

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC  
AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

**Speech**

**by**

*Professor. Michael OMOLEWA*

**President of the UNESCO General Conference  
and Permanent Delegate of Nigeria to UNESCO**  
**on the occasion of the Carthage 8<sup>th</sup> International meeting**

Beit al-Hikma Academy

**History: imagination and reality**

8-13 Mars 2004

Tunisia

Mr Président of the Beit al-Hikma Academy  
Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear brothers and sisters

I am really very happy to be invited to this eighth international meeting of Carthage. The subject “reality and the imaginary in politics, science and art »,is very important, particularly in this more and more globalized world May, I make a point of personally thanking Mr President for this invitation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we were asked to treat this theme from the angle that corresponds best to our work. In my case being at the same time University Professor and President of the UNESCO General Conference.I can intervene lengthily on one or the other subject. I have chosen to speak first in my personal capacity then to put forward certain activities of UNESCO which I represent as President of the General Conference..

### **Human Subjectivity, the writing of history, and the dilemmas of historians:**

For me, Ladies and Gentlemen, history is both an imagination and a reality. History can be **real**. It uses contemporary materials, such as newspapers, decrees, laws diaries, letters, records and so forth to depict a particular reality in a particular time. This type of contemporary history is done by those who are real-time genuine observers of an event. Their story is useful in understanding the minute-by-minute nature of events as they unfold. In time, these descriptions can become useful in our analysis of an event only when taken as a part of our empirical analysis of that event from the past.

History cannot always be real. Newspapers may be partisan and political. The diarist might not make his or her observations objectively. They may only present a single or partial point of view or perspective. It is people themselves who are involved in writing, they are prone to human errors, weaknesses. Instead of addressing the

reality, they are, in fact, only in the exercise of mishearing, self promotion and/or propaganda.

There have been differing views by people throughout history on the role of historians: Napoleon, for example, did not trust historians, yet used them to promote his military campaigns across Europe. Historians always assume they have the final say about the past. Some say it is a mere tale, while others say what historians say is a story but not really history.

There can be, however, an ethical and professional stand taken to ensure that the writing of history can adopt a language orientation and discipline that has Universal application, that remains constant, unchanging; that can ambitiously be linked to the law of gravity which demands that every one who jumps up will always come down.

Much of the early writings on colonial history of Africa, and perhaps of colonial history in general, are a celebration of the humiliation of conquered peoples. Pride, bigotry, ignorance and arrogance have led the historians to interpret history in accordance with their selfish and imperial desires and hope.

There must be a way, some sort of scientific method of crosschecking and recording if what is said it is true or not. History can, therefore, be a science. When looked at from the perspective of carbon dating, for example, scientifically verifiable evidence cannot be faulted. If events were to be corroborated with facts, then history would be irrefutable, as facts cannot change. One could also use such evidence as death patterns, age, gender, frequency etc. as incontrovertible evidence of the past – of our history.

Yet, can we be so sure...?

Some facts, or other elements could be missing. What if the cemetery was only used by the rich? How do we account for those who have been cremated? What if certain papers were destroyed by fire?

This quest for scientific “exactness” could also skew our perceptions of the past thereby causing us to omit, or cause shifts in our understanding of the past.

This is the dilemma for the historian. History, therefore, must rely on some imagination to pull scarce evidence together in our quest for understanding the past and constructing our history. This must be done, however with great care and with as much objectivity and diligence as possible: but also with an ounce of imagination.

Is history a reality or an imagination? In most cases, it is the former, but with a bit of the latter.

\*\*\*

### **Cultural Diversity and Creativity: the realities of our modern world**

Now, with this in mind, I would ask for your kind indulgence, to speak briefly on UNESCO’s actions for the next two years relative to cultural diversity and creativity. This contribution is basically both a reality and an imagination.

While the two subjects may seem diametrically opposed, you will see that in our ever-increasing globalised world, the real challenge is that of the risk of standardization and impoverishment. This challenge may imping on creativity and cultural innovation and, if extrapolated, providing only a one-sided view of humanity in the future.

UNESCO believes that true dialogue of cultures and civilizations is a real guarantee of peace, co-operation and development. For this reason, UNESCO has placed

special emphasis on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue as one of its principal priorities for the next two years.

We also believe that from a very tender age, young people should be introduced to the many different ways of looking at the world and the diversity it gives. Its plethora of languages, religions and cultures. These things are inseparable from pluralism and can be based only in identities rooted in multiple affiliations. Our belief is that the teaching of history – both regionally and sub-regionally – must highlight the reciprocal interactions and multiple borrowings from which contemporary culture stems. Thereby adding yet another dimension to what I have exposed earlier.

The promotion of cultural diversity, if it is to remain “creative”, must be based on acceptance and dialogue. Cultural diversity, Ladies and Gentlemen, cannot survive if communities withdraw unto themselves or opt for confrontation. Our aim, therefore, is to ensure that the conditions necessary for creativity to flourish are those conditions upheld in an environment of both dialogue and diversity.

Intangible heritage – oral traditions; the performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; traditional craftsmanship, et cetera – will be actively promoted by UNESCO. It constitutes the key component of cultural diversity and human creativity. The gradual loss of such heritage and its vulnerability to the impact of globalization calls for a great effort on the part of UNESCO, which will aim to combine efforts under various approaches in order to keep it alive by making young people, in particular, aware of the values of cultural heritage.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would just like to mention that UNESCO is in the process of drawing up a Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions, to complement the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural

Diversity that was adopted by the General Conference in November 2001. This process is to be launched in order to incorporate the principal of cultural diversity, understood in the broadest possible sense, into international law over the long term.

In guise of a conclusion, I shall leave you with the following quote from the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity as it may guide you in your deliberation: *“Creation draws on the roots of cultural tradition, but flourishes in contact with other cultures.”*

I am looking forward to the to the results of your debates which will, doubtless, strengthen our collective understandings of different realities and creativity.

Thank you.