

**ADDRESS OF PROFESSOR MICHAEL OMOLEWA, PRESIDENT OF
THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF UNESCO AT THE**

International Congress on Inter-religious Dialogue

**‘Dialogue of Civilizations, Religions and Cultures in West Africa’
15-17 December 2003, Sheraton Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria**

Your Excellency, Honourable Minister,

Culture Minister of Nigeria, Ambassador Franklin Ogbuewu,

Head of the UNESCO Abuja Office, Mr Hubert Charles,

Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Benin to UNESCO, Mr Olabiyi Joseph Yai,

Supreme Leader of the Great Council of the region Vodun Hwendo, Daagbo Houna,

Professor Elisée Soumonni,

Nobel Price Laureate for Literature 1986, Professor Wole Soyinka,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Eminent Representatives of NGOs, civil society and the media,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour to welcome you all, my brothers and sisters, to this International Congress on “Dialogue of Civilizations, Religions and Cultures in West Africa”. I bring warm greetings from the Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, and the Chairperson of the Executive Board, Hans-Heinrich Wrede, to the impressive audience gathered here to deliberate on the topical subject of exploring how to learn to live together.

For UNESCO, dialogue among civilizations transcends the particular dimension of culture and heritage for it affects all of the Organization's fields of competence. We recognise that intercultural dialogue is influenced and driven by the dynamics of contemporary creativity, which assumes many and varied forms of expression. UNESCO has pledged itself to consolidate a culture of peace in pre-conflict and post-conflict situations and to contribute to pluralism and intercultural dialogue, not least (but not only) by safeguarding heritage threatened or damaged by conflicts.

Dialogue serves to highlight the realities of our cultural diversity and the pluralism of our common heritage from both the historical and modern points of view. It also enables us to promote intercultural cooperation, inter-religious responsibility and intercultural values among the peoples and countries of West Africa as well as with their immediate neighbours and, indeed, the whole world.

UNESCO was created for the purpose of advancing, through the educational, scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world, the objectives of international peace and the common welfare of mankind without distinction of race, sex, language or religion. The Constitution of UNESCO, as it is today and as it was signed by the governments of the States Parties on behalf of their people in 1945, memorably declares that "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". It is in the minds of our brothers and sisters in Benin, in Burkina Faso, in Cape Verde, in the Ivory Coast, in the Gambia, in Ghana, in Guinea Bissau, in Liberia, in Mali, in Mauritania, in Niger, in Nigeria, in Senegal, in Sierra Leone, and in Togo, that we must construct peace and build within and among us a culture of peace.

Dialogue has become imperative in the face of the on-going civil strife, religious bigotry and ethnic chauvinism ravaging our sub-region. We must learn that, throughout the history of mankind, suspicion and mistrust between people have all too often broken into wars and conflicts. We must learn that the wide diffusion of culture and the education of humanity for justice, liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern. As stated in UNESCO's Constitution, war is made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men and by the propagation, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races. Consequently, UNESCO has remained

steadfast in collaborating in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and by recommending such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image as well as by giving fresh impulse to popular education and the spread of culture. We have agreed to promote the development of our nations, therefore we owe a moral obligation, individually and collectively, to make our nations a better place to live.

On 2 November 2001, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was adopted by acclamation by the General Conference at its 31st session. UNESCO has consistently placed strong emphasis on the cultural issues raised by globalization and the need for Member States to firmly support the vital principle of diversity. It was most gratifying that the Declaration was subsequently adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, which also proclaimed 21 May “World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development”.

In this regard, I wish to thank the people of Nigeria, in my capacity as President of UNESCO’s General Conference, for having reinforced this initiative by hosting this Congress. This follows on from the recent resolution adopted on the 16th October 2003 at the 32nd session of the General Conference. This resolution incorporates “The New Delhi Declaration”, arising from the momentous meeting held in India’s capital in July of last year, which sets out the future orientation of UNESCO’ activities in regard to the Dialogue among Civilizations. The key aspects of this resolution include the following:

- Education, especially through the pursuit of the six Education for All (EFA) goals and efforts to promote quality education;
- The sciences and technology, including the role of traditional and local knowledge systems;
- Cultural diversity in all its dimensions, including world heritage;
- The media and information and communication technologies.

