

Interviews

Mexican Culture and MONDIACULT 2022

*Interview by Alejandro Alday with
Ambassador Luis Ortiz Monasterio**

Alejandro Alday: Ambassador Luis Ortiz Monasterio, the Mexico City Declaration made at MONDIACULT 1982 defined culture in broader, more progressive terms and served as a basis for the drawing up of principles and guidelines for culture policies. As MONDIACULT 2022 approaches, how would you say Mexico has applied these principles to the design and implementation of public policies in the culture sector?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: I'm convinced that if there is a country that can bring fresh ideas on the issue of culture to the table, it is Mexico. Our country was the seventh in the world to join UNESCO and the first in Latin America, and has an enormous comparative advantage in that it is a country with both European and indigenous heritage. I get the impression that we Mexicans have a lot to say on the subject of culture. Contrary to what people thought at the beginning of the last century, that our indigenous roots were a burden to the country, today these are deemed a valuable asset that we need to capitalize on. In a sense, it was recognition by Mexico of many obvious things and others not so apparent that led it to participate actively and I am sure this will be the

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case again at MONDIACULT 2022, where we can expect Mexico to have a very strong presence and put forward many initiatives and proposals.

Alejandro Alday: If we go back to 1982 again, to the first MONDIACULT conference, Mexico did not have a ministerial-level institutional framework for the drafting and implementation of national cultural policies like the Ministry of Culture does today. My question is, how can Mexico adopt the agreements reached in the joint MONDIACULT 2022 declaration on the domestic front with the institutional support provided by the Ministry of Culture?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: That is a good question, because historically we have all had a tendency to bite off more than we can chew, not just Mexico, but other countries, too. I believe these institutional and diplomatic structures make it possible for the various government agencies, and even individuals, to actively participate in this field in which we are so competitive. Revealing the vein of culture that runs through foreign policy is quite a discovery. Frankly, I'm increasingly surprised at what a prominent role it plays. I don't know how we managed to design cultural policies before in the absence of ties to diplomacy, at home or abroad.

Alejandro Alday: There can be no denying it better equips us to implement the results of MONDIACULT 2022 and participate in the round tables at the conference, too.

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: This is true. The cultural dimension has changed radically because countries with good credentials, multicultural countries with ancestral views have entered the world ranking; they have entered terrain where they can express themselves, where their proposals are received with open arms by the international community. This is excellent because it speaks to changing times, to internal and external acceptance in every sphere.

Alejandro Alday: Ambassador Ortiz, over the course of your career, you have garnered experience in the fields of academics, culture and diplomacy. How do you perceive the relationship between culture and sustainable development, which is central to MONDIACULT 2022?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: The issue of culture is not only key to one of the highest aspirations of humankind—peace, constructive, creative peace—, but is also related to development. That is to say, economic development is related in a healthy, dynamic way to cultural development, which, in turn, is a direct means of combating inequality, not just in Mexico, but the world over. I believe the issue of inequality can only be solved by taking a very rigorous cultural approach, given the enormous burden it has become for humankind. In the wake of globalization, it would seem inequalities have increased to levels that not only border on the unethical, but that are completely dysfunctional.

Alejandro Alday: MONDIACULT 1982 did not have a reference framework like the 2022 conference has, which is the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. How can the 2030 Agenda influence and advance new accords on cultural policy, this being a very important parameter in practically all activities from now through to 2030?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: It is a very interesting case of reciprocal support, by which I mean greater awareness. It's going to mean better practices by nation states and citizens themselves as regards the social pact. One of the most destructive problems of our times is the lack of clear rules as to how the two actors in the relationship—nation states and citizens—should behave.

Awareness that sustainable development is indispensable at times like these, when the world population has reached 8 billion, is a powerful force we need to harness. We urgently need to come up with mechanisms to ensure the social pact is as free as possible of conflict and, preferably, that it is beneficial to the vast majority.

I am positive MONDIACULT 2022 will go down in history because never before has there been such a pressing need for the world to reflect on war and the pandemic.

Alejandro Alday: Now that you mention the pandemic, Mr. Ambassador, how can States and societies use culture to recover from the pandemic? How can culture contribute to this recovery after the hardships of the pandemic?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: If you look back at history, you'll see that major cataclysms, global ethical collapses, wars and large-scale natural disasters have typically given rise to new organizations, from the International Red Cross, which was founded after the wars of the nineteenth century, and the League of Nations, created after World War I, to the United Nations, which emerged after World War II.

We were still dealing with the pandemic when the war broke out. I was completely taken aback. If you ask me, we failed to grasp the lessons of the pandemic. Even so, I think this is a good time to reflect on the matter and see what needs to be done internally so we can implement a global policy.

We need to be very clear about the proposals of each Nation State, so we can determine whether or not these are aligned with the proposals of the different segments of the Mexican population, considering our country has a dual heritage. Exclusion is not a fit for a country as complex as ours. Contrary to what many think, the plurality of Mexican society makes us a mandatory point of reference when it comes to raising universal awareness as to what culture is.

