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A photograph of a rock surface covered in numerous handprints of various sizes and colors, including red, orange, and black. The prints are arranged in a somewhat vertical column, with some overlapping. The rock surface is textured and uneven.

HISTORY OF PEOPLES RECASTING THE PAST

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Rock art in La Cueva de las Manos (Argentina).

HISTORY OF PEOPLES: RECASTING THE PAST

Special feature produced in collaboration with UNESCO's Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue

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DECOLONIZING HISTORY



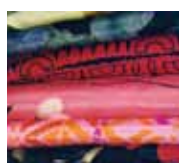
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As UNESCO began weaving the thousand and one Ariadne's threads of past and present, just after the Second World War, it embarked on an adventure of universal dimensions – writing a new History of Humanity. But also of Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, the Caribbean and Islamic Culture.

After the noise and furore of the Second World War and the nuclear hell of Hiroshima, mankind was confronted with a Shakespearian dilemma – to unite or to annihilate? Convinced that "...ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war," as laid down in the preamble to UNESCO's constitution, the founding fathers of the Organization embarked on a project for a new *History of Humanity*. This was to be a work of collective memory that would demonstrate the interdependence between peoples and cultures, while building bridges between history, culture and science.

One of the missions of this audacious project was to forge an awareness of the unity of mankind in all its diversity, thus responding to the intuition of the Dutch historian, Jean Huizinga, who, writing in the 1930's, said: "Our civilization is the first whose past is that of the world; our history is the first to be universal."

Refocusing the historian's eye

This ambition of becoming familiar with time in order to overcome a tendency to leave things out, was, indeed, excessive, since it meant no more and no less than set-



Sir Julian Huxley, one of UNESCO's founding fathers and first Director General.

© UNESCO/Michel Ravassard



The "Nagasaki Angel" from the Urakami church destroyed by the atomic bomb explosion on 9 August 1945.

ting out, in several collections of regional and cultural histories, the essential creations of the human mind, regardless of their latitude and period.

By developing a more acute awareness of the particular cultural identities of each society, and seeing the emergence of new forms of independence, it became necessary, when writing their history, to reflect the point of view of the civilizations concerned. The *History of Humanity*, as well as the *General History of Africa*, the *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, the *General History of Latin America*, the *General History of the Caribbean* and that of the *Different Aspects of Islamic Culture*, are the fruit of this endeavour. A total of 51 published volumes, some in dozens of languages.

Is it overly idealistic to wish to fix on paper something that is endlessly being reborn? More of a challenge. Although all societies have a history, the conception of time varies from one culture to another, and, with it, the status accorded to memory. Also, while our geography no longer has virgin continents, the contributions of different peoples to the construction of mankind remains largely underestimated, even unknown – when they are not actively denied or reinterpreted to conform to the viewpoint of a dominating force.

In order to refocus the historian's eye and to give a voice to those who have not been heard, UNESCO

(...)

“ We cannot proudly publish such works and let them gather dust on bookshelves. We must turn them to full account. We must find suitable ways for these outstanding works to leave the narrow circle of scholars and reach the general public. ”

Koichiro Matsuura, October 2001

(...)

gave historians from all cultures and geographical horizons an opportunity to express themselves, abandoning strictly national approaches and temporary fixes to preserve identities.

“The public now has access to collections of history that rehabilitate the past of civilizations that had hitherto been ignored and that also take a fresh look at cultures that have been obscured by prejudice and stereotypes,” declared Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, as he promised to complete this immense endeavour, started in the 1950s.

Disarming history

By weaving the thousand and one Ariadne's threads of memories of the past and of current events, UNESCO has embarked on an adventure of universal proportions. Here, the notion of time takes on its full meaning, since it enables us to apprehend the global evolution of soci-

eties, as cultures blossomed through exchanges, albeit marked by bloody violence, but also through the generous acceptance of difference, leaving indelible traces.

As new forms of ignorance and intolerance emerge today, foisting hypotheses about the end of history and an isolationist quest to preserve identity, the principles of mutual respect, solidarity and dialogue between civilizations and cultures – which inspired the creation of the United Nations system – are as important as ever.

The collections of history published by UNESCO bear witness to the common legacies and dreams of mankind and, given the wide dissemination of their message, may help to build a shared future that will capitalise on the possibilities for mutual understanding between cultures in this age of globalization.

Katérina Stenou,

Director of the Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue (UNESCO)



Acropolis, symbol of democracy (Athens, Greece).

A gargantuan project

UNESCO's historiographic collections on humanity, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the civilisations of Central Asia and Islamic culture are the result of forty years of international cooperation, involving some 1600 specialists from all corners of the world. To date, 51 volumes have appeared, some translated into dozens of languages.

These pioneering reference works, with their interdisciplinary approach and international exchange of knowledge, combine the history of events with the history of ideas, societies, civilizations and institutions in the regions and cultural zones concerned.

The spirit behind the foundation of UNESCO was to foster a consciousness of the unity of the human species, in all its diversity. No sooner had the Organization been founded, than it embarked upon compiling a new History of Humanity. No mean feat. Thirty years on, a major revision was needed, with a change in methodology and renewed efforts to overcome ideological obstacles. The latest volume came out this year.

WRITING HISTORIES IN THE PLURAL

The idea of a *History of the Scientific and Cultural Development of Mankind* was put forward by UNESCO as early as 1946 and can be attributed to the Organization's first Director-General, the British scientist, Julian Huxley. Naturally, he did not envisage adding yet another history to the large number already published which, although they claimed to be universal, nevertheless remained Eurocentric. Quite the opposite. His intention was to produce a work of collective memory, highlighting the contribution made by all peoples to universal civilization. This was a daring endeavour, to say the least, but one that fitted well with the ideals of the one year-old Organization.

In 1947, the UNESCO General Conference, held in Mexico, decided to set up an International Scientific Commission to oversee publication of the *History of Humanity*. Teams of historians got down to



Second UNESCO General Conference, Mexico City, November 1947.

work three years later, under the direction of a Brazilian, Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro. The first volume appeared in 1961 and the five others at regular intervals until 1968.

However, despite the success of its wide distribution, the publication was not very well received outside the West. And rightly so. Through no fault of their own, the majority of the authors bore the imprint of colonialism, which had taken very little interest in the history of the subjugated civilizations. As a result, barely 1.5% of the publication was devoted to Africa.

