

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

The *Organisation internationale de la francophonie* was founded in 1970 by, among others, Léopold Sédar Senghor, then President of Senegal (the organization celebrated the centennial of his birth in 2006). In the beginning the mission of the *OIF* was to defend the cultural heritage of Francophone nations and the French language. President Jacques Chirac gradually infused it with a more overtly political mission referred to as “soft power” (*force douce*). In 2003 the French, with the support of the *OIF*, rallied support against the war in Iraq and in 2004 the member nations were instrumental in gaining passage of a “Declaration of Cultural Diversity” at UNESCO by 148 of the 154 member countries. The United States and Israel were the only countries to vote against the declaration, largely because the United States wanted to end governmental subsidies for culture in nations where it wanted to export its movies. It felt that governmental subventions gave an unfair advantage to indigenous cultures. This question has long been a source of debate in countries like France, which do subsidize cultural products like movies and documentaries produced in their own countries. For them inexpensive imports from the United States are seen as a threat to French culture and language. This has been referred to as “*l'exception culturelle*” (*Le Monde*, 29 septembre 2006).

Currently the *OIF* has 72 members, observers, or candidates for membership, and its Secretary-General is Abdou Diouf, the former President of Senegal. On 28 September 2006 the *OIF* met in Bucharest, Romania for its eleventh *Sommet de la francophonie*. It was the first time that the *OIF* had met in an eastern European country. Romania was chosen because it was to enter the European Union in January of 2007. The theme of the conference was “*technologies de la communication dans l'enseignement*,” chosen because of the gap between the use of technology for teaching in Anglophone countries like the United States and the Francophone world. Diouf opened the meeting by defining *francophonie* as the defense of cultural diversity against “*une hégémonie, une conception unique du monde*” (*Le Monde*, 28 septembre 2006).

France subsidizes Francophone institutions to the tune of about 80% (*Le Monde*, 29 septembre 2006), and President Chirac pressed for open and honest elections in the Côte d'Ivoire based on renewed and verifiable electoral rolls. He also insisted on sovereignty for Lebanon. Thirty-one other countries were represented by their Presidents or Prime Ministers such as Charles Konan Banny, the transitional Prime Minister of the Côte d'Ivoire. Its President, Laurent Sbagbo, as well as Idriss Déby, the President of Chad (Darfur was to be mentioned in the final communiqué), were not present. One reason for their absence was their concern and that of other Francophone African nations that fourteen of the last twenty-one new members of the *OIF* have been from Eastern Europe. The Africans were afraid that their influence and the financial aid they receive from the *OIF* would be reduced. It was, after all, the African Francophone nations that had been among the founding members. Abdou Diouf and the French had a different perspective. With the addition of Bulgaria and Romania fourteen of the twenty-seven members of the European Union would also be members of the *OIF*. This would make it easier to defend the role of French within the EU, where much slippage has occurred in the last six years. Diouf added that it was the European Union which provides most of the economic aid to the southern tier countries. The Foreign Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo agreed with him (*Le Monde*, 26 septembre 2006). Other countries like Albania, Macedonia, the principality of Andorra, and Greece, which are now observers, also want to join the *OIF*. It is

clear from these developments that the *OIF* wants to join the EU in its competition with the World Trade Organization, which is backed by the United States.

Other issues discussed at the Summit include the right of self-determination of countries occupied by foreign powers and Francophone countries like Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mauritania, which are facing political and economic crises. The situation in Darfur was discussed at length.

The final declaration of the Summit seemed to suggest limits to the ability of the members of the *OIF* to either reach agreement on many of these issues or exercise any significant influence over political hot spots. For example, the earlier call for the sovereignty of Lebanon became the following statement: "En déplorant la tragédie au Liban et les conséquences dramatiques pour l'ensemble des populations civiles, nous appelons à une cessation totale des hostilités et au retour au calme" (*Le Monde*, 29 septembre 2006). Other statements included that the participants were "vivement préoccupés" by the crisis in Darfur and "regrettent" the situation in Côte d'Ivoire.

Abdou Diouf was reelected as Secretary-General and was praised by President Chirac for his leadership and commitment to peace and solidarity. Chirac went on to say that he was optimistic about the future of French in the European Union. Abdou Diouf concluded that the combat for French did not mean an attack on English and that "il ne s'agit pas de remplacer une hégémonie par une autre."

It seems to me that with the increase in member nations it will be more and more difficult to reconcile the divergent interests and objectives which now exist within the *OIF*. For those of us who teach French in the United States it will be important to follow the directions taken by the *OIF* and other Francophone organizations in promoting the French language and Francophone culture. Is it possible that the United States might join the *OIF* as an observer since a nation no longer has to be Francophone to gain admission? Will the French government continue to promote French in the United States as it has in the past and increase funding (the AATF is now working on a media campaign to promote French with French Cultural Services), or will it concentrate more on Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia in the future? Will the 175 million French-speaking people in the world (ninth largest language group) increase in number or is decline inevitable? These are but a few of the important questions facing us.

Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow (*Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*) are optimistic about the future. In their new book, *The Story of French*, which came out in December of 2006, they devote a chapter to what they call "The Francophonie" and discuss its history and future prospects. They also devote an entire section, "Change," to the future of French.

We language, culture, and literature teachers should also know that TV5Monde reaches 170 million households a day in 200 countries. This represents an increase of 10% in the last year. Now this rapidly growing television giant will face competition from the new information and French news channel, "24." Over forty thousand teachers worldwide consult its documentary series and 800,000 videos online (TV5.org) (*The Story of French* 360). Its editorial stance depends on where it is broadcast: TV5Monde Afrique, Orient-Maghreb, U.S., Amérique latine, Asie, Europe, FBS (France, Belgique, Suisse). TV5Québec-Canada is an independent station administered on-site (*Le Monde*, 26 septembre 2006). All the sites broadcast twenty-four hours a day and concentrate their programs according to the geographical, cultural, and linguistic particularities of their region. They also partner with other French-speaking public television stations. Fifty journalists of fifteen different nationalities and 300 correspondents produce copy and broadcast news. The Belgian and Swiss stations present a critical perspective on topics concerning the French and other Francophone nations. At the end of the day, TV5Monde offers a French and Francophone alternative to CNN and Al Jazeera, fitting somewhere in between.

For classroom teachers TV5Monde is an invaluable resource, one that keeps us and our students in touch with the Francophone world.