

OPENING ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT JOSÉ EDUARDO DOS SANTOS TO THE 3rd SYMPOSIUM ON NATIONAL CULTURE

Luanda, 11 September 2006

I accepted with pleasure the invitation to make the opening speech at this third Symposium on National Culture entitled 'Forge of Angolan-ness'. I have seldom spoken on this theme. Most of my attention has been concentrated on the innumerable political, military, economic and social priorities we all had to address to defend our Angolan homeland from external aggression and preserve the territorial integrity of our country within its established borders. In so doing, we were in fact performing a cultural act, since we were protecting the physical matrix within which all cultural and artistic manifestations can take place and expand, while guaranteeing the survival of their creators and producers.

Now that peace has been won, the organised return to their home areas of the population dispersed around the country and refugees abroad has been guaranteed, national reconciliation among all Angolans has been achieved and the foundations have been laid for reconstruction, stability and the country's economic growth, we are in a better position today to work with greater dynamism to develop our national culture.

Since the proclamation of Angola's independence conferences, seminars and other events have been held to analyse, debate and report on many spheres of Angolan culture. However, this Symposium assumes special importance, not only because it is going to make a critical assessment of the work and experience accumulated by the government and cultural workers, but because it is a new move for profound reflection on national culture, its foundations, the current situation and prospects for future evolution.

Culture, as I understand it, is the expression of the knowledge, skill and creativity that characterise an individual, a group, a community or a nation, resulting in the production of material or immaterial works within a given space and time. The notions of individual, group, community, time and space give it the significance of a process, of something that evolves. People, in order to survive, act on the environment around them, transforming nature and transforming themselves, since their their physical aspects and minds develop. Because they are gregarious, they need the solidarity and support of their fellow creatures, with whom they establish the most diverse relations (human, social, cultural, productive, economic and so forth), leading to the fusion of values, usages and customs and the formation of a cultural identity. People can thus identify with the values, usages and customs of a social group, a local community, a region or a nation, depending on the space within which these relations are formed and the strength with which the fusion takes place over time.

Our country has already gone through many stages of social integration and is now in a phase of consolidating national identity. Today Angolans identify with the symbols of the republic; leading figures, that is, intellectuals and specialists, express their scientific and technical knowledge to promote and defend national interests; the creators of art and literature produce national cultural works; the vast majority of

Angolans can relate to the positive usages and customs of the country's different ethno-linguistic regions, and so forth.

Even if some aspects of cultural and social integration may still be regarded as fragile, the inexorable trend is for them to be consolidated. The institution responsible for the sector and cultural workers should therefore promote activities to make consolidation ever more consistent, for example by increasing knowledge of local cultural manifestations, fully recording them, studying and systematising them and making them known. This implies serious scientific research work and mobilising personnel to devote themselves wholly to this task.

Folklore, handicrafts, the oral tradition, initiation rites and other rites based on positive values have always been sources of inspiration for music, dance, sculpture, literature and theatre at the regional level. We know that countless of our people's traditional ceremonies and cultural and artistic forms have been partially affected or even destroyed everywhere in the country, owing to the sometimes violent breaking of direct contact with the sites of cults or ancestral practices or with their officiators or followers.

I think this Symposium should reflect on whether or not we should save these traditions in the short, medium or long term, within the framework of developing our culture and consolidating national identity and the Angolan nation. I consider that saving some of these valuable traditions is work that needs to be done, because they are landmarks that define the identity of our people and can convey principles and values of our common past that differentiate us from other peoples. It is no accident that many of our creators already base their work on them and will certainly continue to do so when they produce erudite music, contemporary dance, stylised African dances, fine art and modern theatre.

This should not, however, prevent us from continuing to involve ourselves, without complexes, in modernity, unreservedly supporting the expression of the new achievements, concerns and aspirations that are transforming our society and that social and scientific progress demand of us.

The major difficulty is in establishing the necessary balance between these two parameters, since there is always a tendency to give more attention to one to the detriment of the other. The important thing is not to reject either of the two heritages we have, the one that comes from our ancestors and is passed on from generation to generation, and the increasingly decisive one that comes from our contemporaries, our own lived experience and access to scientific knowledge. Only in this way can we ensure that our culture has its own original stamp, making it possible to strengthen and consolidate the bonds between all the communities that make up Angola and to create ties of identification and harmony between all their portioned cultures and their representatives.

It has long been recognised and accepted that the coming together of the forms of expression of human groups of different origins and characteristics gives rise to more complex forms of spiritual wealth and even social and economic achievement. This being so, we should accept and understand that over the centuries Angola absorbed cultural elements of peoples from our continent and abroad, which form part of its

current profile as a sovereign and independent nation. To negate or conceal this reality, which would make us unique in the African continent, would be to negate ourselves or to sever factors essential to defining our identity.

Bearing in mind all these aspects, we see culture as a very important strategic variable with immediate effects on the internal cohesion of our society, as well as on our advance to the overall objectives we propose to attain, like building a united, developed and prosperous nation with a flourishing culture and a democratic and social state based on the rule of law.

Angola's cultural policy and strategy to be presented at this Symposium are sufficiently clear and encompass all areas of the country's cultural life, proposing practical initiatives for cultural development, boosting artistic creativity and preserving our collective memory. They are aimed at reconciling the saving of positive traditional features that are not contrary to ethics, social morality and development with promoting access to modernity for new cultural workers and creators in areas as diverse as music and dance, literature and the oral tradition, theatre, cinema, the visual arts and sculpture, folklore and handicrafts, historical sites and monuments, museums, archives, libraries, cultural centres and so forth.