Alejandro Alday: We don't need conflicts right now. Mr. Ambassador, given your experience, how do you think cultural policies can contribute to peace processes around the world?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: It couldn't be clearer that a culture of peace is the best and primary antidote to war. This is because wars are generally caused by the false perceptions of our leaders and oftentimes citizens themselves. But if we can address the problem of the minds of men, which, according to the UNESCO Constitution, is where war originates, we can progress toward building peace. A great deal of work remains to be done on the minds of men if we are to create a culture of peace. The truth is such a culture is non-existent. No country in the world has efficient community or individual conflict resolution mechanisms, and this has led to situations as extreme as entire families turning on each other because of a lack of clear rules, because we don't have institutions capable of mediating.

We don't have a culture of mediation, not even in a country like ours, whose indigenous peoples have vast experience with intermediation. It's

as if we are genetically programmed to reject mediation. If you ask me, there should be mediators everywhere: at schools, universities, the public administration... mediators are sorely lacking. A strong point in favor of a culture of mediation is that it could help enormously, not just in preventing war, but in fostering a positive sense of what its praxis entails.

Alejandro Alday: We need to seek out all these alternative mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts that are not being put into practice.

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: Definitely. Most conflicts can be traced back to old antagonisms that were simply forgotten, buried or underestimated. The classic example is World War II, which can be attributed, in part, to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

We have learned nothing from history. I would suggest we gather the world's elders in a senate of sorts—obviously I'm not speaking on my own behalf, but on the behalf of all the old folks in the world. Our "ancient cultures" have a lot to say and generally aren't given a voice. I'm convinced that, today, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian thought has a lot to contribute to world peace, especially the peaceful coexistence of different cultures. Refusal to accept others, the unfamiliar, the alien, is what leads to conflicts, including conflicts amongst ourselves. Evidently, culture is an instrument of peace that has been disregarded for a long time. I'm glad universal awareness has brought us to this point. Let's make more of it!

Alejandro Alday: Protecting its cultural heritage is currently a priority for Mexico and my question is related to this: how can MONDIACULT 2022 help protect cultural heritage from armed conflicts?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: That is a subject I am passionate about. I served as ambassador to Afghanistan and witnessed at firsthand the ravages of the nine wars the country has survived, but that have virtually wiped out its tangible heritage. I visited the Kabul museum of archaeology and was surprised to see that, like the one in Baghdad, it had been completely destroyed and that its artifacts had left the country in a very "orderly" fashion as war booty. This is completely unacceptable, that a war should end with the looting of the cultural property of others, property

that belongs to humanity as a whole, because according to the Convention, peoples, humanity are the original heirs of this heritage. This is something we will all be hoping MONDIACULT addresses.

Movements have emerged in Mexico for the recovery of illicitly exported archaeological artifacts and works of art. I am sure there is a lot more we can do to make people see there is more to culture than concerts and dances. We need to convince citizens that culture has practical, pragmatic, tangible outcomes. I have high hopes for this conference as regards the issue of protecting the cultural heritage of the world's peoples.

Alejandro Alday: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much. As always, it's been enlightening. Do you have any final comments for the *RMPE*?

Luis Ortiz Monasterio: I've been retired for 15 years now, but one thing I miss about the foreign service is that it holds the possibility of materializing the dream we all have of creating a harmonious international society, a society of peace, not peace as the absence of war, but a positive, constructive peace, a stable peace that brings out the best of humankind. In such a peace, we stand to discover the enormous wealth humankind holds in its hands, a wealth that should not be squandered on futile wars and equally pointless confrontations.

I believe that because diplomats come into contact with other cultures on a daily basis in their line of work, they can help create a lasting peace by identifying and fostering commonalities between cultures.

I lecture nearly every day at the Toluca campus of the Tecnológico de Monterrey, but I get the feeling I'm learning a lot more than my students. Of course, there are new ways of learning, not just the classic teacher-student relationship. The teachers learn, students learn from their classmates and they also learn that they knew things they didn't know they knew.

At the Tecnológico de Monterrey, I proposed combining Mathematics and Law for the purpose of oral trials. Students need to use mathematical logic to defend their points of view in oral trials; good legal arguments are of no use if you can't convince public opinion you are acting legally and legitimately. We all have the world in our hands and have the ability to turn our thoughts into reality, make our wildest dreams come true.

When you reach 80, you become invaded by a sense of urgency. There are some ten issues that concern me immensely, one of which is a promise I made to an indigenous community in Guatemala, the Jakalteco, that I would promote recognition of their language in the state of Chiapas as one of the languages spoken in Mexico. I haven't delivered on that promise yet, so it's on my to-do list. I plan on traveling to Chiapas next year to see how we can defend this language, which is beautiful, by the way. It is no longer spoken in Guatemala, only in Mexico. We are importers of foreign languages; grantors of asylum to the literature and voices of the Jakalteco. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to asylum issues have overlooked this aspect: the provision of safe havens for foreign languages.

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