Also, the links and interactions between the history of science and cultural history were not sufficiently developed in these first volumes, even though its mission had been to trace the scientific and cultural development of mankind.

Then there was the problem of methodology. Over the preceding three decades, historiography had been turning towards anthropological research rather than chronological history. These new approaches had largely been ignored.

(...)



Shang dynasty (1767 to 1122 B.C.) chariot and bones found in Yin Xu (China).

©UNESCO/Hong bin Yue

(...)

Back to square one

“The day will come when what we have written [...] will, in turn, have to be replaced”, said Paulo Carneiro in 1969, in his introduction to the first edition of the *History of Humanity*. “I would like to think that our successors will take this task in hand and that a revised edition of the volumes that we have written will appear as a new millennium dawns.”

That day came in 1978, when the General Conference decided that a complete revision was needed. Work began two years later, starting from scratch.

An historian's work, effectively, never ends, and history itself is a continuous flow where nothing – neither the facts nor their interpretation – is definitive.

UNESCO's objective had not changed – namely, to provide an account of universal history through the multi-faceted cultural and scientific achievements of humanity – but this new project was going to be both more detailed and more diverse. First of all, a new International Scientific Commission was designated, comprising 26 members from all over the world, chaired by the French historian, Charles Morazé.

An editorial committee of eminent specialists was drawn up for each of the seven volumes, which spanned pre-history to the 20th

century. These committees were responsible for checking the contents of contributions, discussing certain aspects and ensuring homogeneity of style and approach. In parallel, working groups met to discuss given issues, whether to do with history (such as the impact of marronage on Native American society) or methodology (e.g. which criteria would be used to choose one cultural contribution over another). In any event, it was agreed that the importance accorded to a given historical period should be

both within the International Commission itself, and between certain collaborators. Western historians were still following the humanist line of the Annales School, a movement founded in 1929 by French historians, Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèbvre, while the Eastern European historians had been trained in the Marxist tradition. Unable to find a solution, Charles Morazé handed in his resignation to the Director General of UNESCO. This could be catastrophic for the future of the project.

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Cylinder of Cyrus, King of Persia, considered the first written bill of human rights (539 B.C.).

proportional to its contribution, not to its duration.

This arrangement seemed to be working well, until, a few months later, Charles Morazé ran into an unexpected obstacle: the difficulty, and then the impossibility, of reconciling the different conceptions of history,

A historic opportunity

Probably because I was both a historian and a member of UNESCO's Executive Council, the Director General, Federico Mayor, asked me to take over from Charles Morazé, in 1989. Never one to refuse a challenge, I accepted, and immediately

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Neolithic cave art in Tassili n'Ajjer (Algeria) from 3000 B.C. .

© Bibliothèque nationale de France



Gutenberg invents the printing press in Europe (15th century).

(...)

set about trying to find a compromise. It was not easy, but luck was handed to me on a plate: the Berlin Wall fell that same year and, with it, the ideological tensions. The effect was so dramatic that my Bulgarian colleague and friend, Nicolai Todorov, suggested to his editorial committee that the space devoted to religions be increased. He even organized a meeting in Rome between Christians and Muslims, hosted by the Vatican!

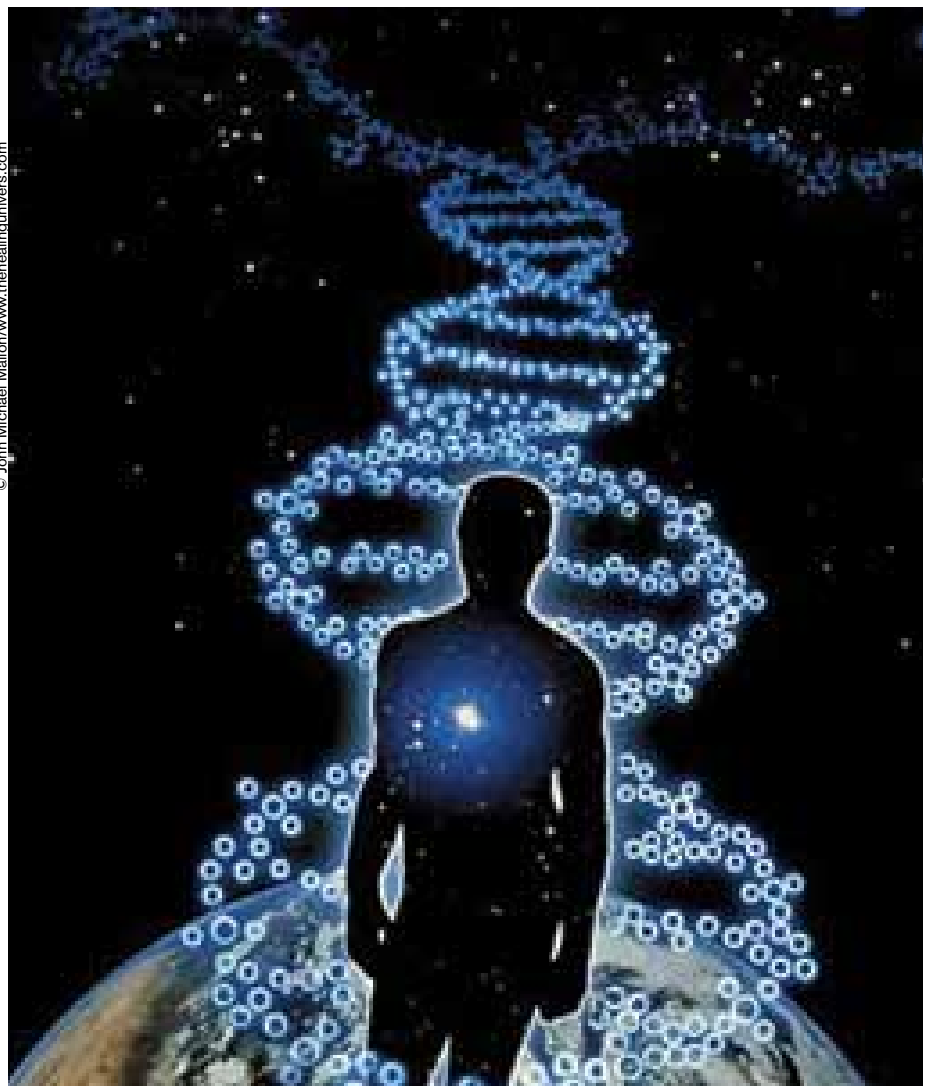
In an effort to make sure matters did not get out of control, as well as to ensure that dialogue, interdisciplinarity and knowledge sharing remained priorities, I decided, systematically, to chair all the specialist steering group meetings, whether they were in France, India, or Jordan. The thematic parts of each volume covered vast areas, from anthropology to demography and legal science, including the effects of science and technology on culture and the arts. In order to treat these subjects, the authors had to resist ideological pressures in favour of a multidisciplinary approach. They also had to demonstrate the interdependence of civilizations, whose inventiveness formed part of the cultural and scientific heritage of humanity.