Let me re-emphasise that since many of the problems faced by today’s world have arisen as a consequence of differences within nations - as the saying goes, “Charity begins at home” - so intercultural dialogue must begin at home too. The main aim of this resolution is to promote dialogue between our different religions and spiritual traditions in a world in which intra- and inter-religious conflicts are on the increase due to ignorance or lack of understanding of religions, traditions, cultures and civilizations different from our own.

We are gathered here today to acknowledge and promote the close relations between and diversity of our civilizations. It is therefore not a matter of identifying and safeguarding every culture in isolation, but rather of revitalizing them in order to avoid segregation, cultural entrenchment and marginalization. The aim of a dialogue of civilizations, religions and cultures is to boost our quest for effective ways to prevent conflicts and misunderstandings. In addition, we seek to discover the value and usefulness of our rich West African cultural diversity in order to enhance acceptance and tolerance and to combat violent confrontations. Moreover, we must encourage communities to build the conditions in which dialogue and diversity can and must flourish, to create the linkages between our various cultures and to promote development through capacity-building and the sharing of knowledge.

UNESCO is delighted by the important contribution which ECOWAS makes to the promotion of dialogue among the peoples of the sub-region, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic response to the current conference by the governments and people assembled here. We are happy that President Olusegun Obasanjo and the government and people of Nigeria are committed to the ideals of UNESCO and the attainment of world peace, tolerance, mutual understanding and respect, which are abiding principles. We are confident that we shall continue to work in close cooperation with all Member States.

Amongst us today, we have eminent persons noted for their thinking and research in various fields - religious figures, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, great and renowned West African intellectuals, and traditional leaders, rulers and chiefs. As we all know, education is a vital instrument for achieving our goals. Our children are to be taught and introduced at a very tender age to the many different ways of looking at our society, our cultural diversity and pluralism, especially the diversity in languages and dialects, culture and religion, tribal marks and attires. These matters are essential for cultivating a balanced culture of peace and a genuine pluralism based on identities rooted to multiple affiliations. We would all agree that our West African historical myths are fascinating. But the worst extremes of afrocentrism can twist, distort and confuse the truths of history. For instance, may I first ask the permission of my Malian brothers and sisters to take the case of Timbuktu. At a tender age, I noticed that Timbuktu was widely used to describe a place extremely far away and was regarded by many as a myth. Then, learning history, I realised in reality that it is a

city in Mali, in West Africa, possessing such great historical importance that in 1988 it was designated a World Heritage Site.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We know that mythologies of cosmogony are believed to play an important role in West African societies, setting up the framework of the social, political and economic traditional structure of those societies. This is why this dialogue is a means to reintroduce us to one another. We must not be sceptical or afraid to ask questions or learn from one another in order to enable us to understand, redefine and update the main lines of emphasis of our cultural policies. Therefore, teachers within the region and sub-region should highlight the reciprocal interactions and multiple borrowings from which contemporary culture stems. Contemporary educationalists should utilise traditional and alternative education methods, oral traditions and values, and the contributions of the older generations, incorporating them into projects and advocacy programmes. This is particularly important for preventive education projects and programmes aimed at eradicating poverty, especially extreme poverty, and fighting against the HIV/AIDS pandemic in our region. Educational activities should reflect on and induce a closer link between traditional and modern culture. In addition, education should join forces with the cultural field in which UNESCO has an important comparative advantage, particularly as regards the protection of cultural heritage and the implementation of standard-setting instruments.

UNESCO has demonstrated its competence and capacity in its actions and involvement in the management of global conflict through the promotion of pluralism and the dialogue among cultures and civilizations. It has done this by recognizing and preserving the principle of cultural diversity based on respect for human rights. Meanwhile, efforts continue to consolidate a culture of peace in situations of recent or continuing conflict by ensuring inter-community protection of national monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, including the reconstruction of the Mostar bridge and surrounding historic buildings, in cooperation with the World Bank and the international community; by rehabilitating historic centres and religious monuments in the Balkans; by supporting the activities of the Palestinian Antiquities Department, especially in Nablus, Hebron, Gaza and Jericho; by implementing further activities to benefit Jerusalem; by launching projects in Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor; and by the protection and conservation of cultural sites around the world.

