

1. Relationship between Peace and Culture

Is it right to assume that cultural differences are the cause of conflicts? This is the first point to be addressed when discussing the relationship between peace and culture. Needless to say, there have been many societies in history peacefully coexisting with others despite ethnic or regional differences, and we should avoid attributing conflicts and frictions to differences in culture. Yet, we cannot deny that culture intensifies such confrontations when ethnic or cultural differences are combined with economic or political interests.

Therefore, we must consider how such situations can be prevented in order to define conditions for co-existence and co-prosperity. This problem of co-existence of different ethnic or social groups is important even at the local or national level, but it has a more difficult dimension in the international arena, because unlike the national level, the international society finds it much more difficult to foster a sense of global community and unity, compared to individual nations, ethnic groups or communities. Therefore, the role of intercultural exchanges needs to be emphasized particularly at the international level.

To this end, we must accept the premise that it is essential for all human beings to share a common ethos and sensibility, to be aware of the significance of mutual understanding and differences in sensibility, and to tolerate differences in the interests of building up a sense of global unity.

2. Conflict Prevention and Cultural Exchange

Given that cultural exchange is defined as activities that enhance mutual understanding and foster the appreciation of mutual identities, we can say that it is a process of assimilation, absorption and integration. At the same time, it functions as a process and medium for independence, resistance and isolation. Because of these contradictory aspects, we must find an answer to this question: under what conditions will cultural activities have a lasting impact? In terms of conflict prevention, mutual understanding – namely developing a sense of unity that can be shared by all human beings – will be of great significance. We might, for instance, study the example of a cultural activity that raises common awareness about the need to eliminate nuclear weapons – such as the famous antiwar tale “Barefoot Gen.” This tale captures the devastating effect of an atomic bomb and is played in Pakistan, which is in conflict with India over the possession of nuclear weapons, in the form of drama by Japanese learners of Urdu language.

3. Cultural Exchange for Prevention of Escalation of Conflicts

In regions suffering from long-lasting conflicts, cultural exchange helps prevent the conflicts from escalating further by allowing local people to redefine their own and their opponent’s cultural identities which have been distorted by warfare. Hatreds on both sides skew and

negatively exaggerate the identities of both parties, fueling the escalation of an existing conflict. Cultural exchange contributes to correcting such distortions. Here, we might think of the case of “peace kids soccer” program under which young boys from Israel and Palestine are invited to Hiroshima and play soccer together afterwards.

When a conflict is prolonged, local people become isolated from the outside world, and their true lives and images become obscure in the eyes of the outsiders. Conflict itself rather than their suffering is presented to the world. Thus, the conflict and violence serve as the only medium for connecting the area of conflicts with the rest of the world, and the peoples at the area and their everyday lives, mindsets and emotions are not communicated well. One of the objectives of cultural exchange is to protect such people against psychological and cultural isolation, that is, to provide links between these citizens in the area of conflict and outside societies. Inviting a Baghdad citizens’ drama group to Japan and have them present a play can be cited as an example of such efforts to bridge the people of Iraq with the Japanese citizens.

4. The Role of Cultural Exchange after the End of Conflict

(1) Mental Healing

When a military or political conflict is near its end, we need to consider how cultural exchange can help heal psychological wounds. Victims on both sides will remain severely distressed, but it must be especially traumatic to be separated from fellow members of the same village or group and forced to fight against them. To help such people heal their psychological damage, cultural exchange activities offering both parties an opportunity to bilaterally express their feelings will be of help in redefining their identities. A good example is a joint drama workshop held to bridge the gap between people who were on the government and rebel sides in Aceh, Indonesia, by offering an opportunity to converse with each other and to lessen the pain of those who had no choice but to battle against people sharing similar ethnic origins.

(2) Passing down the Memory of Conflicts and Anguish

Physical damage is easily discovered and drawn to everybody’s attention, but mental anguish does not surface unless those who suffer open up their hearts. In many cases, those suffering are reluctant to talk about their agony. Providing such people with an opportunity to express themselves and keeping a record of their psychological wounds will ease the process of reconciliation and future conflict. This can be done through cultural activities. For instance, in order to record and pass down from generation to generation the torment of Vietnamese victims of the Vietnam War, various opportunities can be created in the forms of literature, dramas, and international symposia.

(3) Restoring cultural and ethnic pride

Conflicts often destroy or distort self-identity and demolish cultural traditions in which ethnic identity is expressed. Hence, a post-conflict peacebuilding process should include activities

for restoring and reestablishing a symbol of ethnic cultural identity, whether it is tangible (for instance a historical monument) or intangible (for instance performing art.) Inviting an Afghan craftsman to Japan to restore ceramic art destroyed during the civil war is one example of such endeavors.

5. Problems to be Addressed when Engaging in Cultural Activities for Peacebuilding

When conducting cultural activities for peacebuilding, we face practical problems and difficulties. Such issues include how to grasp the needs and intentions of local people and how to prioritize projects. In case where there are many possible options, it is not easy to determine when, what or how to launch and carry out such activities, or to judge priority of possible endeavors.

To put it differently, getting the best out of these cultural exchanges means giving careful thought to our methods, approach and degree of involvement.

The second point is risk taking. Cultural activists may run the risk of being involved in conflict. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, who is going to be responsible for reducing such risk. What can be done to avoid risks? One approach is to invite the people from both sides of conflict areas to an outside world, have them take part in cultural workshops. In such a method, however, our support will be indirect. An alternative will be to create protected spaces which enable us to safely conduct cultural activities in conflict zones. Yet, numerous issues beyond our control will arise, including how and by whom such a space should be actually constructed. There may, however, be a possibility that areas where cultural activities take place come to be considered and serve as protected spaces, if managed with the full cooperation of the citizens of the area.

Third, we need to deal with political risk. Can cultural exchanges remain neutral without being biased towards either side? This is a constant political problem and one we must find ways to avoid. Furthermore, organizers of cultural exchanges in conflict regions, especially government-related organizations, must consider how they should avoid the risk of getting involved inadvertently in conflicts and ensure the safety of activists. Failing to take appropriate measures will likely set off political risks in the country of origin of those organizations.

Finally, there is an issue of evaluation. It is very difficult to assess the effectiveness of cultural exchange for peacebuilding, and that requires a long-term perspective. The higher the military or political risk, the more significant this issue becomes in relation to accountability.