and Communication Order" in 1980 were important steps. Several Conventions were adopted. The Convention on Cultural Diversity (2005) is particularly important, because it together emphasizes the diversity of the different cultures and affirms the Universalist idea of all cultures belonging to a common cultural ground. It therefore refutes Samuel Huntington's conception of an inevitable clash of civilizations: the UNESCO's convention goes against the idea that cultural borders would be factors of conflict. It constitutes an attempt of synthesis between universalism and multiculturalism. Yet the UNESCO's actions remain too scattered, and the efficiency of the UNESCO's conventions is very poor. Besides, the UNESCO's instruments have also pernicious effects: they are often used as instruments for political or economical targets. Now, UNESCO should not only promote the idea of "cultural diversity" and celebrate "cultural borders" and "intercultural dialog", but above all clearly distance itself from the idea of liberalizing culture and from WTO politics. Indeed, liberalizing culture increases social inequality and therefore deepens the "cultural gap" between people. UNESCO should take more concrete steps to allow every people to partake in cultural life.*

**Key-words** : *Universalism, Multiculturalism, Globalization, Liberalization, World Cultural Heritage.*

The issue of cultural borders is, from more than a half century, in the centre of UNESCO's concerns. This intergovernmental organization was created in 1945 with the official aim to contribute to peace by means of education, science and culture. In the 1950s, UNESCO aimed to bring cultures closer together, to unify ways of thinking and of living, in pacifist and universalist conceptions. Then, from the 1960s on, the UNESCO's conceptions have changed: the will to preserve cultural identities has increased. UNESCO gave up trying to abolish cultural borders, but on the contrary, began to preserve them in order to promote originality and uniqueness of specific cultures. How can this turn around be explained? By which means has UNESCO since the 1960s promoted cultural heritage and cultural diversity? Which actors and which conceptions have influenced UNESCO? It is interesting to first analyze the UNESCO East-West Major Project (1957-1966), which illustrates this progressive turn around in UNESCO conceptions; then the UNESCO's focus on world heritage, and in particular in the field of African cultural heritage; and at last UNESCO's normative action, notably the elaboration of UNESCO Conventions and particularly the Convention on Cultural Diversity, adopted in 2005 and entered into force in 2007.

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### **1. The East-West Major Project (1957-1966)**

UNESCO was created just after the World War II, at a time when the general opinion spread that cultural uniformization could contribute to peace and progress. At that time, UNESCO actors were interested in possibilities of bringing civilizations together, and particularly the East and the West (Huxley, 1946 :70 ; Yutang, n° 8, septembre 1948:3 ; Kirpal, 1983:67-68). Thus, UNESCO took up an idea that had been dealt with by its predecessor during the interwar period: the Organisation for Intellectual Cooperation. Many projects that UNESCO undertook in its first years were in line with

such idea: for example, the project of writing a “Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind” (launched in 1947, but only published in the 1960’s), or efforts to coordinate history schoolbooks of different countries. Along this line, in 1949 UNESCO started a series of studies on “interrelations of cultures and their contribution to international understanding” (such as “The Cultural Essence of Chinese Literature”, “The Place of Spanish Culture”, “The Basic Unity underlying the Diversity of Culture”).

Most of all, from 1957 to 1966 UNESCO led a ten-year programme, titled the “Major Project on mutual appreciation of Eastern and cultural appreciation of Eastern and Western cultural values” (Cf. Wong, vol. 19, n°3, September 2008). This project perfectly illustrates the problem of delimitating cultural border between the East and the West. At the time of its elaboration, the notions of East and West were conceived in a purely intuitive way. When they said East, UNESCO actors referred to India, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan. When they said West, they referred to Western Europe and North America. The rest of the world was neglected in this mental picturing.

The activities of the project included studies and research (symposia, creation of institutions, exchange of teachers and researchers); education for youth (encouragement to students exchanges), and information for the general public (films, radio and TV programs, articles, posters, leaflets, sheets, pocketbooks, and the publication of a UNESCO’s translated literature series, “Representative Works” of world literature) (*Évaluation du projet majeur pour l’appréciation mutuelle des valeurs culturelles de l’Orient et de l’Occident*, 1968:9).

When this project was conceived, the dominating idea was that a marked cultural border separated the Eastern peoples from the Western ones. Western intellectuals and UNESCO civil servants considered that such cultural border kept the Eastern people isolated, prisoners of their traditional cultures, of their retrograde traditions. They decided therefore to attempt abolishing that cultural border, in order to allow Eastern people to open themselves to Western modernity and to blend in with a supposed future “world civilization”.

