

Interview with Dr. Oussouby Sacko, President of Kyoto Seika University

Reinforcing Globalization & Localization Through Education

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Globalization and digitalization are often considered detrimental to local cultures, with priority placed on economic efficiency rather than local identity. Regional towns and cities around the world could lose their local (traditional) attractiveness and leave their residents feeling materially rich but culturally or spiritually poor and isolated. Continuing urbanization tends to make all local cities and towns look the same as a result of the adoption of common criteria for development focused on economic growth and efficiency. Could this be behind the increasing numbers of lonely people who feel left behind by global trends? How can we tackle this problem while taking full advantage of the merits of globalization and digitalization? Will globalization and localization always be contradictory? Is there any way to reinforce them both?

We interviewed Dr. Oussouby Sacko, president of Kyoto Seika University, who has lived in Japan for a long time working in education.

(Interview on Feb. 12, 2020)

Self-Introduction

JS: Could you give a brief self-introduction, in particular about your experience in Japan and at this university?

Sacko: My name is Oussouby Sacko. I come from Mali in West Africa and I have been in Japan since 1991, so almost 29 years. After coming to Japan, I went to a Japanese language school for six months and then did my Masters and Ph.D at Kyoto University. I was trained as an architect in the field of engineering. I moved to Kyoto Seika University in 2001 to teach in the faculty of humanities as well as in the Department of Architecture. My main base was in the faculty of humanities because I was working more on communities and area studies, especially the relationship between spaces and human beings and behavior. I myself am more interested in the impact of human behavior on spaces.



Dr. Oussouby Sacko

you could contribute to maximizing the benefits and minimizing the demerits?

Sacko: You mentioned “affecting” – usually we use this word in a negative way, but I am not taking it in that way. Of course, globalization for me is giving us a new chance actually, because we have been living in this modern era with our nation state system. So we have countries with borders and rules and so on, and so for a long time we have been misunderstanding each other. I think that globalization is giving us another chance to know each other, to know our needs, and to let normal people – not the government – understand their dependency on others.

For example, in this school I was talking to students about whether they were interested in globalization and they said no, that is none of my business. But I reminded them that they are eating McDonalds every day; can you see in detail where the ingredients come from? Can you check the tag of your shirt? You will see it is made in Thailand or made in Taiwan. So we are consuming things without knowing who is producing or who is suffering to produce that for us. So, globalization was more economical and industrial. In that globalization, it was unfair because it was giving a chance to some people to have access to more cheap and more diverse things, and it was also making others work for a very low wage. If we see each other – who is producing, who is consuming – and then we know other cultural backgrounds, that can help us to live in harmony, I believe.

At the same time, we start to understand that we can create hatred among ourselves because we associate our problems with another

Education’s Contribution to Maximizing Benefits & Minimizing Demerits of Globalization & Digitalization

JS: Thank you. The world today is greatly affected by globalization and technological innovation, in particular digital technology. How do you see education contributing? We are talking about the merits and demerits of digitalization and globalization. Through your job, how do you think

country. I think it is very important, especially in the educational way, to try to bring responsibility to young people, to encourage individuals and to support them. They can start to know other cultures and other things. Also, a good thing about globalization is that through knowing others, you can understand yourself and your position better. Globalization is not about speaking other foreign languages; it is more important to know how you should stand in this globalized world, because this globalized world tends to come with a mass culture, a kind of consumer culture. But of course, we are not forced to do that. If you don't know yourself, if you don't know your position and your culture, you will be in the flow of consuming that mass culture. But if you know what your priorities are as a Japanese, you can know what you can offer to the globalized world. Not just as a consumer, but as someone who can offer something back. That will give you the opportunity to understand a great deal.

Globalization is even helping you to understand yourself and your culture if you are aware. So educational institutions should make everybody aware about how they should behave in the globalized world. That is what I am telling my students – the first step in the globalized world is to know who you are, where you come from and where do you stand. As you say, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and digital technology revolution are giving us a lot of opportunities, such as communication systems. We can know in real time what is happening on the other side of the world. People are more interconnected. If something happens, you can't hide it from people anymore as technology has made it all accessible.

In the morning, I watch some Japanese TV and I see shows about accidents that occur around the world, for example. Before we would have never seen these but now we see everything that happens. For me, human beings have created this overwork system, something that we can't handle. At the same time, we have problems also to maintain our social system because people are overworking, people are over-worrying about things, they don't trust each other, there are lots of problems. Why don't we give ourselves a little time to think about ourselves, our culture, our family, and to enjoy our time? For me, technology is coming to support a new way of life. People are afraid because they have created a system where they think that they will suffer if they are out of the system. They worry that a robot will steal their jobs and then what will they do? In fact, they will have time to read books and to travel with their family. If the robots drive your car then you can do other things in the car, such as having a meeting!

