

Getting culture right for human development, in Haiti as well

By: Antonio Vigilante

The relationship between culture and development applied to a nation or a community has been subject to a debate, far from being exhausted.

Which culture?

One should start by recognizing that the cultural endowment of an individual or a community is dynamic and multi-faceted. To say it with Amin Maalouf, such endowment is composed by a vertical dimension, which is what we inherit from ancestors and traditions, and an horizontal one, shaped by our times and by contemporaries. This cultural wealth we possess should be protected from the impoverishment deriving from uniformity, conformism, or whatever repress intellectual or artistic expressions and is not the expression of a single monolithic identity but of several cultural identities coexisting within each individual and community.

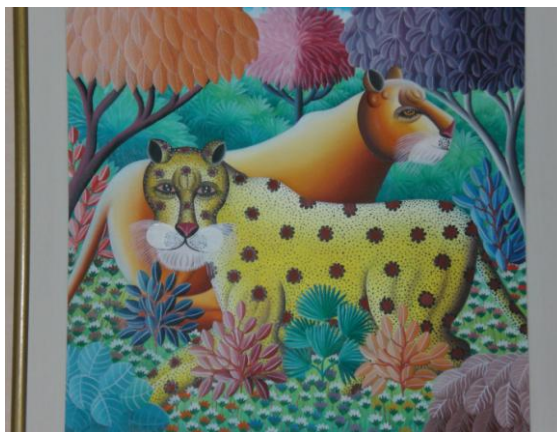
Too often cultural policy making has meant the protection of arts and of cultural heritage per se, more than the respect and protection of cultural diversity, which is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.

Which development?

Human development, the enlargement of people's choices and opportunities, requires more than a decent standard of living and political freedom, as the UNDP's Human development report of 2004 reminds us. People's cultural identities must be recognized and accommodated by the state as cultural liberty is a human right and an important aspect of human development.

Culture and development

There is however no clear relationship between culture and development. Recurrently, waves of cultural determinism emerge, attributing the failures of growth and democratization to inherent flaws in cultural traits. In order to fight such dangerous theories, we should consider that culture is not uniquely critical in determining our lives and identities. Gender, class, profession, politics, human and material resources are also hugely important. Cultures evolve, hence a society's culture may determine very little of its future development, and these changes happen through political and economic interactions with culture and among cultures and through better education. In short, I believe that there is no grand cultural theory of development.



Quo vadis Haiti?

Haitian people and artists possess a formidable creativity which creates magic, poetry, paintings, and music and "which allow to explore the eternity of the unknown" and "notwithstanding this, I see no social and political future"¹.

The obvious contradiction put in the mouth of a Haitian intellectual by a south-American novelist, indicates that culture alone is not necessarily a crucial factor of development, especially if interpreted only as individualistic artistic creativity and expression.

Haiti represents the perfect storm of development challenges, brought about by two major causes: alienation of the population and lack of legitimate, functioning institutions. In other words the eye of the storm is the lack of a legitimate, valid social contract between the government and citizen. The recent disasters, from hurricanes to earthquakes, have tragically aggravated the consequences of such storm and the suffering of Haitian people.

Culture can however be a potentially powerful asset, which if appropriately stimulated and encouraged also by public policies, can lead to an enhanced social capital for reconstruction. But since more than reconstruction is now generally acknowledged that what Haiti needs is "re-foundation", this great challenge requires to accommodate cultural identity and facilitate evolution (avoiding mythifying it), since it can hardly be achieved without significant transformational changes in political leadership, institutional capacity and social movements and without a shared understanding of what constitute the aspired national sustainable development. The cultural and creativity capital should be channelled through incentives and policies towards strengthening people's social capital, i.e. the value, mechanisms, trust and interactions which allow to maximize the country development potential.

The Action Plan for national development prepared by the Government points to some conducive paths, such as decentralization, territorial poles of development and investments in culture. Understandably written with still people's suffering in the eyes, and despair and urgency in mind, still a vision to come true cannot be determined top-down, as it is the case for the Plan. The first re-foundational task now is to create a national political leadership capable of using decentralization as a vehicle for people's genuine participation in determining local and national priorities, and of devising implementation, political and financial accountability systems which allow citizen to be influential in shaping, modifying and implementing yet another national plan, that enables Haitians to be engaged actors and not just supposed "beneficiaries". In sum, I believe that the opportunity in front of Haiti is to restart by the definition of a vision, of a national economic and social vocation in which all citizen can recognize themselves and towards which their culture and creativity can serve as one of the necessary tool linked to all domains of life.

¹ Eduardo Scott Moreno "La doncella del baron cementerio", Alfaguara 2005.