So the official aim of the East-West project was, at its beginning, to “favour connection and understanding between Eastern and Western people” (*Le Courrier de l’Unesco*, December 1958:3), to invite them to “discover or deepen their similitude” (*Évaluation du projet majeur pour l’appréciation mutuelle des valeurs culturelles de l’Orient et de l’Occident*, 1968:4), to abolish the “thousand barriers [...] which separate the East from the West” (Unesco archives, file X 07. 83, 13 January 1960:1-2)<sup>1</sup>. It was aimed to highlight reciprocal influences between Eastern and Western cultures, in order that everybody could become aware of the existence of a common cultural ground, of a “common heritage of all humanity” (MAPA/I AC/3, Annex I ; CUA/96, 17 juin 1959:4). Jacques Havet, a French UNESCO civil servant in charge of the coordination of the project, claimed explicitly that the project was in opposition to the idea claimed in 1889 by Rudyard Kipling that “East is East, and West is West, and never the two shall meet”<sup>2</sup>. Eastern Member States as India were then very favourable to the conception underlying the East-West project (Diplomatic archives of Germany: B 91, Band 16: report of K. Pfauter, 24 February 1956 ; Radhakrishnan, n° 12, December 1958:4-7).

Publications, conferences<sup>3</sup>, exhibitions, radio programs and films came to life in this course of ideas, for example a book titled *East and West: towards mutual understanding* (Fradier, 1959)?, an exhibition titled “Orient-Occident” organized in Paris in 1958 (which tried to emphasize reciprocal influences and artistic proximity of Eastern and Western civilizations) (« Orient-Occident », 1958), and films trying to outline the universality of mime, or emphasizing common points of Eastern and Western music (*Le geste, ce langage : mimes d’Orient et d’Occident* (Unesco, 1962) ; *Et les sons se répondent* (Unesco, 1966).

However, it soon appeared impossible to clearly define the cultural border between the East and the West (CUA/108:3; MAPA/ED/2, mai 1962:2-3). The UNESCO civil servants, together with the UNESCO experts, and representatives of Member States at the UNESCO General Conference and at the UNESCO Executive Council all failed to determine the common criteria (geographic, cultural,

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, every archives document mentioned comes from Unesco archives, unless other source was named.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Jacques Havet, doc. mentioned. Cf. R. Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West”.

<sup>3</sup> Ex. : « L’homme moderne en Orient et en Occident », 1958, Bruxelles ; « L’art contemporain en Orient et en Occident », 1960, Vienne.

historical, religious, ethnic, and linguistic) (MAPA/1 AC/3, 15 March 1957:2 ; MAPA/1-AC/2, section 17). UNESCO assigned two intellectuals, a Lebanese (East) and a German (West) to demarcate this East-West border. But they proved unable to do it, and concluded: “It is difficult to find a precise definition of both terms East and West [...] Have the notions of East and West a geographical of historical meaning, a cultural or material meaning on which data should we rely? Where begins East, and where ends West? [...] This scramble for definition isn’t it vain? [...] East and West exist, it is a fact” (MAPA/3 AC/4, February 1958:8).

At the UNESCO General Conference in 1958, Member States representatives, although reasserting their intuitive conviction that “a real difference separates two traditions in the edification of human civilizations”, failed in defining a clear geographical cultural border between East and West<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, as a compromise, they defined Western culture as “the one prevailing in European countries and in all the other countries whose culture stem from the European culture”, and Eastern culture as “the non European cultures, particularly those whose roots are in Asia”. However, from its formulation, this definition appeared to them as non satisfactory because of its eurocentrism (MAPA/I AC/3 ; MAPA/3 AC/3, May 1959).

About the beginning of the 1960s, a turn around happened in UNESCO conceptions: more and more people were becoming aware that cultural borders between the East and the West were vanishing or even disappearing. It gave rise to reactions in different circles: in the US, multiculturalism conceptions extensively developed among social scientists (Cf. Pretcelle, 1999:26-27 ; Kymlicka, 1995); in Western Europe, more and more intellectuals staged mass consumption and accused it to provoke cultural uniformization (Cf. Braudrillard, 1970); in the Third World countries, intellectuals called for their cultures being better recognized and taken into consideration (X 07.83 Maheu, part II b, 20 December 1963). Under the influence of these trends, the UNESCO official conception evolved: from then on, the organization no more undertook to favour cultural uniformization, but on the contrary to fight it (ever since the cultural uniformization started to be regarded as cultural impoverishment) and to protect cultural identities (X 07 A 120/197 UNSA: 31 May 1965).

These turn around completely reshaped the spirit of the East-West project. Henceforth, it was aimed to preserve cultural borders, seen as part of the cultural world heritage, at risk of disintegration if pressured by cultural globalization. Intellectuals, UNESCO civil servants, and Member States representatives stated the importance of preventing the fading of cultural borders. From an initial negative connotation, cultural borders acquired then a positive connotation: in a more and more uniform world, they became the symbol of cultural wealth (CUA/108, 29 août 1961:3). Thus, Jacques Havet noted in 1960 that, in front of the “irresistible evolution of the world”, which becomes “more and more tightened”, UNESCO must fight against cultural uniformization<sup>2</sup>. UNESCO launched new activities, as collecting traditional Asiatic tales and describing old community rituals (CUA/96, 17 juin 1951:7; *Évaluation du projet...*, 1968:60-61).

