

CREATIVITY AND CHANGE

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Regional Symposium on Arab Endogenous Intellectual Creativity  
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Your Highness, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues....

It is a great pleasure and honour to address this eminent audience today as you begin your deliberations on the role of endogenous intellectual creativity in the Arab world.

This symposium is, of course, of great significance to the United Nations University -- and will, I am sure, greatly stimulate and advance the worldwide process through which we are seeking to bring cross-cultural reflection on ways to release the innate forces of creativity in all societies. Our goal is to interweave the many cultural strands that can enrich the human existence.

We began this process in Japan, in the ancient city of Kyoto, where East Asian scholars met to consider the potential intellectual values that could be gained from that region's many societies. We then turned to Latin American perspectives at a symposium in Mexico City which yielded much additional insight.

Now we come to Kuwait -- a centuries-old crossroads of culture and trade that today, thanks largely to its enlightened leadership, enjoys a new and widely-admired social order. We come here to seek the rich wisdom of the Arab world.

This symposium, I hope, will prove an important and timely occasion for the academic community of the Arab world to define its own potential

contribution to the development of new global perspectives so badly needed by a planet confronted with problems of unprecedented scale and complexity.

In seeking to define what this contribution might be, all of us will equally wish to clarify our own thinking about the definition of Arab culture -- in its deepest and most transcendental sense. This is a question to which I will return later.

The situation we find ourselves in now is largely the result of a fragmentation of the global power configuration, resulting from profound economic and political changes. This immense global transformation that is now occurring was long overdue. The structural disparities that have characterized the international order in the last century have long ceased to be viable. Basic, fundamental changes in the international order have become inevitable. But we will have to devise ways to enhance our capabilities to deal with changes of these new magnitudes and velocities.

One of the central problems, in this world in transformation, will lie in the shaping of new configurations of power in a manner that will lead to a more equitable and peaceful international order -- one in which the hundreds of millions who are now poor, hungry and despairing can realistically aspire to true improvement in their daily lot.

At the core of our approach, there must be the determination that the growing interdependence among nations not be allowed to perpetuate the reliance of the poor on the rich. Interdependence, in its only acceptable sense, should reflect the web of mutually beneficial interactions that strengthen equitable and peaceful relations among nations.

Out of these interactions must grow a single sense of human solidarity, and a perception of the human species as an indivisible entity comprising a global society of many diverse cultures.

Here let me turn to what I perceive as the important contribution which the Arab nations could make in helping to promote and fill out such global perspectives.

This fresh vision must first reject the notion that our present situation is somehow answerable to conventional political, economic or technological nostrums. It will arise rather from our redefinition and reassertion of our civilizational and cultural values. And this is why this symposium takes on such significance -- because you are met here as the intellectual representatives of one of the world's major civilizations.

But recognition of the importance of our civilizational roots will be fruitless -- and indeed counter-productive -- if it serves only to turn us inward on ourselves in our efforts to recapture our own cultural authenticity. From this inner look, that will enable us to define our cultural identity in contemporary terms, encompassing our own cultural goals and perspectives, there must then result a reaching out towards our own world view in creative partnership with other civilizations and cultures.

We know that the greatness in Arab civilization stems from two important sources of cultural creativity:

- The first has been the tremendous endogenous creativity displayed by Arab cultures in the past; the internal thrusts from various levels of society, including major contributions in the field of science, which have been such vital drive engines of Arab growth and development;

- The second has been the equally impressive capacity to incorporate major elements of other cultures -- and to do so in a way that has enriched and fortified Arab civilization over the millenia.

Both of these resources need to be revived and deployed in helping the third world reduce the dependency which has for so long stifled the

creativities and crushed the dreams of our peoples. From these civilizational wellsprings could come many fresh and invaluable insights and impulses towards the shaping of a new and culturally diverse world society.

Such a new society must possess the instrumentalities to come to grips more effectively with hunger, poverty, and ignorance, as well as the underlying structural disparities, in a context of shifting power configurations, higher energy costs, competing demands for food and fuel, population pressures, and the many other interconnected concerns that vie for attention on the march to modernity.

All of these problems, in one way or another, are linked in the grid of modern science and technology. Learning how to put science and technology to use, wisely and humanely and in concordance with the essential values and aspirations of each of our own cultures, is one of the most daunting challenges we face.