What we should understand is that technology is here for our extension, not our replacement. So we think that technology is coming to replace us, no. We create these technologies for our extension, to help us. If technology cannot help human beings to be more at peace with ourselves, then I think we don't need it. Also, now we have a lot of social issues; we have a lot of disruption in our societies. Why don't we use technologies to reconnect with

ourselves? For example, we have something as simple as Facebook – you can meet people you have not seen for years and years and you can recreate lost connections. So if we use it well, technology will give us opportunities to be at peace with ourselves and to rebuild our communities in different ways. Also, technology can help with healthcare, telling you what is wrong so you don't have to go to the doctor every day. We should think that we are not continuing the same life with technologies, we should have a new way of living, a new way of life. We are worried about new technologies but if we think that they will bring us a new life, we can live better with them.

As an educational institution, what is important is the liberal arts-philosophy, the knowledge of societies – it is very important for us to master technology and not the other way around. To do that, we really need to think about what human beings are and what is our history. We need a philosophical approach to discover our relationship with technologies and how we should work and coexist with them. We should also be able to be more creative in what kind of life we want to have with these technological advances. So that is my way of thinking, and in universities we should have more courses on how people should behave in a new society. That is completely based on liberal arts studies.

JS: I understand. I think in that case, art and culture will be very important in the age of digitalization and globalization. I understand what you said very well; in particular, your own identity comes from your culture, art and history and that is why you would need to learn more about it in the age of globalization and digitalization.

Sacko: Exactly, and for routine work, or studies even, robots are better than us. But why should you have this experience? You are better than a robot. They don't think why. So we should change our position and have more questions, more emotions. We should be able to understand or be touched by art, and so the liberal arts including art and philosophy is vital even if it is not your identity.

JS: Globalization and digitalization are symbols of efficiency. Everyone is in pursuit of efficiency, but people are complaining about the “good old culture” disappearing as a result of globalization.

Sacko: As long as human beings exist, we are the continuation of our history, so it's not disappearing, it is with us. We just don't want to look at it, that is the problem.

JS: It is a shame to see the old architecture or streets disappearing as a result of urbanization due to globalization in the big cities of the world. Local places seem to be struggling to keep their cultural

identity. Does the ability to keep your identity depend upon education or urbanization or something else?

Sacko: For me, education is not being in classes or taking courses. Education is between us, between you and your parents, between you and your society. It is more of a community matter and a social matter rather than a formal education matter. So it is very important for us to be educated in our communities. But now, communities give the responsibility of education to schools, where before they were combining schools and community. Schools have a formalized education – they don't teach you who you are as the community will. Our community teaches us that and it is very important.

Digitalization & Globalization in Africa

JS: Turning to Africa, digitalization is encouraging growth and economic development there very dramatically. Would you concur that as a result the gap between Africa and developed nations is now narrowing?

Sacko: In Africa in general, we have only basic infrastructure. We don't have enough landlines or telephone systems, but mobile portable systems came at a time when we were not able to have landlines everywhere. Japan has landlines in every single village, so now the problem is that Japan has built so much infrastructure that people don't need it because they have shifted to mobile communication systems. In Africa, in a lot of countries, because we didn't have those lines or the money or time to build them, we jumped directly to digital. So we master the digital more quickly, because this fits our needs more than Japanese people. In Japan, digital is very slow because at the beginning it was not needed. The meaning of this phone for a Malian person and a Japanese person is very different. Before, for a Malian, if you wanted to open a bank account you needed to bring so many documents. But in Mali only 30-40% are literate, meaning 60% are illiterate, so even if they go to a bank they need help to open an account. They don't even have birth certificates or ID. But if you give them this phone, they can communicate, and they can receive and send money. So for them, this is a business opportunity, the opening to a new world. It is very empowering for them. That is why it is developing so fast. For many people, having a mobile phone is everything.

Regarding the gap narrowing, in Africa and even some Asian countries they are growing very fast but with high risk. In developed or industrialized countries, people move by controlling their risk. We do things with high risk in Africa and so we cannot say that the gap is narrowing. We need to have a more basic literacy about the use of technology, but all we are thinking about is how to grow. We need a sustainable growing system, as the current one is not.

JS: Returning to the issue of local communities versus globalization, what do you think about local African communities facing the challenges of globalization today?

Sacko: In 2010 we had a symposium in Africa about globalization and local culture. In Africa, we think that globalization is coming to replace local culture and that is a dangerous thing. This is a problem of education – we think that if new things come, we should leave all the old things. We don't try to hybrid or combine them and so that is very dangerous for us. It also explains why a lot of people are moving from rural areas to urban areas because they think they will come into contact with globalization and new things. It is very important for us to educate people that what they have as local knowledge, as local culture, is very important for them to live in a globalized world. If you want to live in a globalized world as yourself, you need to pay attention to what you have locally – education, culture, all those things. Education should shift from literacy-based education to a more globally-oriented education. Education before was how to know, how to read and write and work in a modern system. It is not like that anymore, and we have to know how to build our own humanity.

