

# The Challenges of Interculturality in the Mediterranean

**Amin Maalouf.** Writer, Lebanon

In terms of reflection on cultural diversity, it is necessary to consider whether the differences between the communities of a single country must be ignored or taken into account. The example of Lebanon reveals how an option of formal recognition of diversity has been perverted by its own deficiencies. Nevertheless, it is clear that democracy is the only possible way, bearing in mind that the values rather than the mechanisms are sacred to it. In a context in which tensions of identity are growing, the acceleration of communications has also yielded a sense of threat that conveys a conception of “tribal” identity which does not match the current reality. The fear of similarities, increasingly real, enables the claim for a vertical identity, inherited from ancestors and traditions. However, in order to promote diversity, the path to follow is the recognition by each individual and each society of their own diversity rather than the aggressive defence of tribal identities.

I must confess from the outset that I never find it comfortable to ponder on the issue we are addressing. For a person born in Lebanon, reflecting on how we get distinct communities to live together is not just one more concern but rather a chronic obsession which you never overcome. Throughout my life I have endlessly returned to this issue, approaching it from all perspectives, without ever finding an appropriate solution. It is true that, because of my temperament, I am more prone to raising questions than finding answers, and that my novels usually end with question marks or dot, dot, dot.

Nor will I provide a comforting solution this time. However, I will start from an obvious question, which I will pose as follows: when the inhabitants of a country have the feeling of

belonging to different religious, linguistic, ethnic, national or racial communities, or of any other kind, how must we deal with this reality? Must these differences be taken into account? Or, rather, must they be ignored? Must we act as if they were invisible? This issue is present, in one way or another, in all human societies, each of them giving their own answer, sometimes clearly posed and others implicit.

Neither will it be surprising that I linger in Lebanon. And not only because I spent the first twenty-seven years of my life there but also because the Lebanese response to the issues we are addressing is one of the most curious, one of the most original, and I was about to say also one of the most absurd, because power is meticulously shared, at all levels, between a small group of twenty religious communities.

It is certainly an extreme option, deserving respect for its formal recognition of the numerous communities, but at the same time it takes this recognition to absurd extremes. This option could have been exemplary but it has become negative. It mainly obeys the complex realities of the Middle East but, also to a great extent, the deficiencies of the formula itself, its rigidity, traps and incoherencies.

This does not mean that the overall experience must not be valued. Providing room to all the communities without restricting power to a single one – which would condemn the others to subjugate or disappear – is worthy of respect; as it is to have conceived a system of subtle balances that enabled the emergence of liberties and the development of the arts in an area with a predominance of states with a single religion, a single ideology, a single party or a single language, and where all those who do not have the chance of being born on the right side of the wall often cannot choose anything other than submission, exile or death. For all these reasons, I will continue to argue that the Lebanese experience, despite its failures, continues to be, in my view, much more honourable than other experiences in the Middle East, which have not ended in civil war, at least not yet, but which have built their relative stability upon repression, oppression, a covered up purge or de facto discrimination. Based, therefore, on a respectable idea, the Lebanese formula has been perverted. A deviation which is exemplary, given that it clearly shows the limitations of the community system.

I will cite an example, among the many others that I could mention, of how the ingenious ideas of the founders of modern Lebanon have been perverted and, sometimes, transformed into disastrous ideas. One of these ideas consisted of avoiding confrontation at any price, when electing a deputy, for instance a Muslim candidate and a Christian candidate, in order to prevent Muslims from providing support

to Muslims and Christians to Christians and each election ending in a clash between the communities. The solution found was that a determined seat would be reserved to the Maronite, another, for instance, to the Shiite Muslims... In other words, the seats would be reserved to the determined communities with the end of avoiding the confrontation of two different communities. The problem was that, when this principle was clearly applied at all levels, to the President of the Republic, the President of the Council, the deputies and the main officers, each function or position of a certain relevance became, in some way, the “property” of a determined community.

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In my youth I often directed my anger against this aberrant system, according to which out of two candidates for a single function the one elected was not the most competent but the one whose community “had the right” to the position. Today, I continue reacting in the same way whenever I have the opportunity. The only difference is that when I was nineteen I would have wanted to replace this system by any other, while at forty I still wish to see it substituted, but now not by any other.

When I say this, I am going a little further than Lebanon. If the system which was established has proved to be infamous, I do not believe that this truth will draw even more perverse conclusions. Such as, for instance, to consider that societies made up by several communities are not made for democracy, and that only an extremely firm power could preserve civil peace. Even in the mouth of certain democrats we can hear this type of reasoning, which seeks to be realistic although events in recent years have refuted it. Although de-



Mosque, Paris (Ducasse-Lounes/Gamma/Eyedeia/Contacto).

mocracy does not always manage to solve the problems resulting from cultural, religious or ethnic religiosity, it has never been proved that a dictatorship was more successful. Each of you, I imagine, has your own examples in mind, as I have mine. Has the Yugoslavian single party system proved to be more suitable to maintaining the civil peace rather than the Lebanese multi-party system? Thirty years ago, Marshall Tito may have appeared as a minor evil, because the world ceased to see how the different peoples killed each other; today we find out that no fundamental problem had been solved, rather the contrary.