In addition, the African States that entered UNESCO between 1960 and 1962 claimed for recognition of their own cultures, and asked to partake in the East-West project (12 C/PRG/SR.32 (prov.), December 1962:3-10). USSR supported their claims (X 07.83 Maheu II a, 11 April 1961:9; Actes de la conférence générale de 1962:166-167). The UNESCO civil servants tried therefore to include Africa in the project, integrating it to the category “East” (X07.21(44) NC IV : report by Y. Brunsvick, 22 May 1962 ; CUA/108:3). Yet the place of Africa in the project remained very minor.

Eventually, identifying the East and the West in the project proved to be very far from a geographical reality, since Africa and Latin America were included within the “East” and Australia and New Zealand were considered as part of the “West”. Paradoxically, the areas where this geographical border is really situated, such as USSR or Turkey, did not play an important role in the project.

The results of the project were mitigated. Many criticisms arose when it was underway. The representative of Thailand deplored in 1961 “that the [cultural] circulation was carried out in only one sense” and that “every efforts made by Eastern countries to expose their cultures by sending documentation in Western countries failed” (MAPA/60.657, January 1961:4, 7-9). The representative of Laos, supported by the representative of Indonesia, criticized in 1962 the “imbalance” between East

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<sup>1</sup> Unesco General Conference 1958, speech of Z. Husain.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by J. Havet, doc. mentioned, p. 1.

and West in the project<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Western countries had a greater share of partaking in the project than the Eastern countries (X07.83 Maheu, part II b, 26 February 1963). Furthermore, there were stereotypes and prejudice in the presentation of Eastern cultures (MAPA/ED/2, May 1962; MAPA/9256.17; CUA/108, p. 3; *Évaluation du projet...*, 1968:84-85). So the project failed to arouse a better mutual understanding between the East and the West (CUA/125, 9-13 September 1963:5 ; X07.21(44)NC III : june 1961:11-15 ; X07.21(44)NC IV: report by Y. Brunsvick, 22 mai 1962). An internal audit carried out by UNESCO experts in 1968 revealed the lack of reciprocity in the project: publications, films, radio and TV programs, translations of literary works, were mainly done by Western people. "In the cultural exchanges aroused by the project, the movement was mainly in the way of a presentation of oriental values to Occident. It was not always possible to fully assure the mutual character which had been initially assigned to the enterprise" (CUA/108, p. 3-4, and annex I and IV; *Évaluation du projet...*, 1968:12, 75, 84). The project often presented Eastern cultures in a caricatured way, marked by exotic and oriental features, in spite of the warnings given by the UNESCO civil servants (Fradier, Avril 1963:4-7). Articles of the *UNESCO Courier* revealed the predominance of the Western vantage point: they presented Orient as a distant and mysterious region; photographs appeal to exotism and picturesque (Collison, juin 1957:11-12 ; Fradier; Menhuin, Novembre 1957:22). The Eastern cultures were presented mainly in their traditional (and not contemporary) aspects, they were referred to as still and rooted civilizations (Diplomatic Archives of France : NUOI box 835, 25 juin 1963; Unesco archives: CUA/108, p. 3 ; MAPA/6 AC/2 ; *Evaluation du projet...*, 1968:84-85). The Western culture was always presented implicitly as the frame of reference, as shown by the issue of *UNESCO Courier* devoted to "literatures of Orient and Occident": among the 13 articles of the issue, only 2 were written by Eastern intellectuals. The issue consisted mainly in a presentation of the Eastern literatures done by Western intellectuals; when doing so, the intellectuals constantly alluded to Western references (*Le Courier de l'Unesco*, juin 1957).

The project illustrated the conceptual turn around in UNESCO, and how the concepts regarding cultural borders evolved from the 1950s to the 1960s. The cultural border between the East and the West was initially perceived as a divide that should be overcome, in order to allow for the coming of a world civilization; then it progressively appeared as cultural wealth, that had to be protected and promoted. From then on, it seemed as being a part of the world cultural heritage. The putting into effect of the project also reveals difficulty in defining a clear cultural border between the East and the West, and difficulty in generating balanced cultural flows between the two areas. From the 1960s on, UNESCO has more and more devoted itself to protect and promote both cultural heritage, and cultural diversity.

## 2. UNESCO and Cultural Heritage

### 2.1. Increased Focusing on Cultural Heritage

The protection and promotion of the world cultural heritage were expanding rapidly among the UNESCO's activities. In the 1960s, UNESCO gained major fame in this field, by organizing the rescuing of the antique temples of Abu Simbel in South Egypt. This large-scale operation was given a wide media coverage. The temples were dismantled and then moved and reconstructed in a safer area. It was successfully achieved in 1968 and it gave UNESCO legitimacy within the field of protection of world cultural heritage (Cf. Maurel, 2006: 817-829).

