

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
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Address by  
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International Symposium on the History of the  
'Rassemblement démocratique africain'

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Mr President of the Republic,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am both happy and moved to be present at this assembly, which has brought together so many brilliant minds, and so many of my friends, to attend the opening ceremony of the International Symposium being held to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Rassemblement démocratique africain.

No gathering could be more appropriate, at a time when the community of nations is celebrating International Year of Peace, and yet when the destiny of Africa is so painfully uncertain. The course the future is to take must be based on a lucid, dispassionate and realistic assessment of the road that has led Africa this far, with its strengths and weaknesses, its handicaps and its potential, and even its most irrational contradictions. We are therefore extremely grateful to the historians and Government of Côte d'Ivoire for their initiative in organizing this symposium.

Allow me, therefore, in this superb city of Yamoussoukro, the birthplace of President Houphouët-Boigny, which today symbolizes Côte d'Ivoire's accomplishments and all its promise for the future, to pay heartfelt tribute to our great elder statesman, whose influence so profoundly marked the emergence and development of the RDA and whose life and work are so closely identified with the past, present and future of this continent.

Mr President,

It is vital that present and future generations should be able to appreciate the significance of the landmarks in the struggle, with the RDA, to achieve African emancipation and build the new African nations. But to do so we must view those events in the light of the general situation in Africa between the wars, and the relationships that then existed between the colonies and the metropolis.

In Africa which in 1986 has almost entirely recovered its identity and sovereignty and which, despite the many difficulties confronting it, is striving, more or less successfully, to obtain access to more liberty, justice and progress, young people often find it hard to imagine the Africa of 60 years ago - the Africa in which you, Mr President, embarked on your long odyssey.

Which of our young people today could possibly imagine what it was like to live under the system of the 'indigénat'? Which of them could see their fathers or brothers arrested without cause and detained without trial for two weeks, renewed indefinitely, or their sisters' rapists go unpunished? Who still has a clear idea of what forced labour - the twentieth-century version of slavery - was really like?

And who can describe the toil, the suffering, the humiliation, the broken lives, the unending struggles, that formed the essence of colonized Africa?

There were certainly colonial administrators - and some of them are here today - who protested against such practices, and it is to their credit. But that was how the system worked.

Mr President, this was the situation when, in 1925, you joined your brothers in the bush to tend their bodies and at the same time strengthen their spirits. How you worked, always listening to what those country people had to say and being ready to take up their defence. A life-long commitment to their cause now began. In 1932 you were the instigator of the famous strike of the peasants and cocoa-planters in Indénié. In 1939, as chief of the canton of the Akoués, you became your people's bulwark against the humiliations and coercion to which they were subjected. In 1944 the Association of African Planters was set up on your initiative and in 1945 that body elected you to the first Constituent Assembly of the Fourth French Republic.

The Second World War had barely ended and the victorious States had plans to rebuild the world on new foundations in a collective effort to establish world peace, the security of each nation and the shared prosperity of humankind.

It was with this objective in view that the United Nations system was created and, within it, Unesco was entrusted with the task of promoting 'collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations ...'.

However, colonial Africa was for the most part excluded from such considerations. And this is why, Mr President, on your arrival in Paris as a young deputy you immediately undertook what was at that time the Herculean task of mobilizing support for the emancipation of the African continent. You had the Constituent Assembly pass laws abolishing the 'indigénat' system, doing away with the special judicial system for Africans and putting an end to forced labour.

However, a year later the second Constituent Assembly came under the influence of colonial pressure groups which attempted to put the clock back. It was then that, after a series of vicissitudes, you founded the Rassemblement démocratique africain at Bamako in 1946 with a small but faithful band.

Slander and attempts at bribery and intimidation were powerless to prevent the holding of that first assembly at which Africa met Africa. This was due in large measure to your clear-sightedness and tenacity and to the determination of your supporters, some of whom I am very happy to see in this hall today, although many are no longer with us.

The RDA was in two ways the first authentically Pan-African party in history. Firstly, it differed from previous political groupings that had been essentially offshoots of parties in the metropolis in being a party that was African in its genesis. Secondly, it disregarded the boundaries of the various colonial territories - and even the demarcation line between French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa - in order to issue the first call to the African peoples to join forces to attain quite specific objectives.