What has happened in the whole of what was the communist world continues so alive in our minds that an overly long explanation will not be necessary. But perhaps it is worth repea-

ting that the powers that hinder the democratic way, in effect, contribute to strengthening the traditional affiliations. How many people have entered the Soviet universe as “proletarian” and “internationalist” to end up more “religious” and more “nationalist” than ever! Going back in time, the apparently “secular” dictatorships are greenhouses of religious fanaticisms. A laicism without democracy is a disaster both for democracy and laicism.

I would not like to linger on this refutation. In any case, for those aspiring to a freer and fairer world, dictatorship is not an acceptable solution and it will not be necessary to prove its manifest inability to solve the problems related to religious affiliation, cultural diversity or identity. The choice can only take place within the framework of democracy. Having

said this, I have not progressed much. Because the simple term “democracy” is not enough to establish harmonious coexistence. There are democracies and democracies, and sometimes their derivations can be as lethal as those of a dictatorship. In this framework, I consider that two ways are especially dangerous to achieve the safeguarding of cultural diversity and respect for the main foundation of democracy itself. On the one hand, the community system taken to absurd extremes but also the opposite option, to which I will refer in more detail in a moment. In terms of the first of these ways, the Lebanese example, albeit not the only one, is clearly one of the most revealing. Here power is shared between the different communities, provisionally we are told, with the hope of alleviating tensions and with the promise of leading people towards a feeling of belonging to the national community. However, the logic of the system goes in another direction. As soon as the cake is shared, all the communities tend to believe that their portion is too small and that they are victims of a flagrant injustice, and there are politicians that make this resentment an ongoing issue in their propaganda. Little by little, the leaders who do not participate in this game are marginalised; then the feeling of belonging to the different tribes is enhanced instead of weakened, and the feeling of belonging to the national community gradually diminishes until disappearing, or almost. A process which is always accompanied by grief, and sometimes by a blood bath. If we place ourselves in Western Europe, we can think of Belgium; if in the Middle East, of Lebanon. The blunders of the community system have resulted in so many dramas here and there that they seem to support this opposing attitude, which prefers to ignore the differences and defer on all occasions to the arbitration of universal suffrage, considered infallible.

At first sight, this posture strictly speaking seems to show good democratic sense. We do

not want to know whether among the citizens there are Christians, Muslims, Jews, coloured people, Asians, Walloons or Flemish; each of them has a voice in the elections, and there is no better law than that of universal suffrage. The problem of this venerable law is that it works perfectly as long as the sky is clear, but it stops working correctly when the sky gets cloudy. In Germany, in the early 1920s, universal suffrage helped to constitute the government coalitions that reflected the state of opinion. In the early 1930s, the same universal suffrage, exercised in a climate of acute social crisis and racist propaganda, led to the abolition of democracy. When the German people were again able to express themselves in a state of serenity, tens of millions of people had died. The law of the majority is not always a synonym of democracy, freedom and equality. Sometimes it is a synonym of tyranny, subjugation and discrimination.

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It is estimated that in Rwanda, Hutus represent approximately nine tenths of the population, and Tutsis, one tenth. If someone tries to apply the law of numbers without any restriction, this will undoubtedly lead to a massacre or a dictatorship, whether we speak of the present, the past or a distant future. It is not by chance that I have used this example. If we closely follow the political debate that accompanied the 1994 massacre, we will realise that fanatics have always sought to act in the name of democracy, even comparing their uprising with the 1789 French Revolution, and the extermination of the Tutsis with the elimination of a class of privileged people, as did Robespierre and his friends in the times

of the guillotine. Some Catholic priests have let themselves be convinced that they should be “on the side of the poor” and “understand their anger” to the point of having become the accomplices of a genocide.