A few years later, in November 1972, the Organization adopted the "Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage". This is when UNESCO began to establish the "World Heritage List". This list takes inventory of cultural and natural sites which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value. Several steps were taken in the following years. In the 1980s, UNESCO held projects to promote Eastern cultures, such as the "Silk Road Project". In 1988, UNESCO's DG, Federico Mayor, launched the "World Decade for Cultural Development" (1988-1997) (Anouma, 1996:161-180). Yet the results were disappointing. As Yves Courrier, a former UNESCO civil servant, observed, this ambitious and costly operation had minor impact and negligible results (Courrier, 2005:55-56; same idea in Jean-Michel Dijan, Octobre 2005). It is the same with the "Culture of Peace Programme", launched in the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> Actes de la conférence générale de 1962, 32e séance de la Commission du programme.

## **2.2. The “New World Information and Communication Order” (NWICO) or How to Overcome the North/South Economic and Cultural Divide (1980)**

In the 1970s, the Third World countries, and notably many African countries, claimed for a better repartition of production and circulation of information at the world level. They denounced domination of information by a few powerful press agencies belonging to Western countries. Indeed, at that time over 80% of global news flow were controlled by 4 major Western news agencies. The Third World countries claimed for a more equitable system, which would allow their populations to better partake in producing the information and, more generally, in consumption and production of culture.

Further to these demands, the new DG of UNESCO, the Senegalese Amadou Mahtar M’Bow decided to convene in 1977 an international panel chaired by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Sean MacBride. This panel was commissioned to identify and make recommendations on how to make the global media representation more balanced and more democratic. The MacBride Commission produced in 1980 a report titled *Many Voices, One World*. This text outlined the imbalance in information flows, in favour of the Western countries. Its conclusions were not entirely new: in the 1960s, the American media scholar Wilbur Schramm had already noted the unbalance in the world flow of news, unbalance which led to the conclusion that in elaboration of world news much attention was given to developed countries and little to less-developed ones (Schramm, 1964:65).

The MacBride report also observed that the developing world was culturally marginalized by the emergence of satellite and computer technologies. It established that a small number of developed countries controlled almost 90% of the radio spectrum, and that Western satellites broadcast Western television programs into Third World countries without prior permission (The UN had already voted in the early 1970s against such broadcasts). The MacBride Commission proposed to establish a “New World Information and Communication Order” (NWICO), more equitable. Representatives of the Third World played a leading role in this Commission, as Tunisia’s Information Minister, Mustapha Masmoudi.

But these proposals ran up against opposition from the Western powers, and mainly the US. The US, defending the interests of American media corporations, was hostile to NWICO and violently attacked it, painting it as a dangerous barrier to freedom of the press and to individual freedom. The US alleged that NWICO was trying to establish a totalitarian control on press by ultimately putting an intergovernmental organization at the head of controlling global media, potentially allowing for censorship on a large scale. The US and UK championed on the idea of “free flow of information” (in the spirit of “free trade” and economic liberalism), and went against the idea of (inter)governmental intervention aiming to favour a more balanced circulation of information. Faced with the threat of the US to suspend the payment of its contribution and to withdraw from UNESCO, UNESCO abandoned the project, causing great disappointment of numerous developing countries. The US eventually withdrew its UNESCO membership at the end of 1984.

So, the pressures of the Western countries prevented UNESCO from working to favour a more balanced flow of information and communication between the North and the South. This gap increased more and more: it led to the current of “global digital divide” (Lu, 2001:1-4 ; Guillen & Suárez, 2005: 681-708). This is a sort of cultural border, in the negative meaning of the term.

### **2.3.A Stress on African Cultural Heritage**

Because it became aware of the growing North-South gap, from the 1960s on UNESCO has actively worked to promote African cultures. Since the 1960s, Africa, which had been previously neglected by UNESCO, became the “new frontier” of the UNESCO cultural programs. This action was particularly boosted by the African people. At UNESCO General Conference in 1960, representatives of African countries insisted on the importance to develop African studies in Africa. The Malian intellectual, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, who represented Mali at UNESCO General Conference in 1960, urged UNESCO to “save from destruction a huge oral heritage, which is now stored only in memory of mortal human beings”. He noted that “safeguarding oral traditions of African countries [is] an urgent need” (11 C/PRG/SR.6 (prov.), p. 4). From 1962 to 1970, A. H. Bâ, representative of Mali in UNESCO’s Executive Council, played a leading role towards preservation of African cultures.

So, in the 1960s, UNESCO started to collect oral African traditions and to transcribe oral African languages. A. H. Bâ actively contributed to the elaboration of a unified system to transcribe oral African languages. Grammars and dictionaries were set up; historical and cultural tales were transcribed, such as the initiatory Peul tale *Kaïdara*, published in 1968 (Bâ, 1968). In 1972, UNESCO launched a “Decennial Plan for studying oral tradition and promoting African languages”. Besides, the “Ahmed Baba Institute” (Cedrab), founded in 1970 in Timbuktu by the government of Mali with collaboration of UNESCO started to collect old manuscripts and to restore them. There are hundreds thousands manuscripts in the region, some of them dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They are of the outmost importance in shaping a new look on African history. These manuscripts refute the myth of absence of historical African written sources (Djian, août 2004).

