

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

**Intervention by**

**Professor Michael OMOLEWA**

**President of the UNESCO General Conference  
and Permanent Delegate of Nigeria to UNESCO**

at the opening of the 28<sup>th</sup> session of the World Heritage Committee

Suzhou, China  
28 June 2004

Your Excellency...

(Mrs Chen Zhili, State Councilor)

( Mr Zhang XINSHENG Distinguished Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee,  
Your Excellency Mr Hans-Heinrich Wrede, Chairperson of the Executive Board of  
UNESCO,

Your Excellency Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO

Honourable Ministers,

Distinguished members of the World Heritage Committee,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour and a great pleasure for me to have the privilege to participate in this exceptional event. I too, would like to thank most warmly the Government of the People's Republic of China as well as the authorities and the municipality of Suzhou for hosting this important meeting and for providing this Committee with the opportunity to work in such wonderful conditions: outstanding facilities, a formidable group of volunteers; and the traditional warmth and welcome synonymous with Chinese culture. Indeed, Suzhou is a most appropriate place to celebrate culture and nature, and find the inspiration to work on identifying and safeguarding our planet's treasured possessions. May I extend my thanks and congratulations to the President and the members of the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, the Chinese World Heritage Committee and to His Excellency the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to UNESCO. They have spared no effort - throughout lengthy and complex preparations - to provide for a successful 28<sup>th</sup> session of this World Heritage Committee.

Allow me to say that coming to China this time again is a further home visit for me, mainly because I have always been most welcome during my past visits, and given the strong links between my country, Nigeria, and our host country, two of the nine most populated countries in the world. Let me add that we also share a vast and wide-ranging diversity and a common interest in the preservation of our traditions and heritage.

Please permit me to express my satisfaction for seeing together in this room the three pillars of our Organization, what we call the three organs of UNESCO: the Executive Board, represented by its Chairperson; the Secretariat with the Director-General at its head; and the General Conference that I humbly have the honour to represent before you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our cultural and natural heritage are our identity, the most precious gift that we have received from our forebears and that we pass on to the future generations, the celebration of diversity within the universality of humankind.

The World Heritage Convention, as UNESCO's most universally recognized normative instrument, is a remarkable example of how the collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture can be put into practice through common effort and thus contribute to peace, the ultimate and main purpose for which the Organization was created almost 59 years ago.

One Hundred and Seventy-Eight States are now parties to the World Heritage Convention. In this connection, I take this opportunity to congratulate the Kingdom of Tonga for its recent ratification of the Convention.

In the 32 years of the existence of the Convention, a remarkable progress has been made. The World Heritage List currently comprises 754 sites in 129 countries. However, this also means that there exists an imbalance within the List, and one of the main purposes of the Committee nowadays is to work actively to reduce this imbalance.

Our attachment to heritage - and thus the wish to reach a balanced representation on the World Heritage List - finds its roots in our deep attachment to the diversity of conceptions of the world that it reflects. It is increasingly obvious that the whole subject of heritage is closely bound up with the question of cultural diversity.

UNESCO has devoted in recent years to enlarge and complete the notion of heritage and to extend its overall protection through international normative instruments. The World Heritage Convention is thus now enhanced and complemented by the Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage and by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which I had the pleasure to see adopted by the General Conference last October as President of its 32<sup>nd</sup> session. Let us hope that both instruments will follow the successful path of their 1972 forerunner.

Indeed, the success of the World Heritage Convention is to provide a framework for the protection of world heritage, which goes far beyond its most visible aspects. It promotes cultural dialogue and the recognition of cultural differences. It supports sustainable development strategies and encourages the safe and long-term management of natural resources. Therefore, it is also instrumental in preventing conflicts and contributes to the reconciliation process associated to post-conflict situations. Conservation remains, of course, a main aim and a major struggle. But we must ensure that our conservation work is development-oriented. And this is maybe the major challenge for the World Heritage Committee nowadays.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The responsibility entrusted to UNESCO and to this Committee to identify, protect and promote humanity's common heritage is fascinating and sometimes overwhelming. The international community is certainly looking to us to rise to the challenge and add strength to all of its efforts to protect our common heritage.

I am conscious of the hard work you have before you in the coming days. Please allow me to express my very best wishes for your efforts in what may be qualified as one of UNESCO's most challenging and visionary undertakings. I wish you a most successful meeting.

Thank you all, and God bless you richly.