Today, as I look at the seven volumes of the *History of Humanity* on my bookshelf, I cannot help feeling a certain pride. And I tell myself that this monumental work is a defence against an obsession with the clash of civilizations that still haunts too many minds, undermining the ideal of the founding fathers of UNESCO.

Georges-Henri Dumont,
Belgian historian, Chairman of the
International Scientific Commission
for the History of Humanity,
since 1989



The Berlin Wall. Its fall in 1989 brought about Germany's reunification on 3 October 1990.



Stylised image of the human genome.

Once African countries had won their independence in the 1960s, the challenge taken up by a group of intellectuals from Africa, or of African descent, was to rid people's minds of prejudice by remedying a widespread ignorance of African history.

DECOLONIZING HISTORY

Most racial prejudices about Africans can trace their origin back to arguments justifying the slave trade and colonization, which have perpetuated a belief that Africa is a continent without history or civilization. An example of the persistence of this belief can be seen in a statement, made as late as 1963, by Hugh Trevor-Roper, an eminent professor of modern history at Oxford University. "Nowadays," he wrote, "students want us to teach them about the history of black Africa. Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europe in Africa. The rest is largely darkness [...] and darkness is not the subject of history."

One can understand why intellectuals from Africa or of African descent involved in the liberation of black people have been fighting since the early 20th century to 'decontaminate peoples' minds', as some put it, and why African states, as soon as they acquired independence in the 1960s, called on UNESCO to help them rise to the challenge.

When, in 1964, UNESCO decided to produce a *General History of Africa*, it was, above all, to remedy the widespread ignorance about the continent's history and to break free of discriminatory prejudices.

The best way to do this was to give Africans the opportunity to rewrite their own history, with the necessary scientific support.

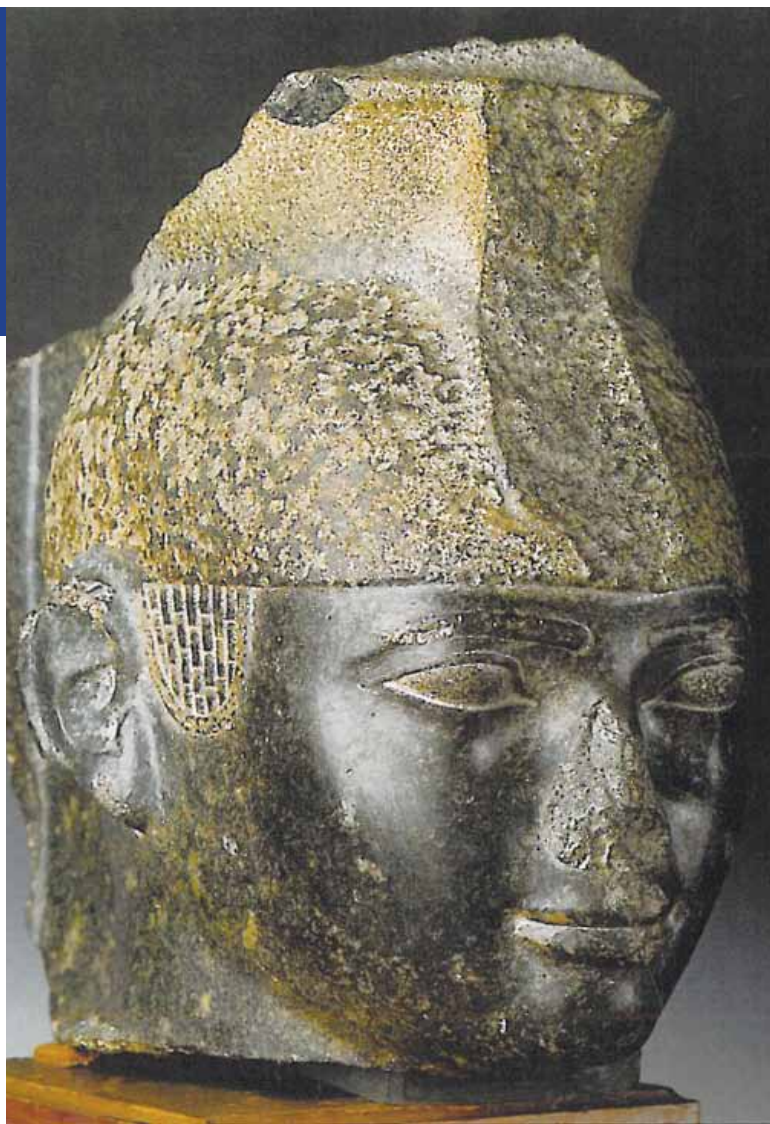
An international scientific committee of 39 specialists was therefore set up, representing different disciplines within the social and human sciences. Two-thirds of the members were African, in order to encourage an African standpoint, while nevertheless remaining open to challenges from outside specialists, with other perspectives.

Within the framework of this project, Cheik Anta Diop (Senegal), Hampaté Ba (Mali), Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso), Ali Mazrui (Kenya) and Théophile Obenga (Republic of Congo), to cite just this era's more illustrious members, held seminal discussions with their peers from other regions of the world, which were to transform ideas about Africa and black people.

These discussions were lively, even stormy at times, especially when, for historiographic purposes, use was made of African oral traditions and the *Ajami* – the African language archives, transcribed using the Arabic alphabet, which are still relatively unknown (see box). The more passionate discussions were to be taken up in volume II.

A global approach

The scientific committee abandoned any ambitions of producing an exhaustive history, opting instead for more condensed overviews showing the current state of knowledge and the main contemporary research trends. It also decided to emphasise the history of ideas, civilizations, societies and institutions, as well as favouring an interdisciplinary approach that drew on all available sources. These included oral traditions and the *Ajami*, as well



Head of statue from Taharqa (Karnak), 25th dynasty (circa 670 B.C.).