Such devotion of UNESCO to Africa was influenced by Pan-Africanism. The “World Festival of Black Arts”, organized in Dakar in 1966 at the initiative of Leopold Sedar Senghor, with the help of UNESCO, fully illustrated it. This festival aimed to introduce Africa “as a producer of civilization” by “people at large in the whole world” (7 (96) A 066 (663) « 66 », II). In the 1970s, the *UNESCO Courier* intensively promoted African cultural heritage (Ngugi, January 1971 :25; ; *Courier de l’Unesco*, May 1977; Juillet 1977, « Freiner l’avance des déserts » ; Novembre 1977 : « L’Afrique australe et le racisme » ; Décembre 1977: « L’essor de la cité arabe il y a 1000 ans » ; août-septembre 1977: « L’empreinte de l’Afrique »). In 1979 for the first time this magazine dedicated a whole issue to this continent (août-septembre 1977: « L’empreinte de l’Afrique »). In 1970, representatives of African countries at UNESCO complained that during the colonial period many African works of art, together with African historical and archaeological pieces were relocated to European countries and remained there. They asked for these objects to be returned to Africa. They demanded “restitution of the artistic and cultural treasures which were removed from their countries before independence” (Unesco, *Conférence intergouvernementale...*, 1970:31). This claim was supported by the UNESCO’s DG from 1974, Amadou Mahtar M’Bow. In 1978, the latter launched an official demand: “The men and women of these countries have the right to recover these cultural assets which are part of their being. [...] These men and women who have been deprived of their cultural heritage therefore ask for the return of at least the art treasures which best represent their culture, which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish. This is a legitimate claim; and UNESCO, whose Constitution makes it responsible for the preservation and protection of the universal heritage of works of art and monuments of historic or scientific interest, is actively encouraging all that needs to be done to meet it”<sup>1</sup>. It led to the creation in 1978 of the “Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation”. But this demand came up against the firm opposition of Western countries. The US strongly criticized the stand taken by M’Bow on this issue. The North-South divide appeared to be clearer and clearer within UNESCO.

In spite of these political tensions, from 1965 to 1986 UNESCO supervised a long-drawn-out enterprise: the writing of a *General History of Africa*. This project was launched at the initiation of many African countries and particularly of the Organisation of African Unity (created in 1963). Among the writers of this book, African historians constituted the majority: they represented 2/3 of the members of the international scientific committee in charge of the writing. Joseph Ki Zerbo, a Burkinabe historian, played a leading role in this project. The important participation of African intellectuals in the writing of this book contrasted with the unbalance which characterized the previous historiography project led by UNESCO, the *History of Mankind* (published in 1968), mainly written by Western intellectuals.

The *General History of Africa*, published in 1981, proved to be an innovative work: it presented itself as the first attempt to elaborate a unified African point of view on Africa as a whole (Collectif, *Histoire de l’Afrique*, 1981; M’Bow, vol. 1, p. 12, 14, 9-10, 15). The Pan-African inspiration of the project is notable<sup>2</sup>. The text is influenced by the “New African History” trend: it

<sup>1</sup> Unesco, “Cultural Property: its Illicit Trafficking and Restitution. For the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to those who Created It. A plea from M. Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, UNESCO Director-General, 7 June 1978”(http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/38701/12320174515speech\_mbow\_return\_en.pdf/speech\_mbow\_return\_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> In the volume about XX Century, section VII is titled : « L’Afrique indépendante dans les affaires mondiales ».

aimed to reassert the value of pre-colonial times, viewed as a sort of golden era. Cheikh Anta Diop, one of the leaders of this historiography trend, used African sources (mainly archaeological sources) in order to outline both wealth and influence of the pre-colonial African empires, contrary to the conclusions of the traditional colonial history. In the foreword, M'Bow wrote that the book intended to present a "faithful reflection of the way in which African authors see their own culture" and emphasized that the project was motivated by "the wish to see African history from within the inside" (M'Bow vol. 1: 9-10, 15). This Pan-Africanism conception blended with a universalist perspective, since in this book, the history of Africa is also conceived as "a cultural heritage which belongs to humanity as a whole" (Ogot, vol. 2: 18).

From the 1970s on, UNESCO has tried to promote not only traditional African cultures, but also contemporary ones. The "International Fund for the Promotion of Culture" subsidized many cultural projects by African artists and intellectuals. But many of these projects met encountered problems during their progress (CLT/CIC/FIPC/12: OP 44, 1984).

In 1975 UNESCO organized in Accra (Ghana) an "Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa" ("Africacult"). In 1991 UNESCO launched the program AFRICOM, which encouraged the development of museums in Africa. From the 1990s on, UNESCO has particularly promoted history and memory of slavery, e.g. the "Slave Route Project". The scientific committee of this project gathered scholars and teachers from all over the world. They organized symposia, conferences, training sessions, and published books. However, this project, scattered in numerous limited actions, registered unequal and often inconsistent results, which recently led UNESCO to undertake an internal audit of it. Jean Michel Deveau, vice-president of this committee, was disappointed by the limited impact of this project, and expressed his regrets that "UNESCO's decision to declare 2004 international year to commemorate the struggle against slavery and its abolition obtained very few echos" (Deveau, N° 188, 2006/2:259-262).

