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de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
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вопросам образования,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO,**

**on the occasion of the Regional Conference on
the “Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa”**

Tripoli, 16 June 2010

Honourable Minister,
Excellencies,
Dear Members of the Scientific Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in the closing session of this regional conference. The General History of Africa project has now entered a second and most exciting phase, since our ambition is to reach young generations by adapting this landmark collection for use in schools across the continent.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya for generously funding this new phase after having already significantly contributed to the publication of The General History of Africa.

Dear Minister, this support clearly demonstrates your Government's unwavering commitment to the rewriting of African history and to now ensuring that Africa's youth discover and take pride in their common heritage, in their continent's rich civilizations and contribution to humankind. Confidence in the future also comes from giving young students this sense of shared history and identity written by their peers.

With the World Cup taking place for the first time on African soil, we are all sharing in this tremendous explosion of joy and pride, a reflection of this Continent's dynamism and sense of unity.

It is worth going back a few years to recall the genesis of the audacious General History of Africa project. It was in the early 1960s that the newly independent African Member States expressed a strong desire to reclaim their cultural identity, to remedy widespread ignorance about their continent's history and to break free of discriminatory prejudices. They aimed to reappropriate the interpretation and writing of their history and to demonstrate the contribution of African cultures to past and present.

To quote the late eminent historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, editor of the first volume of the General History, "Unless one chooses to live in a state of unconsciousness and alienation, one cannot live without memory, or with a memory that belongs to someone else."

So in 1964, the monumental project began, resulting in the publication of eight volumes between 1980 and 1999.

Africa is the cradle of humankind, so the history naturally begins over three million years ago and spans across ancient Egypt, the Fatimid dynasty, the Swahili civilization, the kingdoms of the Horn of Africa, the slave trade, independence and beyond.

It takes into account the history of ideas, oral traditions and draws on disciplines ranging from linguistics to musicology and the natural sciences.

Furthermore, the History considers Africa as a single, richly diverse continent, rejecting an artificial but entrenched dichotomy between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

This huge undertaking was overseen by an International Scientific Committee entrusted with the intellectual and scientific responsibility of the project. The 39-member Committee, of which 26 were from Africa, worked with some 350 specialists from all regions for more than three decades. This process alone provided an unprecedented forum for inquiry, intensive dialogue and passionate discussions because we know that there is no single approach to the writing of history.

I would like to seize this occasion to pay tribute to the members of this International Scientific Committee. They are towering intellectuals who have left a lasting mark on generations of scholars and ushered in a new understanding of African history. We are honoured to count several veterans in our audience today, along with other eminent contributors, such as directors of volumes and authors.

To all of you, I would like to reiterate my gratitude for your pioneering contributions. I am extremely pleased that you are on board with this project's second phase. History of course is a living enterprise; each generation needs to revisit the past. UNESCO cannot and will not allow these tomes to stay within the confines of libraries and history scholars. They document and celebrate a unique historical, cultural, intellectual and social journey that has benefited and profoundly influenced the history of humanity.

As such, there could be no more rewarding legacy than to bring this history into Africa's schools. Your experience and guidance in this matter will be of immense benefit to the new Scientific Committee.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ten years after the completion of the General History of Africa, our Organization was called upon once again to collaborate with African countries on promoting the pedagogic use of this collection.

This project gives us a formidable opportunity to develop a pan-African vision that also highlights the contribution of African cultures and civilizations to humankind.

To quote Joseph Ki-Zerbo again, the history of Africa "must be a history of peoples because, except for a few decades in modern times, it has never been shaped according to the frontiers fixed by colonization, for the good reason that the territorial bases of the African peoples differ everywhere from the frontiers inherited from colonial partition."

Following the numerous recommendations made by scholars and educationalists and after consultations with the African Union and other key stakeholders, UNESCO designed a new project to launch the second phase of the General History of Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, the overall objective of this new initiative is to develop new history curricula and learning material for primary and secondary schools which highlight the shared heritage of the peoples of Africa. We will also look to modern teaching tools to ensure that learning is an interactive discovery process.

In so doing we hope to make a positive and lasting contribution to this overhaul of history teaching and to efforts to speed up the regional integration process in Africa.

The project also aims to improve the quality of teacher training based on the latest findings, research and progress in the field of history education. Furthermore, it is designed to encourage the use of the General History of Africa in higher education across the region and to help develop a strategy to include recent historical and archaeological discoveries, advances in methodology, and major political, economic and social developments since the series was published.

