

Diversity Week 2009 launch speech
Tuesday 17 March, Elisabeth Murdoch Theatre

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., *

I was surprised to receive this invitation from the VC. I started to think whether I was a right person to talk on diversity or not. Later with a reflection on my life and my ethnic root I realised I was the right person to talk on diversity because I was a victim of a false identity and the policy of assimilation before migrating to Australia.

I am originally a Kurd from the ME. My homeland was divided among four countries, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria after the 1st world war.

Since then the Kurdish ethnic identity, cultural heritage and history have been questioned. In Turkey I was called a mountainous Turk, in Iran a Persian and in Iraq and Syria an Arab speaking a foreign language.

I was not allowed to speak my language. I was even forbidden from seeking knowledge and higher education.

I was denied access to university on the ground of my ethnicity. **[I had to escape from Iraq and live in exile to seek education]**

For this reason I like to talk about identity before dealing with diversity. Only through our analysis of the meaning of identity diversity will also become more intelligible. No doubt identity has proved to be theoretically, politically and pedagogically valuable for a large number of people. It is magical glue that blends us all together. It can do that when essential racial character, belief or sexuality of a group of people is explicitly defined as something common to all members of this group. For some people there is no philosophical problem in identifying a group or a cultural heritage on the ground of such kind of commonality. We describe people to be identical and ignore their differences.

But there are two problems associated with the notion of identity;

First, identity is **exclusionary**. It denies diversity. The implication of the notion of identity, especially when diversity is denied, which I call abstract identity, becomes culturally *dangerous* because it does not recognise diversity but negates it.

In this context this type of identity becomes a foundation for establishing a system of ideas in the name of ideology to dictate the meaning to reality rather than interpret it. Ideology distorts the truth rather than disclosing it. Ideology aims at purging diversity by destroying differences and imposing a single world-view and establishing a monoculture.

Humanity has a long history of racial, gendered, and class exclusion in the name of identity and ideology. We have witnessed the rise of ultranationalism such as Nazism and Fascism aiming at excluding diversity. These ideologies were responsible for destroying a significant part of cultural heritage produced by different social and ethnic groups for the sake of establishing identity and monoculture.

Second, identity is a paradox. I remember a statement by Wittgenstein in his book *Tractatus* (5.5303), saying,

“Roughly speaking, to say of two things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all.”

If identity is a relation it must hold either between two different things or between a thing and itself. To say that X is identical to Y, when X and Y are different, is bound to be false; but to say that X is the same as Y is to utter a tautology.

After this short account of identity we need to ask about the meaning of diversity, and see whether diversity is real or conceptual.

Our intuition of the world and the entities around us does not confirm identity. We never experience identity. Whatever we experience intuitively is diversity. We see different types of individuals who belong to different types of social and cultural groups. They have different colours- of skin, speak different languages and have different types of belief. We see different species of animals, plants, and different types of natural objects.

Every entity we experience is different because it has its own unique way of existence. We all experience diversity in our daily life but not identity. For this reason some philosophers reject the notion of identity. David Hume, for example, believes that identity, in particular personal identity, is fictitious and the product of human imagination.

But diversity is also problematic because it is **exclusionary**. It can be used to exclude others in virtue of their different heritage and biology. A forcible emphasis on diversity imposes distinction and finally a self-imposed superiority of one group over another. It leads to isolation, marginalisation and creates a distance between divergent cultural groups.

Throughout the history of human thought we have tried to understand our social and cultural constructions in light of the meaning of the notions of either abstract identity or mere diversity. In both cases, the other is excluded and seen as a threat. In order to eliminate this threat we have tried to dominate the other and in some cases to destroy it. This understanding of these two notions with their practical application have decorated history with medals of war, subjugation, slavery, class distinction, patriarchy and exploitation of nature.

But now, it is time to reinterpret the meanings of identity and diversity on a new philosophical outlook. There should be a way in which we sustain identity without

destroying diversity and vice versa. Identity should be understood in the context of diversity and diversity in the context of identity. None of them should be victimised for the sake of another.