In 2006, UNESCO launched a project titled the "African Liberation Heritage". It aimed to document and preserve the memory of the liberation movements, through archival documentation, oral historical research and the identification and protection of heritage sites related to the struggles for independence. It focused on Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, countries in which the liberation struggles were particularly extensive and harsh.

So, from the 1960 on, UNESCO's efforts to protect and promote cultural heritage and cultural diversity have been intense (especially concerning African cultures); though political opposition from the US prevented UNESCO to carry out NWICO project so that the North and the South would be better balanced in terms of access to (and creation of) culture, such efforts proved useful.

### **3.UNESCO's Normative Action**

#### **3.1.From Tangible to Intangible Heritage**

In its efforts to promote cultures and to protect cultural borders, UNESCO also put the emphasis on normative action.

Cultural borders are often areas of cultural wealth but also of conflicts, sometimes of armed conflicts. That's why UNESCO set up as early as 1954 the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. It proved however helpless to prevent destruction of cultural heritage in the numerous armed conflicts that occurred from this time on, like destruction of Vietnamese and Cambodian cultural heritage by the US during the Vietnam War.

In 1970, UNESCO adopted the "Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property" (1970). Two years later, in 1972, the "Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972" introduced the idea of cultural and natural heritage. In 1982, at the UNESCO "World Conference on Cultural Policies" ("Mondiacult") held in Mexico, the notion of "intangible heritage" was introduced. It was then officially recognized in 1992 with the creation of the notion of "cultural landscape" by the World Heritage Committee. It resulted from taking into consideration the folklores and living cultures, and the efforts of Japanese representatives to UNESCO (supported by other countries, notably African countries) to legitimate a more open conception of cultural heritage, including not only the "monumental" heritage but also the "living" heritage (Bortolotto, 2007). The notion of "cultural landscape" intended to separate from the only known approach, i.e. the "monumental" approach. A



“cultural landscape” was conceived as combined works of nature and humankind, expressing a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment. The World Heritage Committee aimed to balance the geographical repartition of World Heritage sites. The World Heritage list indeed included at that time mainly sites situated in Europe, and Africa was tremendously under-represented. The creation of such notion of “Cultural Landscape” appeared to be best suited to the African background, since, in Africa, both nature and culture are intimately related (Cf. *Africa Revisited*, 1998; Cousin & Martineau, 2009/1-2:342-343).

In 1995, UNESCO elaborated, with the help of the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (Unidroit) the “UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects”. It intended to fight International trafficking of cultural property. In 2001, the “Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage” was adopted, followed in 2003 by the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”. The latter was particularly created in reference to Africa. “Intangible Cultural Heritage” was defined as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”. This intangible cultural heritage was meant to be “transmitted from generation to generation” and at the same time “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history”. It was considered as “provid[ing] them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity”<sup>1</sup>. The Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, which came into force in 2006, led to the creation of a “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” and a “List of Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding”. An “Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” and a “Fund for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” were also established. As Susan Keitumetse observed, “this is a commendable step by UNESCO, given that the 1972 UNESCO Convention has for more than 30 years focused specifically on the tangible aspects of cultural heritage” (Cf. Keitumetse, vol. 61, No. 184, 2006:166-171). Recognition of intangible heritage favoured a better consideration of African cultural heritage.

Nowadays 52 States have ratified this convention. But the results are still minimum and even more, possibly negative. As Susan Keitumetse reviewed, focused on using the intangible heritage in a Tlokweng village, an African community in Botswana, “safeguarding elements of intangible heritage by creating inventories and representative lists can reduce the value of the cultural capital together with the social capital upon which the heritage exists by making some elements of intangible heritage ubiquitous, in the process lessening their existence and use values and thus disrupting the socio-cultural contexts within which these elements exist”<sup>2</sup>.

Because of the mercantile issues that it can raise the normative action of UNESCO within cultural heritage has also other negative consequences. Since the 1960s, UNESCO promoted “cultural tourism”, as a way of safeguarding cultural heritage and of bringing money to less developed countries (SESSA, 1967; Cousin & Martineau, 2007:337-364 ; Cousin, 2008: 41-56). This conception has evolved since then, but it remains centred on the idea that tourism is an apolitical phenomenon, which brings cultural exchange and economic profit. Yet, the benefits for the populations are discussed in particular by economists. Moreover, many ethnographical investigations conducted in Europe, Africa or Asia have proven that cultural tourism raises both political issues and power struggles (Caire & LE MASNE, 2007 in BATAILLOU & SHEOU (dir.), p. 31-57; Cousin, Martineau, article mentioned).