(...)

as disciplines such as linguistics, musicology and even the physical and natural sciences. The committee also chose a continent-based approach, which considers Africa as a whole and abandons the usual dichotomy between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

The eight volumes in the collection, which were published between 1980 and 1999, traverse the entire continent, which is recognized as the cradle of civilization, from the appearance of hominids over three million years ago, to the eve of the new millennium. The collection passes through ancient Egypt, the Fatimid dynasty, the Swahili civilization, the kingdoms of the Horn of Africa, the slave trade, independence, etc. Some 6500 pages in all.

The collection also departs from some preconceived ideas, like the continent's isolation. It demonstrates that the Sahara, far from being a barrier, has always been a place of exchanges and that Africa has maintained enduring contacts with Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas.

Long before UNESCO's "Slave Route" project, launched in 1994, the *General History of Africa* helped to break the silence over the slave trade and its impact on the difficulties encountered in Africa ever since. It devoted an entire volume to the subject in its 'Studies and Documents' supplement series.

Over 20 supplementary publications, often on controversial subjects, such as sources for writing history, the populating of ancient Egypt and the decolonization of Africa, add to this monumental undertaking, which involved over 230 specialists.

As soon as its first volumes were published, the *General History of Africa* had a phenomenal impact in scientific and academic milieus, both on the African continent and elsewhere. The entire collection was published in Arabic, English and French – and parts of it in



Cape Coast (Ghana), point of departure for the slave trade.

Mandarin, Korean, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese. It is considered to have made a major contribution to our understanding of African history and historiography.

An educational tool

However, the collection has remained largely inaccessible to the general public and has not sufficiently been used in African schools, even though an abridged version was published in English, French and three African languages (Hausa, Kiswahili and Pulaar).

Very few history textbooks published in African countries have turned to the collection for source material and the teaching of African history still reflects a Eurocentric viewpoint. Worse still, there is a clear tendency for these textbooks to offer a nationalistic vision of history, which exaggerates the importance of the colonial partition of Africa.

This is why UNESCO has once again been approached to make greater use of the collection as the basis for educational material.

(...)



Yered and the king. Detail from a mural in the Azuwa Maryam church (Lake Tana, Ethiopia).



Founding fathers of the Organisation of African Unity: Mural, 1963, Africa House in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia).

(...)

A \$2 million project was launched in 2008, financed by Libya. “Study the past if you would know the future” is the principle behind a set of educational materials due to be published at the end of next year.

The aim is to remind us that, despite its diversity, Africa shares a common history and values, upon which the African Union should be able to construct the United States of Africa.

The series is targeted at the very young – primary and secondary school children – who will be offered teaching materials that are standardized across all of Africa, aiming to reconcile, on the one hand, themes that promote unity, such as cultural identity and pan-African citizenship, and, on the other hand, national differences. The main collection, along with the abridged version, will also be made

more readily available in higher education establishments. The series will also be tailored for use by teachers, providing them with manuals, educational CD-ROMs and a Historical Atlas, bringing them up to date with advances in historical research and improving the way it is taught. There is also, of course, the general public, which will have access to a wealth of information on the UNESCO web site.

The anticipated outcome of this endeavour is a better-informed African public regarding the history of their continent and the contribution their cultures have made to the progress of mankind, thus aiding them to respond more appropriately to the novel challenges of the modern world. A new task, no less difficult than publishing the *General History of Africa*.

Ali Moussa Iye,

Chief of the Intercultural Dialogue Section, in charge of the Histories Projects (UNESCO)

WHAT ARE THE AJAMI ?

Contrary to what is usually thought, African sources of history are not exclusively oral. There are hundreds of thousands of written documents, called *Ajami*, that record the medieval history of the continent. The origin of the word comes from “a’jamiyy” which means “non-Arab”. This odd etymology can be explained by the fact that these documents are, for the greater part, written in African languages and transcribed using the Arabic script. When Arabic is used, the margins invariably contain notes and comments in African languages.

As Islam spread across the continent, Arabic script was adopted by ten or so African languages, including Bambara, Fulfude, Hausa, Malinké, Mandinka, Somali, Songhay, Swahili, and Wolof.

The oldest known *Ajami* were discovered in Timbuktu (Mali), and date from the 14th century. The Ahmed Baba Centre in Timbuktu, founded with support from UNESCO, now houses over 18,000 manuscripts, most of which have been restored and digitized. Tens of thousands of others are preserved in other centres, such as the library of Sankore University (Timbuktu) and various private collections in the region. The *Ajami* found in Niger are more recent, dating from the 16th century. But others have been found in Chinguetti, Ouadane and Koumbi Saleh (Mauritania), as well as Kano and Sokoto (Nigeria). The subjects treated in these documents cover a variety of areas, including Koranic exegesis, law and jurisprudence, astronomy, botany, medicine, chronicles, genealogies and literary forms.



Ajami manuscript: Jazaa'a Shakur : Bo Yoonu Geej gi (Reward to the grateful: on the way to the Ocean).

Mohamed Ziadah
(UNESCO)

Can the spoken word be used as a historical source? Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane argues that written records are not the only stewards of history. As Burkinabe writer, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, put it, oral traditions are living museums, giving flesh and blood to the skeleton of the past.

AN EAR FOR THE PAST

INTERVIEW WITH DJIBRIL TAMSIR NIANE



UNESCO/Michel Ravassard

Djibril Tamsir Niane.

“Words fly, writing remains,” as we say in the West. Can you explain how the oral tradition has become a legitimate source for the history of African cultures?

This saying comes down to us from the Romans and has helped perpetuate the opinion that oral sources are not to be taken seriously. But the culture of civiliza-

Djibril Tamsir Niane is an expert on the history of the Malian Empire. His major literary work, Soundiata, ou l'épopée mandingue [1960; Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali] was compiled from the tales told to him by Mamadou Kouyaté and other griots (traditional story-tellers). He is editor of the fourth volume of the General History of Africa : Africa from the 12th to the 16th Century. This was the period of the great empires and dynasties of Mali, Songhay, Almohades, etc, which played a crucial part in the continent's history.

Interview by Monique Couratier (UNESCO), editor for this special issue.

tions built on oral traditions is just as rich as that found in societies which use writing. The oral tradition does not say any old thing in any old way – it is a form of the spoken word that is organized, developed and structured. It is an immense repository for knowledge acquired by the community, following well-defined conventions. This is knowledge reproduced with a rigorous methodology.

