

DG/2005/088  
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the unveiling of Queen Idia's Mask.

UNESCO, 25 May 2005

Mr President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Organization and in my own name, I would like to thank you, President Obasanjo, for having accepted the invitation to come to UNESCO to celebrate Africa Day 2005 as its Guest of Honour. We welcome you most warmly to UNESCO House once again.

Africa Day here at UNESCO Headquarters is always a special occasion. But this year the Federal Republic of Nigeria is making it very special indeed through the remarkable gift it is offering to UNESCO today. This gift is a sign of the importance that your Government, Mr President, attaches to your national cultural heritage. African society is people-oriented and art is a major aspect of the culture through which people define their identity. Cultural heritage – whether it takes the form of monuments and artifacts or of “intangible” cultural expressions – is a vehicle of belonging and a focus for rightful pride and self-esteem.

Through this gift of an outstanding example of your country’s rich cultural heritage, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is also demonstrating the importance that your Government attaches to UNESCO. We are at once humbled and delighted by this gift.

I know the importance that Nigerians give to Queen Idia’s Mask, the ivory original of which has been kept in the British Museum in London ever since the conquest of the ancient Benin Empire in 1892. It is a magnificent work of art that serves to exemplify the cultural achievements of a thriving civilization. It is also, therefore, a powerful and precious symbol, as was highlighted when it became the logo of the Second Panafrican Festival of Arts and Culture known as “FESTAC 77”, which celebrated the living cultures of Africa and its diaspora.

Mr President,

I wish to thank you for this beautiful masterpiece. Cast in bronze and weighing 150 kilograms, it is an outstanding gift which, on behalf of UNESCO, I am proud to accept. UNESCO is widely acknowledged as the Temple of the Cultures of the whole world. This mask will immediately become a vivid representation of the intercultural exchange that lies at the heart of cultural diversity and the dialogue among civilizations.

Thank you.