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Address

by

Mr. Amadou Mahtar M'Bow

on the occasion of  
his installation as  
Director-General  
of Unesco

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Madam President,

Permit me first of all to express to you my deep gratitude for the kind words you have just spoken about me. I am happy that my election to the office of Director-General of Unesco should have taken place during the session over which you were summoned to preside. As you recalled, we served together on the Executive Board and as I take up this most difficult task, I feel confident that for the two years during which you will once more be on the Board, I shall benefit from your guidance and your friendship. This is something to which I attach the greatest importance.

Madam President,  
Mr. Chairman of the Executive Board,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Colleagues,

The decision you have just taken to appoint me to the high office of Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a great honour for me and a responsibility, the full extent and exceptional demands of which I well realize. The massive vote of Member States from all regions and of such varying ideologies is not merely a mark of confidence by which I am deeply touched; it is an essential condition for taking up the leadership of an organization which by nature and vocation is universal. This widespread support seems to me to augur well for the future in that it translates the will of all to work together for the attainment of the Organizations's goals.

I also interpret your vote as a gesture of consideration and esteem for regions and peoples - those of the Third World - which have for so long been confined to a peripheral rôle in reaching decisions and exerting influence at world-wide level. I feel certain that, as you do today, millions of men and women will regard this election as a milestone on the way to elimination of the prejudices which have so often and so tragically marked the history of mankind, and as evidence of a desire to set international co-operation on an increasingly equitable footing.

For your token of confidence in the part of the world from which I come - Africa, which is just emerging from a tragic period of destruction initiated more than four centuries ago and which in certain of its regions still suffers from domination, racialism and apartheid - for your token of esteem for all the disinherited peoples, of whom, at this solemn moment, I feel I am the symbol, for your confidence in my person, allow me, Ladies and Gentlemen, to express to you my profound gratitude.

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I take up today the heavy responsibility of continuing the work of those eminent men who preceded me at the head of this Organization, each of whom left the imprint of his personality and of his conception of his duties towards the international community. Without their talent, their spirit of initiative and their untiring devotion, Unesco would not be what it is today. Although all belonged to the same intellectual tradition and had very similar human qualities, each in his own way was able to give a particular emphasis to the work of the Secretariat, to set his seal upon it, with the same urge to serve and the same concern for effectiveness.

Julian Huxley, the first Director-General of the Organization, was the very image of the scientist, to whom, to borrow the words of Terence, "nothing human is alien" and for whom knowledge and science must be the instruments of man's power - a power that is neither blind nor destructive, but fertile and liberating. From the start, Huxley bestowed on Unesco his anthropocentric vision of the world - one might say his humanism - and established once and for all the happy conjunction of education, science and culture in the service of an exalting ideal of welfare, peace and justice.

By a coincidence which looks like an aesthetic choice by Clio, the second Director-General turned out to be a poet, a man of letters, who realized that art is not a thing apart, a lonely pursuit for initiates, a luxury and pleasure reserved for the few, but an ultimate experience, a form of life; who realized that, in order to be authentic and lasting, art must arise from the depths of consciousness which implies that all art, though the expression of an individual, is also the expression of a people, a culture, a common heritage. But this poet was also a conscience, and his ethical view of the world imposed a rigid moral system on the Organization: its interests, which are those of the entire world, admit of neither bargaining nor half-measures. Torres Bodet, uncompromising aristocrat of international ethics, preferred to abandon the field rather than to give way to haggling, or accept the idea that Unesco should restrict its sphere of action or lower its sights.

After the man of science and the man of letters came the man anchored in reality, imbued with the long pragmatic tradition of his country: Luther Evans. Evans realized that his two illustrious predecessors had left him a valuable heritage which it was his duty to bring to fruition. Under him Unesco went through a period of consolidation and strengthening. Carrying out plans, opening up ways, staking out claims, Luther Evans - a man of action - communicated his own dynamism, and with it a new impetus, to Unesco's work.