And there are specialists of the spoken word, whose role is to preserve and transmit things from the past – *the griots* (see box). In West Africa there are entire villag-

es of griots, like Keyla, in Mali, with its 500 inhabitants. These are like schools of the spoken word, where children as young as seven are taught the history of their lineage, learning it by heart. This memory is then reactivated by the rhythm of songs and musical instruments like the tamani, the koni or the khalam. The griot's words are “spoken hieroglyphs”, as my friend and compatriot, Joseph Ki-Zerbo has put it.

What is the role of the griot in today's society?

In Africa today, the Western educational model is encouraging a

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© Association Images & Mémoire

Gathering of Bambara griots (Mali).

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move away from oral culture towards the written word. And, indeed, traditional schools are losing their strength in terms of transmission. Even so, the griot continues to play his role within the community, in keeping with his socio-professional caste, and he continues to preside at all ceremonies.

Can he be seen as a historian?

Thanks to the knowledge passed down from his elders, the griot possesses a corpus, which makes up the basic narrative. But, according to circumstances, he might decide to relate just one part, or a condensed version. He can also add knowledge that he has acquired by speaking to others on his travels. These deletions and additions do not alter the validity of the narrative that is passed on from one generation to the next, as they are clearly indicated in his tale. As he tells the story, the griot puts things into perspective - in other words, yes, he acts as a historian, if you accept that history is always an arrangement of the facts by a historian!

Isn't there a danger of oral traditions becoming corrupted through transcription and translation?

Naturally, stories are gathered in the griot's own language, using a tape recorder, before they are transcribed into this same indigenous language. The story is then translated into a Western language – which suffers from the same limitations as any other translation! The historian can always go back to the original recordings and hear the “dot-dot-dots” and “brackets” inserted by the griot.

Did you use oral sources when preparing the General History of Africa?

Absolutely. The oral tradition is more than a matter of spoken history; it also deals with cosmogony,

legends, and so on. To make sense of all of this, the historian has to compare and cross check sources. But this is also true for written sources.



Recording of stories from oral tradition, Senegal, 1969.

Take the epic of Sundiata. This is the oldest African epic, tracing the formation of the great Malian empire through the journey of its founder, Sundiata Keïta. He lived in the 13th century and unified the Sahel region from Niger to Senegal. His story has been passed down to us via the oral tradition, but the historical facts are also confirmed by written records.

In order to fill in some of the missing details in the oral versions, we made comparisons with documents from the 14th century left by Ibn Battuta (born in Tangiers) and Ibn Khaldun (born in Tunis). This made it possible for us to give an exact date for the battle of Kirina, where Sundiata defeated his enemy, the sorcerer king, Soumaoro.

We also cross-checked with other oral variants of the epic, particularly from Keyla in Mali, Fudama in Guinea and Bangul in Gambia. It is interesting to note that the epic has been passed on in various languages, which makes the historian's task even more fascinating.

Africa is known for its extraordinary linguistic diversity. At least six of the 16 linguistic families documented in the world are African. Does this make it possible to talk of a continent-wide cultural identity?

Africa has always been a model of cultural diversity. Let's come back to Sundiata's Empire. It was made up of a number of ethnic groups, each with its own culture, language and traditions. This was not a Jacobin form of rule. It was a model of decentralised rule, which allowed diversity to flourish. And its linguistic diversity was not at

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Old map of Guinea.

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all a hindrance, if the freedom of movement enjoyed by the great traditional healers is anything to judge by, travelling from village to village, from Dakar, in Senegal, to Conakry, in Guinea.

It is worth remembering that there was freedom of movement through-

out West Africa as a whole. In 1236, Sundiata declared what has become known as “The Charter of

“**Tete la asom ene Kakyere.**
(Things from the past
echo in the ear).”

Akan proverb

Kurukan Fuga”, a kind of state constitution, and established a document that acted rather like a passport, with regional, not national, validity.

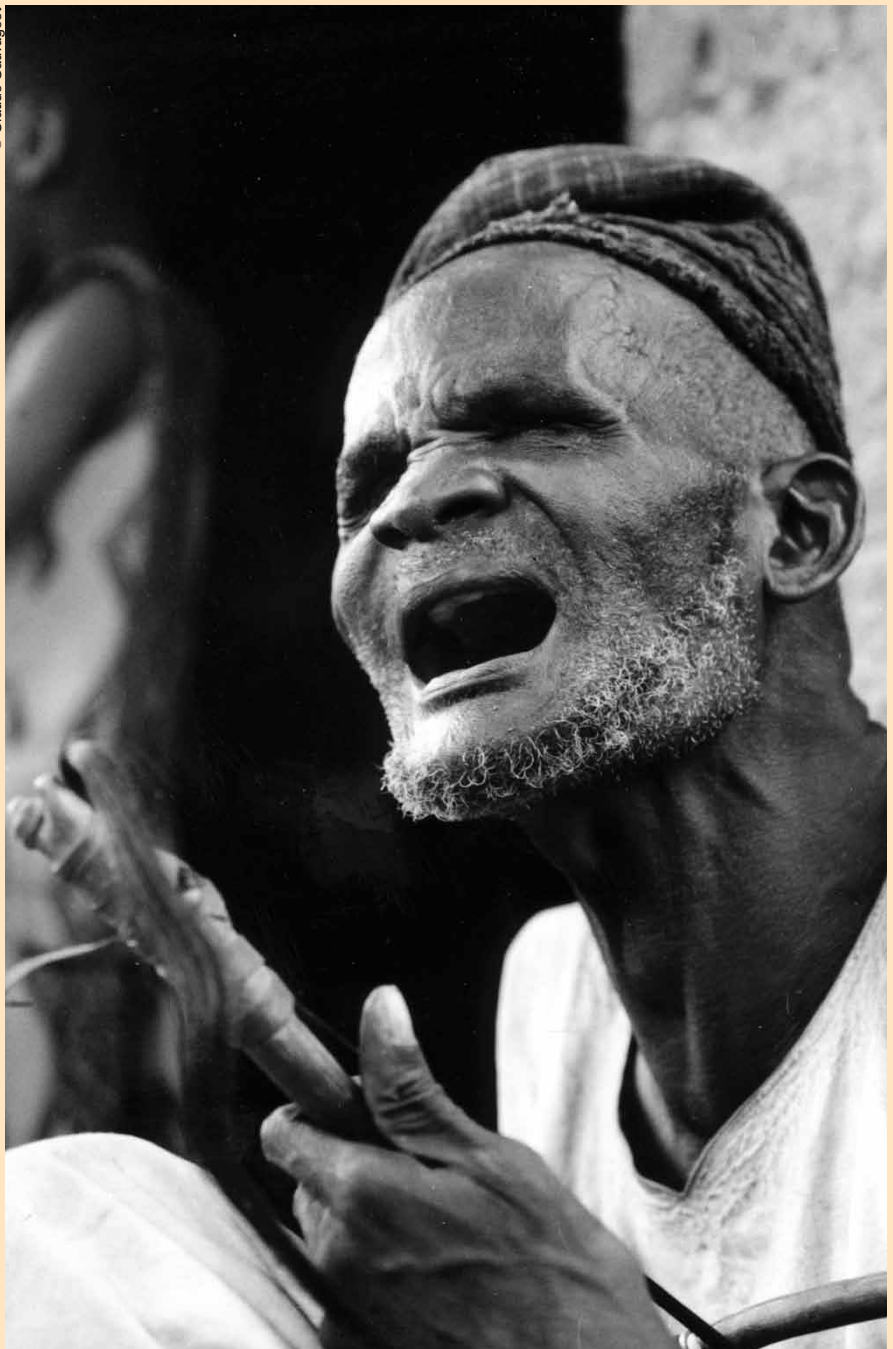
This variety of languages, then, does not necessarily imply a parallel variety of values.