If such an argumentation worries me, it is not only because it endeavours to ennoble the vile gesture of the executioner but because it shows how far noble gestures can be perverted. The ethnical massacres are always carried out on the most beautiful pretexts: justice, equality, independence, the right of peoples, authenticity, democracy, the fight against privileges, the fight against exploiters... What has happened in several countries in recent years should make us distrustful every time a universal principle is invoked in an ethnic conflict. No nation, no principle, no practice has the same meaning in all countries and in all circumstances, and all are perverted as soon as they take place in a climate of racial or religious hatred or of any other kind. Among the many groups who are suffering discrimination worldwide, some are majority, as was the case of South Africa until the abolition of apartheid. But the most frequent case is the reverse: the minorities are suffering discrimination, are being deprived of their most elementary rights and are living in constant terror and humiliation. Someone living in a country where he fears to say that his name is Christian or Mahmoud or Baruch, and where this situation is repeated for four or five generations; someone living in a country where there is not even the need to make such a “confession” because he already bears on his face the colour of his group, because he forms part of those groups which in some countries are known as “visible minorities”, does not need many explanations to understand that the terms “majority” and “minority” do not always belong to the vocabulary of democracy. So that we can speak of democracy, the opinion vote, the only one that represents a free opinion, must have been replaced by the automatic vote,

the community vote or the identity vote. Since an ethnicist, or racist or totalitarian logic prevails, the role of democrats worldwide is not to make the preferences of the majority prevail but to respect the rights of the oppressed, necessarily against the law of numbers.

Values rather than mechanisms are sacred to democracy. What must be absolutely respected and without the least concession is the dignity of human beings, of all human beings, women, men and children, regardless of their beliefs and colours, regardless of their numeric importance; the form of counting must be adapted to this demand. If universal suffrage can be freely exercised without yielding too much injustice, so much the better; otherwise, it is necessary to conceive, within the framework of democracy, correctives, institutional ordinances and protection systems.

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Having said this, I return to my question at the beginning: must differences be acknowledged? Or rather, must they be ignored and must we act as if they did not exist? What I have just explained is the intellectual and affective process that has taken place in me throughout the years and has made me highly aware of the barriers raised at the end of each option. Respecting the differences in excess is dangerous, so is ignoring them.

Between the two options, you will say, there is a whole space of intermediate formulae. Undoubtedly. But if we organise meeting after meeting, symposium after symposium, it is because the correct doses are never easy to calculate. It is true that a healthy management of identity differences can prevent many disasters in any country, while a partial, cynical and cruel management can plunge any country into a difficult to imagine stagnation.

But the observation I have just made does not satisfy me either, for the simple reason that all the countries in the world are confronted with growing difficulties to achieve the coexistence of immigrants and local residents, blacks and whites, Serbians and Albanese, Greeks and Turks, Christians and Muslims, Jews and Arabs, Catholics and Protestants, Russians and Lithuanians... The list could be endlessly extended. And it is difficult to believe, but the management of these problems is deficient everywhere. Everywhere. Undoubtedly, it is also due to other reasons.

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Neither am I fully convinced by those who argue that these conflicts are no more numerous or more violent than in the past, and that we are suffering the effects of an impression caused by the fact that, today, they are commented on and seen while in the past people were unaware of their existence. If I have to rely on my own experience as a Lebanese, as a Mediterranean, French, European or as a mere spectator attentive to the events of our era, I have no doubts that a real worsening is taking place and that it is not an optical illusion. Never before in history had the conflicts between the Lebanese communities been so lethal as those I have known; never, for centuries, had the violence related to religious fanaticism involved so many countries at the same time, both in the Muslim world and beyond; never had the ideological disputes been eclipsed to that point, in all areas in the world, by conflicts related to identity; and never, both in France and in many other European countries, had the issues related to immigration had such relevance in the political and intellectual debate.

If things are approached in this way, the logical conclusion that we must draw is that, in the

contemporary world, vast and powerful factors intensify the identity tensions, and that a good, pragmatic, skilful, honest and lucid management is not enough for problems to disappear. I do not doubt that a management of this kind is indispensable. But it is not enough because there are global factors that no leader in the whole world is capable of commanding.

I will not go on talking about the extraordinary development of communications or about its consequences in our daily life; it is something which can be seen at first sight. Need I point out that the events are not taking place in the same way in the era of global television? That we do not demonstrate in the same way or put the bombs in the same places when we know that millions of people are looking, listening and reacting at the same time? There are also phenomena of imitation, contagion and amplification. The time to react is increasingly shorter, and the chaining of events occurs at another pace. Events which in the past would have lasted for years or decades, in just a few weeks culminate before our amazed eyes; the collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance.

Somehow, the acceleration of communications results in an acceleration of history. Each of us has sometimes the impression of being overwhelmed by what is happening; new realities, new instruments, customs and fashions to which we do not always finally adapt are constantly appearing. And this feeling of being caught in a whirlwind yields the natural desire to seize on to something, but on to what? On to the certainties, ancestral traditions, the oldest affiliations, the most visceral, the most solid and the most stable.

In many of our contemporaries this kind of vertigo is combined with a profound distrust of all the phenomena encompassed by the notion of globalisation. Some mistrust because they think it is too limited to the western world, others doubt it because they consider it too American or too English-speaking, or simply

foreign. But, in general, currently all human communities are experiencing a sense of threat, a need to defend essential elements of their identity – their religion, their language, their way of life – or their territory, whether against neighbouring communities or more global adversaries. The world is a fabric of bruised identities, which makes the management of the relations between the different communities more complicated than ever. But despite everything, moreover, a worsening factor, linked to our vision of the identity of individuals and groups, is added; thus, I will outline some ideas in this respect.