The practical man, the man of the moment, was succeeded, in the person of Vittorino Veronese, by the enthusiast, whose lyrical flight was sustained by feelings of fraternity, community and oecumenical faith. Under his direction, Unesco undertook an historic task: the preservation of the cultural heritage of mankind. For the first time, men of all cultures and all latitudes joined together to save monuments and works of art, which, while bearing authentic witness to the soul of a particular people, were nevertheless regarded as a universal heritage because they represent expressions of the human soul and testify, through the ages, to the creative genius of man. The world campaign launched by Vittorino Veronese undoubtedly marked a decisive moment in the history of the Organization, for it revealed the full extent of the forces of peace and progress which it was able to mobilize.

It was at this moment in the evolution of Unesco that a man who came straight from the Organization itself appeared on the scene: a man whose ideas had ripened, whose analytical faculties had sharpened and whose will to act had deepened within the Organization. With his exceptional experience of the Secretariat, René Maheu brought to Unesco the qualities of a long rationalist tradition; moreover, as befitted an alumnus of such an influential hotbed of intellectual development as the Ecole Normale Supérieure of the Rue d'Ulm, his Cartesianism was more than philosophical speculation: it was reasoned enthusiasm, a dogged desire to serve. With a firm hand on the rudder, he was never to forget the horizons for which the ship was headed: the furtherance of justice and concord among men, the provision to all, through education, of the opportunity to exercise to the full their responsibilities as men, the application of science to the task of taming the wilderness of natural forces and, finally, the creation through culture of an atmosphere conducive to the flowering of the noblest capabilities of the mind.

Throughout the long period during which René Maheu held the high office of Director-General, Unesco, by welcoming to its midst so many new States emerging from the collapse of colonial domination and by developing its operational activities on their behalf, gave hope to millions of men; a growing number of peoples and nations turned towards it in their quest for progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The inheritance which such men leave to their successors imposes duties which cannot be shirked. I certainly intend to undertake those duties to the fullest extent which my responsibilities permit, in a spirit of scrupulous respect for the Constitution and the decisions of the General Conference, and also in closest collaboration with the Executive Board, of which I had the privilege to be a member, and in constant consultation with the Member States, and particularly with their accredited representatives in Paris. I also intend to strengthen our links with the United Nations, the Specialized Agencies and the regional organizations whose objectives concur with those of Unesco.

But since every man bears the mark of the age in which he lives, of the environment into which he was born and in which he grew to adulthood and of the experience which he has accumulated, it is in the spirit of the African people, and in their wisdom, that I shall find the initial motivations of my action.

When I speak of the people of Africa, it is not an abstract vision I evoke, but a reality experienced and fully entered into. My presence at the head of this Organization is merely the consequence of the profound changes which have taken place in that vast continent since the present century began. Yes, I grew up with Africa, suffering its pains, feeling its anguish, sharing its aspirations. The lesson I learned there was the lesson of deliberate attachment to the traditional environment; in accepting the fundamental values of that environment, we accepted ourselves as free beings in a dominated society, for what we had to preserve was the freedom of the spirit, in which the true meaning of dignity resides. Hatred was never in our hearts, even in times of conflict, because we never lost hope in mankind.

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I shall not forget either the experience I have gained since that morning in November 1929 when I first went to the regional school at Louga, accompanied by a

father who knew no French, but who had felt that, however important it was to be true to oneself, one had also to build bridges to the world. My journey from the Sahel of Africa, where man's life is so hard, to the banks of the Seine, to the age-old seat of learning - the Sorbonne - was a rich and utterly absorbing adventure. I discovered new beings, learning to appreciate them as brothers; above all, I saw Europe - for at that time, the Sorbonne was a European crossroads - in a new and unfamiliar light. What I acquired there, besides knowledge, was the capacity to reason, under the guidance of teachers for whom I have always retained the liveliest affection.

Lastly, I shall draw vital strength for the mission which you have entrusted to me from my profound conviction that the world is a single entity and that the struggle for mankind is everywhere the same. This conviction has been reinforced by my contacts with all manner of people from all the continents, and in this Organization, with whose activities I have been associated for the past eight years.