The pitiless repression that followed marked the beginning of a troubled period for those who were fighting for the freedom and dignity of Africa. Nevertheless you managed to be everywhere, indefatigable and unwavering.

And when I was invited as a young man, the President of the Association of African Students in Paris, to meet you at the Palais Bourbon for the long interview which you were kind enough to grant me, what first struck me - and is still engraved on my memory 40 years later - was your calmness, the unquestioning faith that inspired you and seemed to radiate confidence in the future, at a time when there was a warrant out for your arrest and those close to you were being subjected to constant harassment.

Eventually, in 1951, the RDA was represented on the Legislative Assembly and in 1956 nine of its members were elected deputies. You, Mr President, were already an undisputed leader, the focus of the aspirations of all the peoples of the continent. The RDA's popularity was confirmed at the territorial elections that preceded the implementation of the 1956-1957 Loi cadre and the establishment of the first government councils.

Lastly, Mr President, you were Minister of State in the first Government formed by General de Gaulle and you helped to draft the Constitution of the Fifth Republic before leading Côte d'Ivoire to independence in 1960.

Your name is thus indissolubly linked with all the key stages on the path that led the peoples of Africa step by step from the darkness of colonialism to the first light of freedom. You pointed the way to emancipation that made the dignity of Africans the basis of all social change and reconciled their quest for progress with their need for authenticity.

That is why you have constantly taken an interest in the education of African youth - as early as 1946, it was you who, for the first time in the history of the continent, sent 150 Ivorian scholarship holders, who were to be followed by many others, to lycées and secondary schools in France, until such time as you were able to establish secondary education in Côte d'Ivoire.

Today Côte d'Ivoire can boast 1,200,000 pupils in over 6,000 primary schools; more than 400,000 pupils in 280 lycées and secondary schools, and some 15,000 students at university and in science and technology polytechnics.

At the same time, you have always considered that if education is to give men and women more control over their destinies, as well as enabling them to take an effective part in the life of society, it must affirm the basic values on which each people's collective identity is founded.

And yet you were always convinced that there were aspects of African cultures that had a wider relevance, holding the key to a wisdom that the rest of the world needed. But you also realized that Africa must welcome all the knowledge and know-how that the rest of the world could offer it.

And so very early on you made plans to open up your country to the universal benefits of science and technology - and that these plans have borne fruit is clear from the number and quality of the higher education institutions established here over the last two decades.

In your eyes, culture, education and science together formed the basis for the harmonious development of any country that wishes to build a future commensurate with the requirements of the modern world, without, however, denying the fundamental values of its past. This conviction quite naturally led you to devote your attention and your time and offer your whole-hearted support to the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and, through it, more widely, to multilateral international co-operation.

Thus the historical progression that led you, Mr President, from the defence of the Akoué people to that of the Ivorian nation and then to that of the continent as a whole, subsequently led you to press, with the full weight of your authority, for a co-operation based on equality, freedom, justice and progress which would embrace all humankind.

That President of the Association of African Students in Paris who met you a little over 40 years ago and whom the workings of history placed, 12 years ago, at the head of one of the most prestigious organizations in the United Nations system, can certainly bear witness to that. Your love for Africa and your efforts on behalf of the dignity of its people are equalled only by your determination to see genuine human brotherhood established in peace and harmony.

At the most difficult moments of a mission which Africa was unanimous in wishing me to undertake in the service of the international community, you have been my most stalwart support.

'It is a question of dignity!' you kept saying, at our many meetings over the decades. And so I should like to bear witness before the historians of Africa gathered here and before so many African politicians with whom I have such close and binding links, that in the lonely combat which begins anew every day you, the elder, have always been a source of comfort to me.

Therefore, in a world which must henceforth face the future indivisibly united and which is nevertheless so often powerless to control the contradictions that rend it asunder, allow me, Mr President, to end with a wish: Long may you live to illumine with your experience and your wisdom the path of Côte d'Ivoire, Africa and the world.