

Article by Ferdinand Richard for NECTART

Translated into English by Angie Cotte

## RECENTERING OUR INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL COOPERATION ON LOCAL CREATIVITY

French cultural diplomacy is still shaped by the principle of [national cultural prestige](#) as it was understood during the presidencies of General de Gaulle. However, it should be strategically questioned and repositioned today, no longer on the basis of bilateral State relations but rather with the aim to develop international and ecologically responsible cooperation relying in the long term, on human input, innovation, dignity and respect for the upcoming generations.

We should examine French international cultural relations with a rapid but worthwhile analysis of the strategies that this country is currently operating in the Gulf as well as a quick overview of the decisions which are currently being taken in this regard<sup>1</sup>.

Each member of the Council of Gulf Countries has produced its long-term development strategy (Bahrein Economic Vision 2030, Kuwait Vision 2035, Qatar National Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030), while the United Arab Emirates presents specific orientations for each of its members (Abu Dhabi Vision 2030, etc...).

Most often, these strategies aim for general objectives. For example, Saudi Vision 2030 is the general strategic frame defined by Prince Mohammed Ben Salman in April 2016 to reduce the dependance of Saudi Arabia on petrol, diversifying the economy and developing specific public sectors such as health, education, infrastructures, entertainment and tourism.

These objectives target an increase in non-petrol international commerce with the added value of producing a [milder](#) more [secular](#) image.

In order to elaborate such strategies, Gulf countries hire international consultancy management firms, whom they pay with tens of millions of dollars, to produce studies which often [recycle findings](#) from other studies previously sold to their neighbours (give or take a few differences here and there on the local contexts or specific topics examined by specialists).

It is worth noting that the executive officers working within the royal Administrations often had previous professional experience in these same firms, which is why it is easy to see a [kinship](#) (not necessarily conflict of interest) between the two, reinforcing a sense of standardization of process hidden behind a somewhat opaque [jargon](#) for the non-initiated reader. It is also of interest to note that these evaluations refer to [key performance indicators](#) (KPI) which are unfortunately far removed from reality and do not reflect the needs of the populations.

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<sup>1</sup> My analysis is based on my active engagement as a cultural operator, working on the ground for many years, close to local cultural actors and aiming for cultural and artistic development. My approach is directly linked to interaction with local artists and cultural operators in the Arab-speaking world, the wider Middle East and Africa. My experience in 2013 as cultural expert for the French *Cour des Comptes* and the report they produced on French cultural Institutes abroad, as well as my responsibilities as Head of the expert panel for UNESCO's International Fund for Cultural Diversity from 2010 to 2015, have also shaped my understanding of this topic.

There is an abundance of national strategies which include culture in their priorities. For example, the most recent country to endorse twelve new **culture** commissions at the beginning of 2020 (in literature, publishing and translation, fashion, cinema, heritage, architecture and design, visual arts, museums, theatres and performing arts, booksellers, music, and gastronomy), is Saudi Arabia. These commissions however lack an innovative approach in their recommendations, reproducing for the most part former initiatives such as building museums by famous architects, launching prestigious (and costly) biennales highlighting international artists, setting up bilateral partnerships investing in mass tourism, etc. What exactly is the long-term success factor of these national strategies in the Gulf? This is the main question we should be asking ourselves, especially since there is no mention of the emergence of **local creativity** and cultural development in all the sectors of society and the population at large.

#### MORE IMMIGRATION OF FOREIGN ARTISTS THERE

Having failed to invest in the training of their own professionals in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), the Gulf kingdoms are today faced with a lack of human resources amongst their local population which means that they have to consider bringing foreign artists and cultural operators from abroad.

In Saudi Arabia, the massive **entertainment and leisure parks** (Al-'Ula<sup>2</sup>, to name one of them, is the size of Belgium whilst Neom is a Free Zone for tourism and leisure near Egyptian tourist resorts), as well as museums, biennales, etc. are currently being launched and will require the skills of a number of specialists from the world of leisure and creativity.

Thus, pushed by the necessity to secure a strong position in the content industries battlefield (which will become the major economic sector of the post-petrol era), Gulf countries, and the companies they host, are being forced to set up creative **task forces**, composed of professionals who do not represent sufficient numbers of their own population. Consequently, in CCIs as with other sectors of the economy, talents from other countries of the Arab world (Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt), as well as from the Indian Sub-continent, from Sub-Saharan Africa, even from some European countries, the Balkans in particular, are emigrating there in significant numbers.

#### THE BACKGROUND TO FRENCH INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS

In this context, one can question the current doctrine applied by the French authorities in terms of bilateral cultural exchanges with the Gulf countries.