JS: To be more specific, the learning of history and your own country's indigenous arts would be very important?

Sacko: Yes, and also one of the very important things we are forgetting in this globalized world is the impact of language. Of course, it is good to have English or French to communicate with others but it is also very important to learn your local languages. A lot of parents think that their children should learn French or English so they can live and travel abroad, neglecting their own local languages. This is dangerous as local languages are very important. They come with poems, storytelling, and art.

Kyoto & the Reality of Globalization

JS: You have been living here for a long time, and you are a very fluent Japanese speaker. How do you perceive Kyoto? For Japanese it is a good place to remind us of our cultural identity. But Kyoto, like Paris, is facing the reality of globalization.

Sacko: I like Kyoto because people there have been very egotistical and conservative, but that is to protect their values which is very important. Kyoto is now suffering the effects of mass tourism but it is responding very well – it has built two Kyotos. The Kyoto they show, and the Kyoto that they don't show. So they have responded to tourists' expectations very well, and it is very interesting to have

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two overlapping Kyotos because if people want to know the deeper side of Kyoto – the philosophy – they can.

JS: You are an architect and this school is a professional institution for design and architecture. From that perspective, what about the visual aspects of the cohabitation of globalization and local culture, for both Kyoto and Africa?

Sacko: In this university we set three main orientations. One is liberal arts – philosophy and knowing yourself and understanding the locality. The second is global – to be aware of global issues and to know your role in a globalized world and how you use globalization. For me, students trained here may work in Africa or Thailand, you never know. So they should be well-versed in global issues. The third one is expression. Expression is, how you show what you have as feeling to others. That is through art, through literature, through fashion. It is very important for them to know these things.

We are located in Kyoto and so of course we are learning from Kyoto – from Saikyo-Ku. We are the only university that has signed an agreement with the local government. For me it is very important that we should train students about what is under their feet and so when they go to the global level they know how to combine locality and globality. It is very important. So you don't have to be only global, you don't have to be only local. What we are extending to the world is, how we can help the traditional industries in Kyoto. Because the traditional industries are suffering everywhere in the world, not just Kyoto. We have opened a center for innovation of traditional techniques. In this school we have been sending students for internships every year for almost 40 years to local ateliers and local industries. But every year, we see that one or two of the industries shut down because they don't have the opportunity of continuity or other problems. Now, we try to record and document them, to archive them. At the same time, we create a platform for young people who are working in those industries, to see how they can use their potential for innovation while cooperating with the world.

We made the same agreement with France; there are researchers in France who are aware of traditional industries being replaced by those things, and we have the same agreement with Britain and Spain, and now also with African countries. For example, we are working with indigo. We can find indigo here, and in most African countries, but over time even indigo dying will be so industrialized that local techniques will disappear. So we are working in a consortium with Burkina Faso and Mali on indigo. We also have the same group about rice production, to preserve the techniques and how to sustain the production. Until now they were doing a kind of local design but maybe they could combine with a Japanese indigo designer to have another product which is maybe needed in Spain. So we are also working in collaboration with the International

Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden University, and we called that "Humanity Across Borders" which is a very creative and innovative platform.

Promoting Local Identity

JS: Finally, do you have any plans for exchanges of students between Africa and Japan?

Sacko: In 2020, we will open a Center for African and Asian Contemporary Culture Studies, which will be for research about Africa and Asia. There are a lot of centers doing research on anthropology, for example, but this will be called "The actual position of Africa" in relation to Asian countries. In 2021, we will open two new departments. One is about media expression and creation, and the other is about global cultural studies. I just came from the budget meeting, because we are trying to open a Seika liaison office in Dakar (Senegal) next year. It will have many roles, including promoting Japan studies, and how young African people can study in Japan and how to promote exchanges between educational institutions. At the same time, I think it is very important for Japan also to let Africa know what Japan is. Maybe we can have collaborations through art, for example.

JS: By maximizing the merits of globalization, you can promote localization. Any other future plans?

Sacko: Exactly, that is the idea. I have set myself a few goals, and these are that we should be aware about how we respond to Sustainable Development Goals, but also I am promoting diversity in this university to have foreign students, to create a small globalized world. Currently more than 25% of our students are foreign students, but I want to raise this to 30%. Equally I want more staff who have worked abroad and also foreigners as professors and administration staff. We can't jump forward without revamping traditional recruiting practices; in that vein I am promoting women in managerial positions. Globalization is not about doing something outside exclusively, it happens within the campus too. My main preoccupation is how to make the majority change. I am not pursuing diversity to help a minority, as by doing that I would just isolate minorities. I want to change the view, the mindset of the majority, and then we can have a more inclusive social system.

JS: With diversity you can maintain local identity.

Sacko: Yes, exactly.

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Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender, who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.