We have to bring about a change from assimilation to integration and from monoculturalism to multiculturalism. This change is not only a historical necessity of our time but also a proper apprehension of reality. Inclusion is crucial for this type of diversity I talk about. Through inclusion we can establish a strong multicultural society where diversity does not threaten the integrity of a constructed identity.

When I talk about multiculturalism and diversity I don't mean to have *halal* food on Sydney Road or a dinner in China Town. Our call for cultural diversity should also not be associated with our guilt and our failure to construct an identity but rather it should be built on our understanding of reality philosophically.

Diversity should be initiated by a new philosophical thinking that accommodates our differences and aims at changing politics of exclusion to politics of inclusion and recognition.

Only through identity in diversity and diversity in identity we can extend power not only to end marginalisation and exclusion but also to appropriate cultural expressions of the other. The other in this type of diversity is no longer seen as an enemy but by contrast an integral part and a necessary condition for the development of the self.

For this reason, the notion of diversity should be examined in its relation to recognition, tolerance and democracy. Cultural diversity is incompatible with non-democratic principles because an emphasis on cultural diversity keeps us away from the tyranny of monoculturalism. It encourages different cultural agents to participate in building society.

Our time is a beginning of a new era in which no single reality, truth or power prevails. Instead there will be plurality of truth, values and power. We should remember that diversity will lead to the notion of **cultural relativism**. There will be no single and absolute criteria for any kind of judgement because every culture is different and unique in itself.

Although the notion of cultural relativism is appealing to our common sense and new philosophical thinking but it is embedded with a problem. Some times by insisting on the functionality of all cultural practices we will be compelled to suspend or avoid critical judgements in assessing other cultures. Some people might think that under the sway of the relativist paradigm there will be no reason to justify a critical approach to any culture because a critical evaluation becomes a prejudice.

On the ground of accepting diversity I believe we should sustain the notion of cultural relativism as long as it does not become a pretext for tolerating offensive practices and crimes against humanity.

I am not here to talk only about cultural diversity of language and religious belief. In addition to language and religion there is diversity in creative arts, sexuality, secular opinions and philosophy. All these different ways of expression are significant components of multiculturalism and should be recognised.

As we see, our notion of diversity will lead to recognition of our differences without sacrificing identity. It leads to political as well as moral correction. But the question that arises here is, whether university is a right institution for promoting diversity or not?

The answer to this question is based on our philosophy of education and our understanding of the moral and political functions of university. If we think of university as a training ground for young people in order to make them employable according to the demands of the market, then moral and political correction will not be the responsibility of university.

In my opinion, university is a place for diversity and has a noble responsibility in educating rather than training our youth. University has a role in promoting political and moral correction because education is more than training. Today our universities are no longer institutions of learning for children of a particular cultural group or social class. It is a place of diversity and coexistence of all different cultural groups and social classes.

At the end I like to add another point in my analysis of the meaning of diversity. Diversity should encompass our relation to nature. Unfortunately, modernity has treated nature as raw material and a reserve for investment and production. This has gradually led to an unavoidable ecological disaster in our time. The economic development of modern industrial societies is no longer a criterion for superiority of any civilisation. As we know every economic gain is not a progress. Nature should be treated with respect rather than being subdued or conquered. Our multiculturalism and a new understanding of diversity should not remain anthropo-centric. It should not overemphasise the importance of human beings in the world, while downplaying the glory of the rest of the living beings and natural entities. We can avoid the ecological disasters of our time by overcoming our anthropo-centric position and adopting a position of bio-centric egalitarianism.

Let us build a bridge of understanding, and recognise our differences for the sake of future generation. Let us save the planet and live together with all our differences in peace and harmony. Let us not be ashamed of our differences but be proud of them. Diversity is not the poverty of culture but richness, not repulsive and intimidating but splendid and beautiful.

Muhammad Kamal
17 March 2009

Diversity Week
The University of Melbourne

* Martin Luther King, Jr., "I have a Dream", in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1986. p. 219.