The experience of virtually all of the cultures out of the Western mainstream clearly calls into question the validity of hitherto conventional notions of development. We will therefore have to devise alternative development concepts and strategies which could take us along different trajectories of industrialization and rural modernization from those of the industrialized world. But whatever the strategy adopted by any particular culture or nation of the third world, it must encompass three basic tasks:

- First, to optimize abilities to adapt existing forms of science and technology to our own needs in the third world -- needs that we clearly define by our own values and perceptions.

- Second, to pay close heed to advances on the frontiers of science. Lest we watch carefully what is happening at the frontiers of science in

the research laboratories, largely in the industrialized world, and be prepared to play our own part in the latest scientific advances, whole new sets of dependencies could be born. Science now promises much -- in, say, biotechnology and communications and their use for human and social advancement. We must ensure that this new knowledge can be turned to the third world's benefit as well, including the hitherto marginalized segments of our societies.

- Third, and finally, we must find new ways to tap and use creatively our rich endogenous cultural resources in response to our own problems, opportunities, and aspirations. In doing so, we must adhere faithfully to the true meaning of endogeneity -- that is, a growing from within. We must not limit our search for creativity therefore to the academic elites, but seek to draw on many traditional intellectual streams -- both individual and institutional. This requires new social learning processes.

The accomplishment of these three tasks has a number of preconditions. But undoubtedly the most fundamental one is that we clearly define our own cultural identities and basic values and goals.

This calls, really, for a process of redefinition and reinterpretation -- one which will permit us to see more clearly the potential strengths and spiritual resources that lie within this Arab civilization and many other civilizations. This will also mean unlearning those elements that have contributed to a distortion of our true identity -- most notably the Europe-centred historical notion of what we of these ancient civilizations are thought to be.

In the process, we will inevitably have to face the question of the relationship between science and moral values. At one point in history, in most civilizations, science and religion, as a source of such values,

worked closely together in helping men and women understand and strike a balance between the finite and infinite, between autonomous reason and our sense of the transcendent. But over the centuries of growth toward modernity, scientific knowledge and transcendent wisdom have drifted apart. This drift must be reversed.

While this will be an imperative for scientists and scholars of all beliefs, in our deliberations here we will wish to consider, quite logically and properly, how Moslem civilization can meet this challenge. Can Islamic civilization deal effectively and creatively with science and technology within a transcendental perception of life?

It is already possible, however, to sense -- through the agonies of conflict even among ourselves and the swirling cross-currents of change -- the search by our Islamic civilizations for new patterns of purpose and cohesiveness which could reverse the earlier processes of stagnation and decay. But it is only the beginning of a long and painful historical process leading to the emergence of contemporary Islamic civilizations. The same process is in train in other non-Western civilizations who will eventually also take their rightful place side by side with Western civilization in a culturally pluralistic world.

It is this search for a new pluralistic world that is at the heart of the work of the United Nations University. The University is seeking to play a catalytic role in mobilizing the intellectual potential and conscience of the world -- and particularly in the third world. In this mobilization, the contribution of Arab intellectuals could be of tremendous significance. Their efforts -- your efforts -- to bring about an intellectual renaissance in Arab cultures could be an important contribution to the intellectual endeavours of the third world.

I believe that the mobilization of the third world intellectual -- and the welding of his thought and work to that of similarly-minded colleagues elsewhere -- is an indispensable prerequisite of humanity's advance out of its present crisis.

It will be an enormous task. We must confront, dispassionately and with a minimum of rhetoric, the reality of our present fragmentation. We must knit together the best intellectual efforts of the third world -- it is one of the major challenges we face in our endeavours to build a more viable and morally acceptable international order.

In closing, may I again underline the great symbolic importance of our symposium taking place in Kuwait, where an enlightened democracy with constitutional freedom flourishes and welcomes thinkers from all parts of the Arab and non-Arab world. I am sure that the co-ordinator of the UN University project on Socio-cultural Development Alternatives, Dr. Anouar Abdel-Malek, shares my view that we will find much here this week that is rich and fulfilling and enlightening.

May I also take this opportunity, on behalf of the United Nations University, to express our deepest gratitude to His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Saad Al Abdullah Al Sabah for inviting us here. Our thanks go also to Their Excellencies, Abdel Aziz Hussein and Yakoub al-Ghoneim and to the Rector of the University of Kuwait for all their kind co-operation and assistance.

We all know, and are grateful to Kuwait, for the generous support it supplies to universities and research units within the Arab world. But even more important is the fact that Kuwait today is a kind of haven where hundreds of scholars, intellectuals, journalists and artists from all over the Arab world can work in peace and liberty for a better Arab future. I am happy to associate the United Nations University with that worthy cause.