These initiatives have enabled the Organization to identify courses of action for encouraging full participation by local communities, the custodians of traditional know-how and transmitters of culture, in the formulation of strategies for the protection and development of their cultural heritage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must use this golden opportunity offered by UNESCO to reformulate our national cultural policies in the perspective afforded by intercultural dialogue. West Africa has come together to dialogue and to take up the challenge of reflecting on **WHO WE ARE**, to comprehend the principal ideas of cultural diversity in its broadest sense and thus to complement the principles contained in other instruments, including those relating to human rights.

Let me recall Article I of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which states that “Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”. We all agree that cultural diversity and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions are a source of innovation, creativity and exchange. It is the guarantee not just of mutual enrichment but also of a viable future for humanity. Intercultural dialogue now holds a key position on the international agenda. Our cultural and religious diversity shall not prevent us from attaining the Millennium Development Goals. On the contrary, this dialogue will strengthen our ties, create better grounds for peace, cooperation and development, assist the rehabilitation of our cultural heritage in pre- and post-conflict situations, and secure inter-community, inter-regional and inter-state reconciliation. In conformity with the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, we must respect and accept the equal dignity of all cultures and all religions, without distinction. We West Africans are of a multicultural background, in which culture and religion must retain their own identity and must respect the identity, religion and civilization of the other without prejudice or hatred.

It is a fact that dialogue has taken on a new meaning in the context of globalization and the current international political climate. It has therefore become a vital means of maintaining peace and world unity. As is widely known, globalization is a real challenge to cultural diversity because of the risk of standardization and impoverishment inherent in the increasing commercialization which intrudes upon creativity and cultural innovation. Cultural goods and services are therefore another essential

vehicle of both diversity and dialogue. UNESCO has drawn the attention of the international community to this matter and is making efforts to help developing countries and countries in transition like ours to establish viable and competitive cultural industries, from the national and international perspective, and to create the conditions in which a range of cultural expressions can flourish, contributing thereby to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in West Africa.

Globalization not only offers brand new possibilities for expression but also exposes the most vulnerable to the risk of marginalization. But West Africans are equal to the task; trade and commerce are not new to you or to your civilizations. Between the 11th and 15th centuries, for example, West Africa exported goods across the Sahara Desert to Europe and beyond. So we must gather both ancient and modern knowledge, methods, ideas and traditions to embark on this challenge of the new century. We must join hands and heads for a productive cultural diversity for sustainable development and conditions conducive to peace. We must combat new and old forms of ignorance, tribalism and ethnophobia as well as new and old forms of literacy and illiteracy. We must renew ties with our rich West African cultural diversity and heritage in order to build a prosperous and healthy future.

We are here today to celebrate and revive our cultural diversity, our civilizations, and our intercultural and religious pluralism. We must build on the richness of our pluralism through a variety of means: through regional and sub-regional approaches; through the indigenous people and their communities; through regional observatories; through international agencies and non-governmental organizations; through the network of UNESCO chairs linked to intercultural programmes facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices in the field of cultural pluralism; through work to encourage cooperation at national and local levels with parliamentarians, municipalities, indigenous people and their representatives and civil society as well as through the improvement of local capacity in every field. We should advocate, learn and work under the Flagship of the “The Slave Route” to which the history of West Africa is strongly linked. We shall and must embark on specific dialogues and actions against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

We must take on the task of sensitizing decision-makers, both in the public and private sector, to the link between cultural diversity, dialogue and sustainable development through the formulation of appropriate methodologies, studies and national, sub-national and

international consultations. We must analyse our national and local policies and practices and create various pilot projects to suit our needs. Above all, we must show the willingness to live together, learn together and grow together harmoniously so that all are included in this global village: “UNITED WE STAND AND DIVIDED WE FALL”.

In conclusion, let me express my sincere gratitude to the UNESCO Culture sector, particularly to the Inter-religious Dialogue Programme, and to all the participants without whom this dialogue would have had no meaning.

Thank you.