

Olympism, a source of cultural inspiration

In the world today, we have all become accustomed to the Olympic Games, a recurring spectacle that takes place every two years, the Games of the Olympiad alternating with the Olympic Winter Games. It clearly has become the highest of every athlete's aspirations to participate in, and if at all possible, to win at the Olympic Games. Moreover, the nations of the world vie for the honour of hosting the Olympic Games, which is also a means of bringing the world to their country and of sharing their culture with the peoples of

by Seiuli P. Wallwork *

the world. History tells us that this great event was founded to transcend barriers of race, creed, or conflict. The Olympic Movement is the world's collective organization for the promotion of Olympism, and it encourages the development of young people both morally and physically, building friendships and international understanding for a "better and more peaceful world". In order to promote Olympism, it is neces-

sary that we, as part of the Olympic Movement, should understand and appreciate the concept of Olympism. Olympism is a state of mind. In the modern world, it is known as an alliance linking the arts, the humanities and sport. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, referred to Olympism as a union of mind and muscle. In founding the modern Olympic Games, Coubertin proposed "organizing the outstanding collaboration of the Arts and Humanities, and bringing about their daily, modest and limited



Opening ceremony at the XVII Olympic Winter Games in Lillehammer in 1994.



Closing ceremony at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta, the Centennial Games: a preview of Sydney.

collaboration in the local manifestations of sports activity”.

The philosophy of Olympism relates to the harmonious development of the mind, body and spirit. According to the *Olympic Charter*, in its second fundamental principle, “in blending sport with culture and education, Olympic seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example, and respect for fundamental ethical principles”. It is a philosophy that embodies the concept of the union of mind and body which has been described as “cross-curricular” and “cross-cultural”, enabling individuals to develop more completely by means of education, cooperation and mutual respect. It is in fact an international language, that today is understood and spoken by many people of all cultures and walks of life.

Olympism is clearly the embodiment of all the ideals within the Olympic Movement that promote fair play, international understanding, tolerance, friendship, and respect for the language and culture of others. It enhances morality. Like religion, it is a way of life with a spiritual quality, creating a sense of inner unity and promoting camaraderie and friendship.

The Olympic Movement has been firm in its stand to promote world peace through sport, and in bringing together the peoples of the world. Dr. Un Yong Kim, IOC Executive Board member and president of the GAISF, believes: “challenges can be overcome. The Olympic Movement stands for a better and more peaceful world”.

The youth of the world have, every Olympiad, come together from different lands and cultures as one, to take their oath before the Olympic flag, where the symbol of the five interlacing rings representing the five continents figures in the centre of a white, borderless background. This is symbolic of the peoples of the world assembling in the neutral arena created by the Olympic Games, and it expresses the message that all can live without fear or prejudice. Battles may rage, but we have still seen athletes of all races embrace in celebration on the victory stands, as the whole world applauds their excellence in sport. This is the culture of the Olympic Games. All participating athletes are an integral part of the Olympic Movement, and their achievements and aspirations are considered to be the highest expressions of Olympism. Their cultural differences are

incentive enough for them to share their customs and traditions. In so doing, they take the first step toward the elimination of prejudice and discrimination. Jesse Owens, the sport legend who helped transcend racial barriers, once said: “In sport, you learn not only the game, but things like respect for others, the ethics of life, how you are going to live your life, and how to treat our fellow man”. The athletes of the world bring to the Olympic Games not only their outstanding skills and talents, but also a part of their way of life. They bring their heritage, and their culture. According to President Samaranch of the International Olympic Committee, “the difference between sport and the Olympic Games is that the Olympic Games are the sum of sport and culture”.

Since the modern Olympic Games were created, every host country has opened its door, inviting the rest of the world with the promise of warmth, friendship and goodwill. In organizing the Games, they have all included cultural programmes that depict their way of life, both past and present, leaving lasting impressions on the minds of all who attend. Most of all, in sharing their culture, they have reached out to the rest of the world in a spirit of fellowship and friendship.

While the main focus is on sports, and the men and women participating, the underlying cultural theme and overtones cannot be overlooked. The Olympic Games have become a distinctive festival of youth, an invaluable component of universal culture that projects what is good and wholesome in young people.

Already, much has been written and said about the spirit of Olympism in general, and no doubt this production will continue in future generations. There will be many more discussions and forums on the subject. However, what is clear today is that the Olympic Games, a true embodiment of the spirit of Olympism, are a global event encom-

passing the five continents and the 197 National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The Oceania contingent of NOCs, which represents one of the five rings and of which my own country forms a small component, spans across the Pacific Ocean. It is home to a colourful array of people including Caucasians, Melanesians, Asians, Micronesians and Polynesians. It is a region very rich in culture that has been handed down through many generations. The isolation and economic difficulties of some of its member countries have caused some to question their worthiness to be a part of the Olympic family. One can only quote the president of the Association of National Olympic Committees and IOC member, Mario Vasquez Raña: "the Games belong [...] to the whole of humanity. [...] participation is an obligation for all of us."