The notion of “world cultural heritage” was diverted from its initial address. It now appears more like a “touristic tool”, serving political and economical interests. This can wield bad effects on cultures. For example, S. Cousin and J.-L. Martineau analyzed the “instrumentalization” of customs, traditions, culture and heritage. They disapprove of the “transformation of world heritage into tourism”. In their study case about Osun Osogbo “sacred grove” (sacred forest along the banks of the Oshun River just outside the city of Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005), they underline the importance of lobbying actions, led along political and economical issues. The political target was to “give to the new capital of Osun State a historical

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<sup>1</sup> Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, article 2.

<sup>2</sup> S Keitumetse, article mentioned.

anchorage, which it lacked of, against the city of Ife-Ife, well anchored in history”. The main political objective was “to allow Osogbo to move from the place of secondary town to the rank of capital of state”. Inclusion of Osun Osogbo sacred grove in UNESCO’s World Heritage List is “the result of almost 15 years of steps taken by Osun State to construct for itself a historical and cultural legitimacy”. Through nomination on World Heritage, UNESCO appears as a legitimization body. The problem is that through this system, the culture can be manipulated and used as a political or economical instrument (Cousin & Martineau, 2007:351-358).

Many other shortcomings prevent UNESCO’s normative action from being successful: only a very small number of state ratified certain UNESCO’s conventions. For example, only 11 States have so far ratified Unidroit Convention. And in spite of the creation in 1997 of the Red List of African Archaeological Cultural Objects at Risk, aiming to stop the looting of African archaeological objects, trafficking in cultural property continues and brings loss (often irreparable) of cultural heritage of African countries.

More generally, as Philippe Baqué, Jean-Michel Dijan and Yves Courier observe, most of UNESCO’s conventions and instruments are of a “very poor efficiency”. Most of UNESCO’s normative instruments remain just dead letters, because they are not binding agreements (Baqué, Octobre 2006; Courier, p. 54; Dijan, article mentioned).

With reference to the Sub-Saharan Africa, it is still clearly under-represented on the World Heritage List (less than 10%), in spite of the creation in 2006 of the “African World Heritage Fund”, which aims to help African States to increase the number of their sites nominated on the “World Heritage List”.

Besides, UNESCO’s efforts to promote African cultural heritage were often carried out by Western people, which often narrowed to protecting ancient, traditional forms of culture. And generally, the norms generated by World Heritage List are set out by Western people, who therefore imprint their conceptions and reading grids to African cultures. This fact can contribute to maintaining the African culture in a subordinate position by comparison to the Western culture, and to materializing the African cultures with stiff, rigid, artificial cultural borders, rather than to encourage their vitality.

### **3.2.The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)**

The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) was signed at UNESCO in October 2005, and entered into force in March 2007; it aroused big hopes. This convention was the result of many steps. The boost came mainly from France and Canada (Musitelli, n°62, Summer 2006). The UNESCO’s conference on cultural policies for development, held in March 1998 in Stockholm, concluded that the economical globalization damaged local cultures and traditions. Then in November 2001, the UNESCO’s General Conference unanimously adopted the “Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity” (at that time, the US had not yet rejoined UNESCO). The declaration intended to take a stand against the risk of cultural uniformization caused by globalization.

Both France and Canada employed different diplomatic means to convince many countries of the need to protect cultural diversity; their action was supported by advocacy groups such as the “National Coalitions for Cultural Diversity”, and by international cultural organizations, such as the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF), and the International Network for Cultural Diversity (RIDC). The OIF played a pioneer role by adopting, in June 2001 in Cotonou, a “Declaration of Ministers of Culture on Cultural Diversity”, which influenced UNESCO and directly inspired UNESCO’s declaration. Most of all, France dedicated itself to convincing the European Union. In August 2003, the European Commission was admitted to negotiate within UNESCO, in its own name, matters of its competency. The European Commission had a decisive influence on UNESCO, because its (then) 25 Members voted the same way, in October 2005, when the General Conference finally adopted the “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions”. This adoption was almost unanimous. Only two Member States voted against it: the US and Israel.

This text considers cultural diversity as “the common heritage of humanity”, “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”. It recognizes the diversity of cultural expressions and

cultural traditions as essential to the exchange of ideas and values among these cultures. It underlines the importance of creativity and interaction among different cultures. It sees cultural diversity as a “living, renewable and constantly changing treasure of humanity” (UNESCO, série *Diversité culturelle*, 2003:3). It intends to oppose the cultural homogenization that globalization incites. For that purpose, the convention tries to set out rules and principles concerning the world cultural diversity. It was the first time that a consensus was met by international community within this field. This text recognizes both the role and the legitimacy of public policies in promoting cultural diversity. It outlines the importance of international cooperation in order to protect minorities or vulnerable cultures. It tries to fill in a loophole and to articulate the numerous normative tools already existing on the subject, and generally not enforced (Cassen, Septembre 2003).