Based on my experience working on the ground, I would say that there are three successive periods which have led to the current geo-political situation.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.connaissancedesarts.com/monuments-patrimoine/alula-loasis-qui-valait-15-milliards-de-dollars-le-projet-pharaonique-de-larabie-saoudite-pour-creer-un-nouveau-centre-culturel-mondial-11156589/>

The first period starts with the creation of the French Ministry of Culture in 1958 which happened at the same time as the dismantling of the colonial empire, the exit from NATO's high commandment, and the resistance to the cultural strand of the Marshall plan (Hollywood....). This new Ministry replaced the Delegation of Fine Arts which depended on the Ministry of National Education, and this led to a decrease in the socio-cultural Popular Education approach, as well as a domino effect on the assignment to accompany the cultural development of countries outside Europe, which was one of the aims of AFAA, inscribed in its statutes, AFAA being the ancestor of the current French Institute. This assignment faded and was replaced by an ambition to communicate French culture internationally, understood as "cultural diplomacy", ultimately reducing the aims to communication tools and support to export (arms, cars, etc. included), as well as in supporting the affiliation of French-speaking future elites from our former colonies.

The second period relates to the rise in power of the European project, when a very **Gaullian** strategy (which was understandable at the time) gave a **nationalized** image of French culture exposed to the world, which didn't match the European aims of **relative federalism**. These European aims were perceived at the time, at the highest level of the French State, as a threat which would inevitably outweigh the rise in power of the Europe of Regions over the Europe of Nations.

This explains to a certain extent the outcry of French national unions and syndicates of cultural professionals, when they discovered that certain European networks were tempting to change, although unsuccessfully, the unanimity rule in cultural matters during the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty. A reaction I would qualify as "from a bygone age".

This led, in my opinion, to a silent but genuine grudge felt by a number of French local authorities (cities, euro-regions) who increasingly endeavoured to master their own **international** development, including cultural development, by boldly leading their own foreign policy, whether sovereign or not. In passing, the comparison between the strategic approaches of the Goethe-Institut and the French Institute are, in this regard, quite revealing.

The third phase in this evolution is what can be referred to as a **tragedy** for cultural operators and young artists. I am referring to the tsunami generated by the globalisation of the content industry. Although the process is threatening at many levels, at least it has the merit of clearly identifying who decides and who pays when it comes to Culture. In the battle of the content industries, radical changes have suddenly emerged which are strongly symbolic.

For example, on Netflix, the biggest commercial successes are no longer British but Spanish speaking productions released by companies established in this linguistic zone. Today, the biggest pop music commercial success in the US, way above the American popstars, is a Korean boys band produced by a Korean company; unthinkable in 2015...

In parallel, one can witness the global exchange of cultural content carried out, to a large extent, by social media and those who control the **distribution channels**: Big Tech of course as well as multinational Investment firms, not to forget the many State agencies working 24 hours a day to monitor and exploit social networks which we would be naïve to think only come from Totalitarian regimes. These **actors** become makers of ideologies, whether they face up to it or not, and the effects of this are often for the worst rather than for the best.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandre Piquard « Amazon Prime Video pursues an offensive strategy in contents », Le Monde, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 : [https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2021/03/23amazon-prime-video-poursuit-une-strategie-offensive-dans-les-contenus\\_6074141\\_3234.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2021/03/23amazon-prime-video-poursuit-une-strategie-offensive-dans-les-contenus_6074141_3234.html)

Alongside the major traditional European cultural cooperation agencies<sup>4</sup>, new nations<sup>5</sup> are emerging with their own cultural diplomacies which are often aggressive and overwhelming, barely hiding their political and commercial aims. Again, we have to face the fact that these shifts are real and irreversible. If we want to remain in the game as an **influencer** then we have to not only **make do** but **do differently**.

## A MAJOR SHIFT

Today, the challenges faced for the well-being of the entire planet cannot be solved by any country alone. A global reform of world governance is all the more urgent, even though difficult to assume; which is why we should define the **globalisation** we need and how we want to **co-exist** in respect of cultural diversity, as one of the keys to this reform's success. To achieve respect for cultural diversity implies a well-designed and respectful international cultural cooperation strategy.

To build this mutually enriching and equitable strategy, we can look to the French-speaking cultures which provide ample know-how, creativity, methodologies and artistic alumni; in effect, they should be considered as a **universal archive** of resources, as important as the Bamiyan buddhas, the pre-Islamic divinities of the Middle-East or the sacred drums of the Saami; the disappearance of anyone of these would be a catastrophe for humanity.

I consider that safeguarding such archives requires that we disconnect them from **cultural diplomacy**. Not that the legitimacy of diplomats is put in question. Not at all! Their role remains an absolute necessity for the pacific resolution of conflicts. All the approaches they use, including cultural ones, are legitimate. However, I consider that those who should be the first ones to design international cultural cooperation should be the cultural and arts professionals themselves.

*La France des Lumières* is an ardent defender of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>6</sup>, of course. Which is why it is necessary, before undertaking any bilateral **cultural** relations with any (more or less) authoritarian regime for reasons which have very little to do with culture, to urgently and collectively share our thoughts and redefine the strategy of our international cultural cooperation by re-examining our **language** and our **assignment** in order to become capable of reinvesting sustainably in humanity, innovation, dignity and respect for the next generations.