SPEAKING LIVE: THE WORDS OF THE GRIOTS

Before he starts to tell a story, the griot situates himself in time, in order to give his words a firm foundation. He is therefore both orator and genealogist, not just telling of events, but also of the relationships between people. A guest at every ceremony, he acts as moderator and can even be required to “tidy up” his story to avoid certain statements from causing ill feelings. He also always apologizes in advance for anything he may leave out - even if this is deliberate. This “Master of the Spoken Word”, as well as promoting social harmony, also therefore plays an ethical role. In Africa, the spoken word “counts” because, once it has been “fired like a bullet”, it cannot be retrieved. There is no question of saying whatever comes into one’s head – “speak only when it’s time, and know how when to hold your tongue”, says one proverb. And this is the real meaning of the traditional “palaver”.

M. C

© Claude Sauvageot



The griot's blind gaze expresses the power of African words.

Central Asia, crossroads and meeting-place of cultures, has also known periods when it was closed off from the outside world. The *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* shows that despite ideological barriers, historical and cultural links between inhabitants weave a regional identity.

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Falconry in the Kyrgyz steppes.

STEPPE AND THE SILK ROUTE

Samarqand, Bukhara, Herat... cities of dreams. Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Akbar... characters who marked history. Avicenna, Khayyam, Ulugh Beg... thinkers who transformed worldviews. These names were inscribed down through the ages on a territory that corresponds not to a specific region of the ancient world but to a permanent crossroads of exchanges between peoples: Central Asia. Since antiquity, Scythians, Hsiung-nu and Khi-

taï roamed this area, from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border, setting the foundations for the great civilizations of Asia and Europe.

The *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* covers this immense expanse, which, until the 16th century was essentially given over to steppe pastoralism, with agriculture only possible in a few favoured places, like oases. Accordingly, it has given birth to little that has been original to human life and culture.

However, its position as the heartland of the Asian continent has given it a unique position as a corridor for the movement of peoples, religions and ideas, and for cultural and artistic currents. The more favoured, settled regions to the south and east of the core region have, over the past four or five millennia, given birth to several religions and civilizations of the Near East, Iran, India and China. Influences from all these have been significant for the evolution of Central Asia.

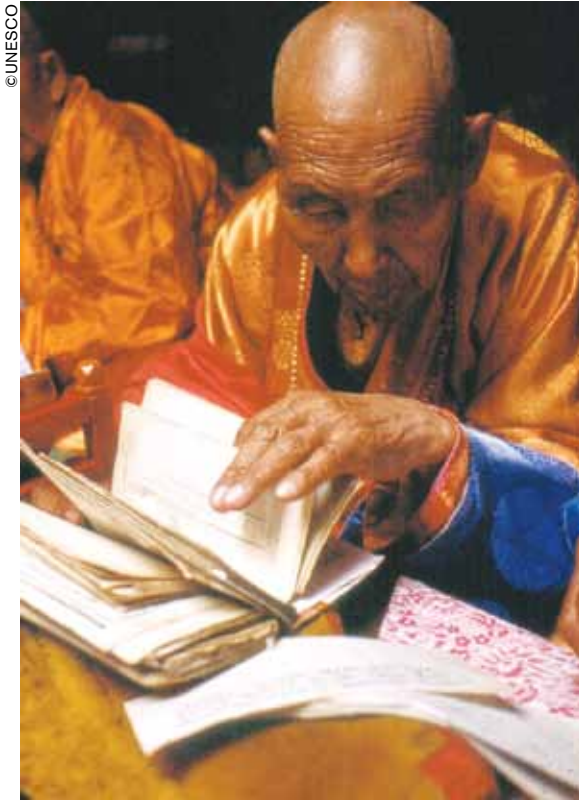
A land bridge

The region of the steppes acted as a land bridge between the great civilizations of south-western, southern and eastern Asia, which intervening mountain ranges and deserts have, throughout recorded history, largely separated from each other. Obvious examples here include the so-called 'Silk Route' running across Central Asia from East Asia to Iran, the Near East and the Greco-Byzantine worlds of the later pre-Christian and early Christian times, which not

© UNESCO/ E. Eichenberger



Dome of a mosque in Samarkand (Uzbekistan).



Buddhist sage in Mongolia.

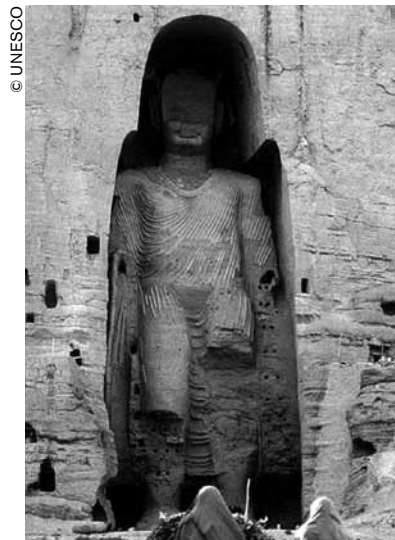
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only conveyed luxury textiles from China to the Levant and ultimately to Europe but also, in the reverse direction, brought Sasanian silverware from Iran into Central Asia and as far as Siberia and what is now Russia, and Roman gold to Central Asia and north-western India..