An important point is that this convention transforms the French notion of “cultural exception” into the universal notion of “cultural diversity”. According to Jean Musitelli (who contributed to the adoption process of this text), this evolution constitutes a “Copernican revolution” (Musitelli, n°62, Summer 2006). Besides, this convention is more ambitious than the former ones of UNESCO: it tries to give a juridical status to culture and to oppose the domination of the WTO, which aims to liberalize cultural goods and services. Its negotiation and subsequent adoption at UNESCO (and not at the WTO, as the US wanted) show an effort to give competencies back to UNESCO, competencies which the WTO was progressively taking (Cf. Germann, 2004:325-354).

Yet many factors are jeopardizing the efficiency of this convention. Its main weakness is that it does not call the WTO guidelines into question. As the WTO, the UNESCO convention states that cultural goods and services are of economic nature: UNESCO does not reject the WTO’s mercantile conception of culture. On the contrary, article 20 subordinates the UNESCO’ convention to the WTO rules. It is the result of pressures coming from the US. Moreover, in case of infraction against the convention, there is no sanction provided (Mattelart, octobre 2005). The power of the convention is therefore very limited, mainly symbolic. This convention does not appear to be as robust as the WTO agreements that support global trade in mass media and information.

With regards to the ways and means of promoting cultural diversity, UNESCO is now at a crossroads. Two opposite conceptions about globalization and liberalization coexist within it. On the one hand, many UNESCO representatives or UNESCO partners advocate that the institution should orient its cultural politics along the lines of economic liberalism. For example, Prof. Patrice Meyer Bisch, representative of UNESCO Chair on Human Rights and Democracy, recommends “refocusing UNESCO on transnational sovereignty”, i.e. to give more room to NGOs, private actors, transnational firms, foundations, associations. According to him, it is necessary “to reform [UNESCO] toward more liberalism”. “After having reached the economic field, [...] liberalism can apply to cultural field”. He thinks that neither the States nor UNESCO “have the necessary abilities to represent cultures”. He disagrees with the idea of UNESCO strongly ruling in cultural matters: in his opinion this would restrict cultural freedom. According to him, UNESCO shouldn’t impose rules, but only “favour synergy between civil, private, public cultural actors” (Meyer-Bisch, N° 170, 2001/4: 673-676). On the other hand, UNESCO denounced some negative consequences of liberalization. Along this line, UNESCO representatives participated in the “World Social Forum” (WSF) in 2001 in Porto Alegre and in the following sessions of WSF. They were associated to round tables and, on these occasions, dwelled on the necessity that globalization should respect human rights and cultural diversity (Solinís, n° 182, 2004/4:707-708; Cf. Milani, Arturi, Solinís (ed), 2003). So, at present, UNESCO must clarify its position towards liberal globalization.

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For more than 50 years, UNESCO has been questioning the delimitations and the reality of cultural borders. The East-West Major Project (1957-1966) illustrates the UNESCO’s initial universalist conception and its determination to encourage cultural unity. It reveals a progressive turn around in UNESCO’s cultural politics, which led UNESCO to develop a more synthetic conception, allying promotion of cultural unity and cultural diversity at a time. Analyzing the trouble that the East-West project encountered during its achievement also illustrates the extreme difficulty to determine borders between cultures: neither large delimitations, as established by Fernand Braudel in *Grammaire des civilisations* (Braudel, 1987), nor finer delimitations, based for example on languages (Warnier,

1999:8-9), are able to reflect the extraordinary complex and shifting character of the mosaic of cultures.

Since the 1960s, UNESCO has tried hard to safeguard the world cultural heritage, notably in Africa, where it appeared to be endangered, and undergoing extinction. The creation of the World Heritage List in 1972 and the attempt to set up a “New World Information and Communication Order” in 1980 were important steps. Several Conventions were adopted. The Convention on Cultural Diversity (2005) is particularly important, because it together emphasizes the diversity of the different cultures and affirms the universalist idea of all cultures belonging to a common cultural ground. It therefore refutes Samuel Huntington’s conception of an inevitable clash of civilizations: the UNESCO’s convention goes against the idea that cultural borders would be factors of destabilization and conflict (Huntington, 1996). It outlines the importance of cultural variety and intercultural dialog. It constitutes an attempt of synthesis between universalism and multiculturalism.

Yet UNESCO’s actions remain too scattered, and the efficiency of the UNESCO’s conventions is too limited, because these conventions are not binding agreements. Besides, the UNESCO’s instruments have also pernicious effects: they are often used as instruments for political or economic targets. They are in many cases diverted for the profit of private actors, like corporations, which benefit from the transformation of culture in commercial (for example touristic) products.

Now, it seems that the important challenge to be taken up by UNESCO is to give every people the social-economical conditions to be able to discover cultures and to be part in creating them. Liberalizing culture, i.e. handling culture as trade (as WTO does) is opposed to this scope, because liberalization increases social inequality and therefore deepens the gap between people in the access to culture. This “cultural gap” is now deepening, both between the North and the South and within each country. So UNESCO should not only promote the idea of “cultural diversity” and celebrate “cultural borders” and “intercultural dialog”, but above all clearly distance itself from the idea of liberalizing culture and from WTO politics. UNESCO should take more concrete steps to allow every people to partake in cultural life.

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