If the struggle for mankind, in its variety and in its unity, must be pursued without respite, it is because the very future of the species seems to be threatened in different ways: by the uncertainties which hang over peace, by the anarchic exploitation of natural resources, by the destruction of the environment, by increasingly intolerable inequalities, not to mention the frequent spurning of human rights. And all this is because men refuse to build their relationships on foundations which would permit the promotion of progress for all, in justice.

Mankind has the choice between living as members one of another and falling prey to barbarism. To live as members one of another means first of all the acceptance of differences, whether they are biological in origin or the product of geography and history. It means the renunciation of all notions of hierarchy among peoples and nations. It means the abandonment, once and for all, of the historical vision of those who, from Ancient Greece and Rome right up to the age of modern imperialisms, have always confused civilization with power, reducing to the status of "barbarians" the subjugated peoples as well as those who rejected their yoke. But living as members one of another implies more: it calls for an effort to sublimate differences in the construction, on a world-wide scale, of a new economic, social and cultural order which, transcending the selfishness of nations, will enable man to organize the space around him rationally, so that each may live there freely and happily, in brotherhood with his neighbours, whoever they may be. It may well be feared that the only alternative is barbarism, for the balance of terror and the intensification of inequalities may lead, in the end, to clashes productive only of ruin and desolation: the destruction of all that human genius has helped to create over so many millenia.

The threat will be no less - even if peace can be secured - if the power of science is not exercised with wisdom. Man's capacity to calculate and to inquire has now expanded to the point at which he is in a position to study both the infinitely small and the infinitely great. Whether he penetrates the mysteries of genetics or escapes from gravity to explore outer space, whether he pursues the study of the microcosm, dividing what - only yesterday - seemed indivisible, or sets out in conquest of the universe, man appears indeed to be standing on the threshold of a new age, as if the combined effects of two centuries of scientific progress were on the point of setting him free from all his bonds.

But were science to be diverted from its most noble goal and placed at the service of evil, it, too, would imperil mankind's very existence, or at any rate threaten to plunge men into new forms of bondage, worse perhaps than any which they have known throughout their history.

It is true that scholars and scientists in many countries are - each in the loneliness of his own conscience - reflecting on the very sense of their activities and on the final aims of science. Unesco cannot stand aside from this debate, any more than it can fail to interest itself in whatever bears on the progress and the destiny of man. Its responsibility is all the greater inasmuch as none is better placed to mobilize the intellectual resources which both reflection and action demand. The ambition of its new Director-General is to stimulate a vast movement in which scholars from all horizons and all disciplines may participate in a joint, world-wide effort of meditation on whether our civilizations are leading.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since its foundation in 1946, Unesco has undoubtedly followed a long and difficult path, facing countless problems and passing through a number of world crises with their tensions and conflicts. Today it is its Member States, all its Member States, which must endeavour to understand that Unesco can carry out its mission only in an atmosphere of serenity and frank and patient dialogue. The period of unprecedentedly rapid change which the contemporary world is traversing constantly obliges the Organization to review the objectives which it sets itself and the methods by which it works, in order to meet the imperatives of new situations. In many spheres, this sustained effort of renewal and adjustment has made it possible to deepen and broaden a programme of action for which, by reason of its universality, there is still no substitute in the modern world. Admired by some, criticized by others, at times misunderstood, Unesco exists because of the part taken in its work by the 135 Member States which make up the Organization and bear witness to the faith and hope that mankind as a whole places in it. What a heavy responsibility therefore attaches to everything connected with the preparation and execution of the programme, tasks calling for continuous attention to the process of self-criticism, constant evaluation of the results achieved, and determinedly forward-looking imagination.

But - deliberately - I shall not speak either of the programme or of the budget at this juncture. I intend to do so at greater length when you have finished your work and when I have assembled all the information which I do not, for obvious reasons, have at this moment.