Greco-Roman influences were likewise a major factor in the development of an art like that of Gandhara in eastern Afghanistan and north-western India. In Islamic times, other Chinese luxury goods like ceramics made the long and hazardous land journey across Central Asia to centres of consumption like Nishapur, Ray, Isfahan, Baghdad and other great cities of the caliphate and its successor states, thus supplementing sea traffic through the Indian Ocean.

In the realm of ideas, various of the great religions of the Old World spread across Central Asia to other parts of the continents, such as Zoroastrianism from Iran into Transoxania (corresponding roughly to modern Uzbekistan) and Khwarazm (between today's Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). Buddhism went

forth from India to conquer China and Mongolia. Meanwhile traders from Western Asia, the Iranian Sog-



Great Buddha of Bamiyan (Afghanistan), before and after its destruction by the Taliban in 2001.



dian merchants, brought Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism across Central Asia to eastern Turkistan and northern China. In Islamic times, the new faith of Muhammad was carried from the Iranian lands into the steppes and beyond, often involving a process of

syncretism with existing beliefs and practices there, such as those of shamanism.

Closing and opening

The *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* has thus been designed to show that Central Asia deserves consideration, in its own right, as a distinct entity of human history, and also because it has functioned as a crossroads and meeting-place for the civilizations of East and West during past millennia.

Passing to our own time, it also provides the historical background for the vastly increased openness of the region during the last two decades or so after the tightly closed period of Soviet domination and Cold War rivalries. The open terrain of much of the region had, in earlier times, always made it accessible to outside influences and movements of peoples. But, at the turn of the 20th century, despite lengthy lines of communication and the consequent slowness of travelling, en-

thusiastic explorers, archaeologists and art experts from a variety of nations revealed to the world in general the remarkable cultural, literary and artistic treasures of the peoples of Central Asia.

But then ideological fanaticisms and political turmoil made Central

(...)

Asia a region largely closed to the outside world for many decades. One consequence of this was that no academic body or institution, let alone a single scholar or small group of scholars, felt able to undertake the compilation of a general history of the region, from its prehistoric beginnings to its present place in world history, until UNESCO brought together a wide range of authorities in the 1980s

and the present history was thus launched, mobilizing some 180 authors. Recently we have witnessed the emergence of the four Central Asian republics which are Turkic in ethnos and speech (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and the one which is their Iranian equivalent (Tajikistan). Independent since the early 1990s, these states are now able to exploit their own mineral and other re-

sources and to play decisive roles in world commerce and industry; on the other hand they are now discovering continuities of culture with lands on their periphery, such as the Turkish and Azerbaijan republics, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, links which were previously strongly discouraged or even rendered impossible.

It is hoped that this UNESCO History will demonstrate that what was once considered as an amorphous, little-known region of the European-Asian landmass has in fact acquired an identity over recent centuries and is now fully able to play a part in world affairs.



Spring celebrations (Nowruz) in Tadjikistan.

C. Edmund Bosworth

British historian, Emeritus Professor of Arabic Studies, University of Manchester, co-director with M.C. Asimov of Volume IV of the

History of Civilizations of Central Asia

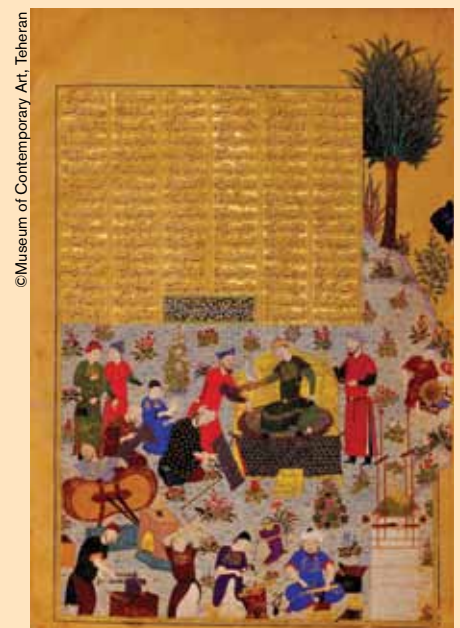
WHEN A HISTORICAL ENTITY DOES NOT CORRESPOND TO A GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

The seven volumes of the *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* cover a vast territory from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border.

The International Scientific Committee for the project had, at the outset, the task of delimiting what could not, from the very facts of topography and habitat, be a well-defined region of the Old World. From the point of view of geography and vegetation, the great Eurasian plain or steppeland stretches from Hungary to the Tian Shan and Altai mountains, but one may delimit this further hydrographically, since the lands between the Urals and western Manchuria comprise land-locked, exiguously-flowing river systems and lakes which have no outlets to the surrounding Arctic, Pacific and Indian oceans.

This delimited region was taken by the Committee as the core, but cultural, commercial and economic factors necessitate taking into account adjoining lands of ancient civilization to its west, south and east which have been, throughout history, in a symbiosis with this core region. Hence the Committee finally decided to define 'Central Asia', for purposes of the History, as not only including the Central Asian republics that are now heirs of the old Soviet republics, but also fringe areas such as Khurasan in what is now north-eastern Iran, Afghanistan, the north-western and northern parts of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, Mongolia and those parts of the modern China known as Xinjiang (province in western China).

C. E. B.



Miniature of Jamshid, mythical king of ancient Iran (16th century). (Source: A. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Tahmasbi editions)

A world first: the *General History of Latin America* focuses on the societies and civilizations that have inhabited the central and southern American continent, more than on the nations. Even so, the lack of historical sources on indigenous and African-Latin American peoples has posed some problems.

HISTORY SEEN THROUGH SOCIETIES

At the beginning of this year, UNESCO published the final volume in its *General History of Latin America*, bringing to a close a massive undertaking that offers a global vision of the history of an immense region, covering some 22 million square kilometres. The scale of this *General History* – which fills some 5600 pages – is exceptional, both in terms of its size and the number of contributing authors. For the Venezuelan historian and Chairman of the editorial committee, Germán Carrera Damas, this reference collection is the first attempt to write the history of the societies – and not nations – of the Latin-American continent.