I believe that we all take on, out of habit rather than conviction, an old conception of identity, a limited and distinctive conception that I would call “tribal” and that, although it was natural and tangible some years ago, no longer adapts to current realities; or to the realities of mixed societies, such as ours, or to the global realities.

The historian Marc Bloch stated that “men are more sons of their time than of their parents.” Undoubtedly, this has always been true, but never as true as today. Things have changed so much in a few years that we feel infinitely closer to our contemporaries than to our ancestors. Would I be exaggerating if I said that I have more in common with a passer-by chosen at random in a street of Prague, Seoul, San Francisco or Barcelona, than with my own grandfather? Not only because of appearance, clothes, habitat or tools that surround us but also because of moral concepts, ways of thinking. And also because of beliefs. However much we define ourselves as Christians – or as Muslims, or Jews, or Buddhists, or Hindus –, our vision of the world and the beyond has not in fact anything to do with that of our “co-religionists” who lived in the past. For most of them, hell was a place as real as Asia Minor or Abyssinia, inhabited by demons with claws that dragged sinners to the eternal fire, as in

apocalyptic paintings. Today, nobody or almost nobody continues to see things like this. I have taken the most absurd image, but this is also true in concepts that encompass all fields. Many conducts that are today perfectly acceptable for the believer would have been inconceivable for their “co-religionists” of the past. I have written “co-religionists” in inverted commas, because our ancestors did not practise the same religion as us. If we lived among them with our conducts of today we would have been stoned in the street or thrown into a dungeon, or burnt at the stake for impiousness, licentiousness or witchcraft.

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In short, each of us is the deposit of two inheritances: one, “vertical”, comes from our ancestors, the tradition of our village, of our religious community; the other, “horizontal”, comes from our time, our contemporaries. It is the latter which, in my view, is more determining, and is more so each day that goes by. However, this reality is not reflected in the perception we have of ourselves. We must not claim a “horizontal” inheritance but rather one of the other type.

This is an essential point, given that it is closer to the notion of identity as it takes place in our days. On the one hand, there is what we are in reality and what we are by the effect of globalisation; in other words, beings woven with threads of all colours, who share with the vast community of our contemporaries the fact that there is a breach between what we are and what we believe ourselves to be. The essential core of our conducts is the essential core of our beliefs. On the other hand, there is what we believe ourselves to be, what we want to be; in other words, members of one commu-

nity rather than another, adepts to one faith rather than another. It is not about denying the importance of our religious, national or other affiliations. It is not about denying the influence, sometimes decisive, of our “vertical” inheritance. It is above all about illuminating the fact that there is a breach between what we are and what we believe ourselves to be. To tell the truth, if we reaffirm our differences with such strength, it is in fact because we are increasingly less different. Because despite our conflicts and our old secular enmities, every day that goes by our differences diminish and our similarities increase a little more.

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It seems as if this pleases me. However, should we be cheered to see men increasingly similar? Will it not be that we are heading towards a uniform world where people will soon speak only one language, a world where we all share the same bundle of minimum beliefs, where we all see on television the same American series munching the same sandwiches?

It is not the world I aspire to. I have the profound conviction that today’s humanism must be based on two indissoluble elements: the universality of values and the diversity of cultural expressions. However, if we want to promote diversity, the lucid way is not the disproportionate, aggressive affirmation of tribal identities but rather the recognition, by each

individual and society, of their own diversity. The identity of each one of us is formed by many affiliations but instead of coming to terms with all of them, we usually choose only one – religion, nation, ethnicity or others – as a supreme affiliation, which we confuse with total identity, which we proclaim in front of others and in whose name sometimes we become murderers. Would it not be more lucid and in keeping with today’s realities for each one of us to come to terms with all the affiliations? Would it not be the most normal thing for immigrants, for instance, to fully come to terms with a dual affiliation in their source society and in their adopted society instead of being constantly forced to choose between one and the other? Would it not also be reasonable for each country to fully come to terms with their own cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and each page of their history? How can Europe be constructed if it does not come to terms with its extraordinary diversity, if its future citizens have to see themselves always cruelly divided between their culture of origin, their national affiliation and their support for the great network that is being constructed? Do we not all perhaps need a new concept of identity – which sometimes I feel like defining as a Mediterranean conception of identity – less tribal, less exclusive, less limited, less a prisoner of the selecting myths, more open to the others and to the realities of the future world?

As I feared, I am ending again with a cascade of questions. However, although my words are restless and lack certainty, be sure that they do not lack hope.