Allow me only to stress that ethical action, the promotion of knowledge, with all the exchanges it involves, and aid for development, cannot be considered apart from one another without a risk of depriving the Organization of one of the reasons for its existence.

While the ethical objectives reflect the Organization's loyalty to one of its first tasks, which is to lay down universal standards applying to all because they are freely accepted by all, the promotion and dissemination of knowledge represent the prime source of progress.

But man's destiny cannot be dissociated either from the development of society, by which I mean all societies; there is no society in the world today which is not in some way having to face development problems. Special attention probably needs to be paid to those most seriously disadvantaged.

There is something shocking and unjust in the fact that hundreds of millions of human beings are still suffering from illness, illiteracy and hunger, and are thus deprived of what is essential to human dignity, when we consider the colossal waste which is a feature of certain societies.

If it is to be true to its calling, Unesco is in duty bound to do more, and to do it more effectively, to help all those who are deprived. We must make a determined effort, for this purpose, to modernize our methods for the planning and execution of all our activities. But as far as practical efficiency is concerned, an organization can only be as good as its secretariat; and judicious selection of staff, emphasis on its international character, and regular in-service training, appear to me to be crucial in this sphere. I should like at this point to say how much I have been impressed, during my four years as Assistant Director-General for Education, by the intellectual gifts, the efficiency and the loyalty of my colleagues. It is my intention to encourage personal initiative as much as possible, ensuring that the imagination and creative abilities of all those in the service of the Organization, whatever their rank, are not fettered by an over-authoritarian conception of the principles of hierarchy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Each period of history has its underlying trends, its lines of emphasis, marking its significance and its distinctive character. Today more than ever, an organization like Unesco must not be content to be carried, as it were, by the tide of events, but must resolutely take its proper place in the van of the twin movements of emancipation and unification of the nations which are the outstanding features of our time.

And so, as I take up the heavy responsibility which you have done me the signal honour of confiding to me, if there is an appeal I would address to the States here represented, and, through them, to all men and women in every country of the world, it is that they should redouble their efforts to rally to Unesco, in a great movement of universal fellowship, all those for whom the happiness and well-being of others are more than empty words. Unesco, this meeting of minds, this fraternal association of peoples, must remain, in a world which now, for better or for worse, commands tremendous technical powers, the ultimate hope for peace and understanding among men.

I am fully aware of the scope of the struggle we have to wage: what we have to do is to ensure that each day the meaning of justice and truth is more clearly perceived; to strive against all that abases man physically and intellectually - poverty, ignorance, inequalities and restrictions of all kinds - and to deliver him from the sometimes overwhelming pressures of exploitation, alienation and mechanization which tend to reduce him to the status of a mere object.

If the goal at times seems very far away and the path to it so thorny, it is because the true achievement of our end would mean nothing less than an ethical revolution by which man - all men - may be assured of full development. I remain convinced - and this conviction will underlie all my work in the service of the Organization in the years to come, giving me an unfailing source of hope and energy - that hatred and misunderstanding can be overcome in the unity which is forged when ideals freely and jointly accepted are finally put into practice, and that man will one day succeed, as we read in the Vedas, in "overcoming hatred by love and falsehood by truth".

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Taking of the oath by the Director-General

Madam President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I take the ritual oath, I should like to carry out another rite, in keeping with the traditions of the continent from which I come. I should like, before you all, to take formal leave of Africa, of the countries of the Third World, and of the Members of Group V who put my name forward for this office in the beginning and have been throughout the strongest supporters of my candidacy. I take leave of them because, from now on, I am a citizen of each of your countries, the servant of all your States. I shall not be able to assume the great responsibilities which you have just entrusted to me without your understanding, your support and your assistance. For these I thank you all in advance.

"I solemnly undertake to exercise in all loyalty, discretion and conscience the functions entrusted to me as Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, to discharge these functions and regulate my conduct with the interests of the Organization only in view, and not to seek or accept instructions in regard to the performance of my duties from any government or other authority external to the Organization."