The project encompasses two of the Organization's key priorities – Africa and education. Africa, in terms of a response to urgent development needs at the national level and to accompany the regional development process; and education because at issue is a fundamental human right, the very basis of development and responsible citizenry.

In 2010, proclaimed the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, for which UNESCO has been designated lead agency, the project you have worked on over the last week takes on particular importance. It contributes to the objectives of this International Year – particularly that of “promoting a reciprocal knowledge of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity”.

When I inaugurated the International Year, I also established the High-Level Panel on Peace and Dialogue among Cultures to address the evident necessity of revisiting the very definition of peace in today's globalized world and to adapt our action to this changing time in history.

The UNESCO Panel is an open panel that will meet once or twice a year. Author and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Wole Soyinka, film director Souleyman Cissé, Mohamed Ibrahim of Sudan, who created the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, and the Archbishop of Kinshasa, Monsignor Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, are some of the voices of wisdom speaking out from Africa which have enriched our thoughts.

Quality education and knowledge of the great cultures and civilizations of the world are strategic priorities for an International Year that creates a bridge between this project and the African Union's Second Decade of Education for Africa, which emphasizes quality education and the strengthening of the link between education and culture.

I sincerely hope that this initiative will lead to new and innovative partnerships between UNESCO, the Commission of the African Union, African education ministers, academics and teachers. I hope that the project will contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of African history and civilization and their importance beyond the African continent itself.

This project is not only a leading example of UNESCO action in Africa. It also provides a model to promote cooperation through activities based on the expertise of UNESCO's different sectors in areas such as the writing of history, development of curricula, teacher training, informal education and the use of information and communication technology.

As the African Union works to strengthen regional integration, this project presents a unique opportunity to do so on upon the basis of a shared heritage. This ambitious goal can only be attained gradually and over the long term. It requires a change in perspective and a new way of thinking for individuals and countries to reflect upon themselves, their identity and their history. It also requires changes in policy and governance. It represents too, however, an exceptional opportunity and, in my view, the only way to move forward.

As the world becomes increasingly integrated, organizing itself into regional blocs, thinking in terms of shared heritage is the best way to end tensions and encourage the strengthening of dialogue, discovery and understanding at all levels, from schools and villages to national and regional institutions.

In the words of the late Senegalese anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop, former member of the Scientific Committee, “awareness of a common history is the strongest bastion a people can build against cultural or other types of attack from outside”.

It is only by learning to know others, basing our relationships on cooperation and openness, that we will succeed in creating more peaceful societies. We cannot overestimate the need to help young people everywhere discover their shared heritage. This is why I am convinced that teachers, scholars, historians and decision-makers from other parts of the world can learn a lot from this unprecedented project with which UNESCO is proud to be associated.

As we all know, the implementation of this project has encountered great obstacles. We all have a role to play to achieve our goals. UNESCO cannot accomplish this mission without you.

As members of the new Scientific Committee designated by UNESCO, you will assume intellectual responsibility for the project and play a decisive role in wisely steering the entire process.

As focal points appointed by your education ministries to oversee the follow-up to this project, it is imperative that you keep your authorities well-informed and that you do everything possible so that your country can contribute effectively to its implementation.

Lastly, I would like to say to the eminent scholars and experts who have agreed to take part in the project, that their guidance and opinions will contribute significantly to mobilizing all the intellectual resources of Africa in support of this mission.

I was informed of the substance and the intensity of the discussions which took place last week. Your conclusions and recommendations will be of great assistance to us in moving the project forward. We are embarking upon a new adventure and I have no doubt that your competence, wisdom and dedication will benefit the children and young people of Africa.

I would like once again to express my deep gratitude to the Government of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya for holding this conference and to thank it for its warm and generous hospitality.

I thank you, Minister, for your personal commitment to ensuring the success of this event, and I have taken due note of your call to enhance multisectoral capacities to further this programme.

In conclusion, I would like to express my hopes for success to all of you who are determined to stand by UNESCO in this great challenge. As an African proverb wisely says: “one must leave home to begin learning”. This conference has enabled us once again to learn together and to make sure that the treasure of knowledge which the General History of Africa contains is shared by the most precious resource on this continent: its youth.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a safe journey back to your countries.