Fundamental support will be provided by the state, especially in respect of creating cultural facilities, personnel training and drafting cultural legislation (on patronage, intellectual property rights and the international registration of traditional musical instruments) and also in developing mutually enriching international cooperation and exchanges. In line with these ideas, I think it is also necessary to draw up a series of laws on the arts, performances, cinema and audio-visual production that establish a standard framework to regulate the granting of state support, creating conditions for people to have new opportunities for cultural achievement and for multi-faceted artistic creation.

It is in this connection that the government is already engaged in initiatives with a view to the construction of buildings to house the Vocational Institute of Theatrical Arts, the Higher Institute of Arts, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Historical Archive and the National Library. These projects are underway and some may start to be implemented in 2007.

Relations with UNESCO, the United Nations agency that deals with science and culture, also need to be strengthened within this context, so that we may benefit from all its experience and discuss with it the recuperation of the cultural heritage taken out of the country during the colonial period.

Special attention should be paid to the different languages spoken in Angola, since it is through them that forms of communication and integration of the population in the national whole are established.

We should have the courage to accept that the Portuguese language adopted as the official language since independence, which is now the mother tongue of more than a third of Angolans, is becoming a nation-wide language in Angola. This in no way means – quite the contrary – that we should renounce the preservation and continued promotion of the different African languages in Angola, up to now known as 'national

languages', though perhaps incorrectly, since they are never more than regional and often extend beyond our borders.

We know that a language is not only a means of communication between members of a community, but involves a whole legacy of knowledge and cultural forms transmitted over centuries or even millennia, which would be irremediably lost if it ceased to be spoken. It is therefore essential that scientific status be given to our country's many languages and that they be included in the teaching programmes and media of the regions in which they are spoken, so as to enable them to remain vital and transmit to future generations the human and moral wealth associated with them.

Nor should it be forgotten that the media, apart from their normal functions of informing, educating and entertaining, are a very important means of transmitting cultural and artistic subjects and should have an attitude of constructive criticism towards them, providing appropriate ways of analysing them and thus helping to form public taste.

We must also be able to make judicious use of new technologies, because although they reinforce inequality in terms of information and culture at a world-wide level, unilaterally imposing their own products in a disorderly and uncontrolled manner, they also permit easy and rapid access to important information and material on matters of cultural, scientific and leisure interest.

The Angolan nation is a reality in the process of integration and consolidation, in which some factors of integration are still fragile and others already consolidated. Integration occurs through the assimilation of the specific cultural values and usages and customs of one community by the people of another community and vice versa, in a natural manner, caused by social and human contact within a shared space, whether local, regional or national.

In the formation of political will and the ways of putting it into effect, political figures and the authorities have a duty to promote activities and produce facts of a social, political, moral or civic nature that strengthen the more fragile aspects of national integration.

Activity that is excessively centred on local or regional integration can lead to the emergence of divisiveness and micro-nationalism on an ethno-linguistic basis, and to separatism, which always leaves all citizens who do not identify with such absurd claims unprotected and limits their rights.

Cultural activity programmes should therefore be in keeping with the content of the strategic action of the state and the policies through which it is put into effect.

In this respect, we should also espouse the idea already widely expressed and historically proven that cultural freedom and pluralism are better guaranteed in big states that see themselves as multicultural than in small states that are culturally and ethno-linguistically homogeneous.

The education system is an ideal means of achieving this if, from earliest schooling to higher education, there is systematised cultural, patriotic and civic education leading

to the creation of a new mentality based on values, principles, usages and customs that are national in character. This 'system' should obviously not exclude specific local or regional features, but should establish a correct and hierarchic scale of values that is consensually and naturally acquired.

In this connection, cultural activity programmes should set out work plans for regular and systematised activities of a local, regional and national nature.

Initiation and other rites, traditional music and dance, handicrafts, community theatre and the oral tradition are naturally local in character. But Angola's African dances, songs, theatre and popular visual arts may be regional or national in character. Similarly, erudite cultural manifestations in any field that take place in any part of the country are always national or universal in character.

There is therefore a need for scientific investigation to know the full national cultural reality, studying, systematising and making known the cultural manifestations that take place at all levels and stressing their value, emphasising the importance of factors that help to consolidate national identity and the Angolan nation.

The world is tending to become ever more integrated and is today characterised by the fact that the information, culture, values, usages and customs of the most developed countries are influencing the peoples of the less developed ones.

'In this era of globalisation, in which every country is a market within a global market, in which information, the values of a universal culture and the norms of western civilisation are disseminated without boundaries, those who are incapable of administrating their market and preserving the values of their identity, transforming them into a contribution to the global process, will become ineffective.' (Quotation, 11 November 2005)

Indeed, in this constantly accelerating process only those countries that set out programmes of action and representation, language and culture that enable their peoples to interact with other peoples can affirm their personality and maintain their independence.

The attitude to be assumed by us, within this context, will clearly be cultural action showing our ability to organise the points of reference of our common past and to structure the forms of action and communication that the present requires on the basis of a stock of standards and good habits.

This spirit of openness to the world that characterises Angolans enables us to discuss any subjects and assert our standpoints with anyone whatsoever, without any complexes.

This attitude we are forging is, moreover, the basic reason for successes achieved internationally and should govern domestic action, also in business, social and organisational areas, in order to make gains, in the shortest space of time, in the fight against hunger, unemployment, endemic diseases, illiteracy and other ills still found in our society. It means developing self-esteem, trusting in ourselves with humility, learning ever more and acquiring the ability to work for success or victory.

It means being in this world with our own cultural identity rooted in our history and our continent, yet open to the legacy of values that already belong to all of humanity and that enable us to compete on an equal footing with other peoples in the world.

I wish all the delegates a profound, frank and useful discussion of all the themes on the agenda, making it possible to reach consensual and creative conclusions on the development of our national culture.

Long live Angola!

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