The concept of Olympism is fairly new to the Oceania region, with most countries having become members of the Olympic family only in the past two decades. However, they do not have less merit than others, especially given their enthusiastic efforts to spread the Olympic ideals to the youth in their territories. For the majority of athletes and youngsters in these regions, it is neces-

sary to work much harder to realise their goals - Olympic or other - owing to the isolation of their countries, Travel costs alone can prevent them from taking advantage of chances to participate in major world events on other continents. The spirit of Olympism, however, and the desire to succeed, can open new doors to them.

Australia and New Zealand are the Olympic "leaders" in the region, both in terms of seniority and of strength. They have produced outstanding sportsmen and -women who have gained renown as Olympic and world champions in their respective sports. But when Tonga won the silver medal in boxing at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996, it was claimed as an "Oceania" medal by the rest of the island nations. In the true Olympic spirit, all of the participating countries from Oceania showed their support and shared in the Pacific family's victory. The dreams of the youth of Oceania are no different from those of their counterparts around the globe, even though they may be oceans apart. Within the region live people whose heritage is their culture. Like their forebears, their lives are guided by traditions and ceremony. They know their place in

society from a very young age, and their way of life is founded upon their love of humankind. In song and dance, in oratory and ceremony, they have preserved the traditions of their heritage throughout many generations. In their way of life, they have with dignity and pride upheld the "philosophy of life exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of the body, will and mind". Interestingly, the very ideals of Olympism for the foundation of the culture of most of the Oceania region. Hence, it can be said, that cultural tradition upholds their sense of Olympism.

Olympism is a harmonious blend of sport and culture. Just as there is an extraordinary atmosphere in the Olympic stadium when an athlete is cheered on to victory by spectators from his or her own country with the singing of a traditional song from the homeland or the national anthem, so this spirit is felt among the small island nations of Oceania when song and dance are used to inspire athletes to attain greater heights of achievement in sport.

It does not matter how great or small the NOC is, as long as it is a member of the Olympic Movement, it is of equal value and should be given equal opportunity to promote and share the spirit of Olympism. Through their cultural contributions, all NOCs strive to enhance the ideals of Olympism in their own country or region.

Historically, the concept and practice of Olympism are conceived as a part of Western culture. It would appear that they were alien to the peoples of the Pacific and other parts of the world that are geographically isolated or that were separated from European influence for many centuries. Just as Olympism was born of ancient Greek culture, later to be revived by Coubertin, so the cultures of the rest of the world were founded upon ancient myths and legends. Today, the relationship of this Western culture with the many other cultures of the world has been propagated because all share the



Australia: traditional dance performance.

basic principle of the harmonious unity of the mind, body and spirit. Therefore, while there is still much work to be done regarding the development of modern skills and techniques, spiritually, Olympism is not only a source of inspiration to our people, but it is in fact a way of life.

Having lived in the Oceania region all my life, and being of Polynesian descent, my involvement in the Olympic Movement has in recent years given added meaning to my cultural heritage. Not only has it increased my sensitivity to an extensive global perception of the Olympic Games and all they stand for, but it has also enhanced my appreciation for my own culture in relation to the Olympic spirit. There is no doubt in my mind that this feeling is prevalent throughout the Olympic family and the different peoples it comprises. The IOC President has said "the Olympic Movement must be a galvanizing reality capable of defeating bad politics, ambition and hatred. The International Olympic Committee must continue to spread its ideals of fraternity, friendship, peace and universal understanding".

Within the Olympic Movement there is a strong infrastructure which encourages and supports participation at all levels. Through its various organizations and commissions, the development of youth in sport throughout the world is the shared ideal. The Olympic motto - *Citius, Altius, Fortius* ("Faster, Higher, Stronger") - is symbolic of the ultimate realisation of human aspirations. It is the expression of the harmonious blending of the mind, body and soul. It is the spirit of Olympism. It has touched the hearts and lives of the people of the world, inspiring their pride and belief in their cultural heritage. It also brings the cultures of the world together at the greatest international event in sports, binding us all in friendship and peace. Olympism is therefore a source of cultural inspiration, and we as part of the Olympic Movement must keep the flame

of fellowship burning for the youth of today and the generations to follow. In my own culture, there is a proverbial expression which when translated into English goes something like: "When we part ways, there is hope we will meet again in our children". May the spirit of Olympism be kindled and preserved

over the oceans of time so that the future generations may also fulfil their role of promoting peace through the union of sport and culture.

*IOC member and president of the Samoa National Olympic Committee,



The "human pyramid" at the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992.