If we are to define national or European strategies today, it seems inevitable that these must adopt an ecologically and economically responsible attitude to sustainable investment using quantifiable, acceptable and sustainable impact indicators applicable to international cultural exchanges.

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<sup>4</sup> British Council, Goethe-Institute, French Institute

<sup>5</sup> China, Russia, as well as Turkey, South Korea, South Africa, Brazil, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Article 1 « All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. To be equal in dignity supposes that there cannot be dominant cultures.

And while mentioning the next generations, aren't we somehow losing ground with the younger generations from the so-called developing countries? They are the exact same youth who are currently the leverage of CCIs and who are incomparable demographically speaking to our aging Europe. Despite Jean Nouvel's fascinating design of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi (which is visited by whom, I ask), could anything such as this reverse the back track we are witnessing? What is it there for in the first place? To mask other immediate gains which are far from cultural, or as a tool for mass tourism?

#### PROPOSALS FOR A CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN GULF COUNTRIES AND FRANCE (AND/OR EUROPE)

In order to save the miracle of our rich cultural diversity on this European continent, we must share it with the rest of the world, without an ounce of arrogance but merely as a shared resource, disconnecting it as far as possible from any horrible **selective immigration** calculation which represent a theft of creative know-how, as shameful as the looting of raw materials. We should be capable of putting on the table relevant and sustainable **counter-propositions** not in a **top-down** fashion as our engineers do, be they cultural engineers or not, but attentive to the practioners and the **fans** (the word consumer here would be offensive). This will take time, alliances and cooperation beyond national borders, beyond the French artistic excellence alone, beyond defending the French language, beyond the Jacobin reflex of national sovereignty. In a nutshell, it is only by renewing this strategy, that a dignified and fruitful cooperation with the Gulf kingdoms can take place.

A cultural guild or alliance between France (and/or Europe) and the Gulf countries, could be designed based on the following suggestions:

- *A network of co-working spaces for the creative youth of the Global South.* The global south (the Southern hemisphere) is gradually revealing its incredible potential in terms of creativity. One day it will be the centre of the world as it is already at the heart of multiple aspirations. In order to develop a more humanist, more accurate, long-term strategy which would also be a more **profitable** one, we should look to the outstanding network of French Institutes which could be the global creative *co-working space* we are looking for, attending the needs of the youth from these countries. It would be wise to back it up with an extensive mobility programme (staff exchange, networking hubs, production markets, sharing of ressources...), without language or nationality restrictions. Deploying such a philanthropic and economically advantageous initiative would be excellently served by a Europe/Gulf Countries consortium.
- *Our bank: a mutualized fund and new financial procedures*  
Most of the artistic and cultural entrepreneurs of the so-called developing countries face huge difficulties when addressing the bank sector. The relationship that an entrepreneur can have with a bank as we understand it in the Western World, is not at all applicable to these countries. Many of them cannot even open a bank account. They have to comply to a system of financing through the regime, or else foreign support, both of which tend to **instrumentalize** them. The question of access to loans needs to be urgently addressed, taking the form of a cooperative initially funded by Gulf countries and France/Europe. Similar models exist in other sectors than the cultural and creative economy. Let's adapt them!

- *An online artistic education platform*

There is a lack of preservation of narratives, reports and archives of artistic and cultural productions in the Global South much as elsewhere in the world. If they are preserved from destruction, then they invariably end up on bookshelves where no one will read them. The result is an incredible loss of know-how and lessons learnt, which is also a waste of financial resources (particularly public ones). We urgently need an efficient and collaborative system to be designed and put in place. Attempts of this kind are already in the making such as Global Grand Central<sup>7</sup>. But a tool such as this one must be as extensive, up-to-date and reliable as possible, which implies costs in terms of human resources and maintenance. Here again, a joint venture would be fitting.

Although they may not have the same language and ideas as their elders, it would be risky to consider the young generations, particularly from the Global South, who are considerably more numerous and increasingly educated, as having a naïve vision, without understanding the balance in powers currently shaping the future of our planet. They may be pushed aside of the circles of power today, but they are aware and nothing escapes them. We will have to be accountable to them. As we know, revolutions and commercial agendas are rarely in tune with one another.

The concept of *co-existence*, proudly portrayed as a salient French feature known as *le vivre ensemble* naturally respects cultural diversity and could easily replace the French *exception culturelle* which is progressively misunderstood by non-French speakers, of which there are more and more amongst the youth of the countries in the South. It could become a noble and global aim, initiated by France/Europe. It could even become a fabulous communication tool for the French-speaking community, which is quite a paradox in a way. At the very least, this would have style and flair. The choice is ours. It's a public choice which doesn't need to resort to international consultancy firms.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.globalgrandcentral.net>