“This book consolidates the efforts of Latin American societies to understand themselves, on their own terms,” says Carrera Damas. And that is what makes it so original. “There have already been General Histories of Latin America. But they focus much more on the States and nationalities than on the societies. And it is precisely the latter that interest us.” While a chronological national history follows the time-line of a given country, the collection just published by UNESCO adopts a thematic approach, which is not confined by national borders. For example, the chapter on Latin American dictatorships after 1930 looks at them as a whole, without being limited to a single country or part of the continent.



Aztec gods, from the Florence Codex (16th century).
(Source : L'Amérique de la conquête, Éditions UNESCO/Flammarion, 1991)

One of the innovations of this collection, explains Carrera Damas, is the integration of the history of Brazil in a global vision of the continent's history, while also devoting specific chapters to it.

But he also emphasizes another peculiarity of the collection – its universal approach. “Not so long ago

the history of the world was written in France, in Britain, and so on. But today we are trying to move towards a genuinely universal history.” Indeed, the nine volumes comprising this history are the result of a collaboration between 240 historians from Latin America, Europe and the USA. Carrera Damas recalls a judi-

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(...)

cious remark by a Chinese historian during the writing of UNESCO's *History of the Scientific and Cultural Development of Humanity*. "Well, you talk about 'The Renaissance'", he said, "but by the time that Renaissance was happening in Italy, we Chinese had already had four Decadence periods and three Renaissances!"

For the Venezuelan historian, UNESCO has played a key role in the success of this marathon scientific endeavour. "No other organization could have taken on such a task, while guaranteeing the scientific freedom, the time and the human, scientific and material resources it required. The task of writing and editing this work would have been beyond the capabilities of a private enterprise and would have been extremely demanding, even for a university."

But, paradoxically, the more positive aspects of this project – such as the multicultural composition of the editorial team and its funding by an international organization - were not without their own challenges. Several authors, including some of the most illustrious, died before completing their contributions. And the project suffered from inevitable financial ups and downs, the physical distances between authors, too few meetings between contributors and technological constraints (at the beginning, communication was uniquely by post and fax!).

History: questioning the past

There have been suggestions that the work is 'Eurocentric', because of the small amount of space devoted to indigenous peoples - and even its title. After explaining that the term 'Latin America' is simply the most common one, the Chairman of the editorial committee added, "You shouldn't forget that this general history has been written with the aim of being communicated. Any use of language that

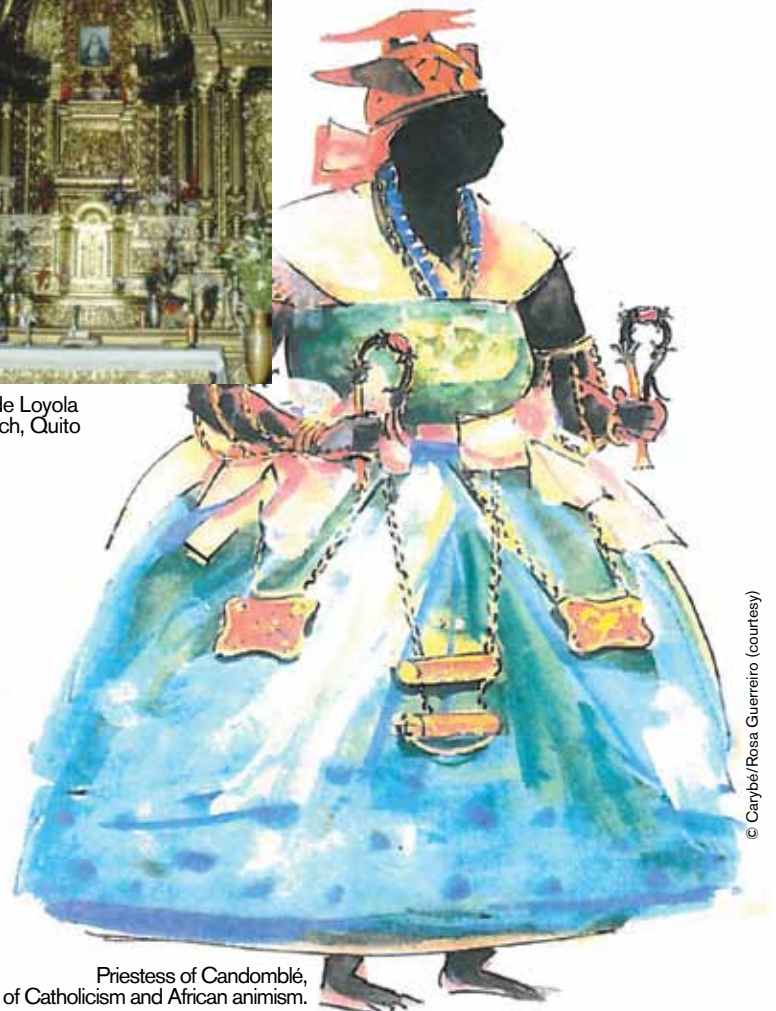
cannot translate reality, cloisters knowledge, rather than disseminating it." Also, the introduction to the collection emphasises that writing a history of Latin American societies has, historically, meant endorsing the hegemony of the Latin American Creole peoples.

ists on the history of indigenous peoples – and the even greater lack of research on Afro-Latin American societies by Afro-Latin Americans – is a reflection of the way things really are, and which this collection cannot ignore. "We knew from the outset that a disproportionate amount of space would be devoted to mixed-race history, given the paucity of sources of information about indigenous societies. So, as much as this may be criticized, this work does present a history of the continuity of Creole peoples in

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San Ignacio de Loyola baroque church, Quito (Ecuador).



© Carybé/Rosa Guerreiro (courtesy)

Priestess of Candomblé, blend of Catholicism and African animism.

And as far as the presumed *Creole-centrism* of the *General History of Latin America*, is concerned, Enrique Ayala Mora, a member of the editorial committee, points out that historiography only translates the real situation. For him, the lack of research by indigenous special-

Latin America, through the simple fact that there are no other written historiographic approaches to the Latin American reality. Nevertheless, the *General History* does offer some insight into the more recent reality of indigenous and Afro-Latin American peoples."

(...)

According to the Ecuadorian historian, the choice of devoting a single volume to the Pre-Columbian period and the eight others to the period since the arrival of Europeans, should not be interpreted as ascribing too much importance to the Creole world. "The questions multiply as we approach the present," he says. "For example, we have devoted two volumes to the Colonial period and four to the Republican period. Each volume on the Colonial period covers more than 100 years, while the average period covered by each volume on the Republican period is about sixty years. The volume on the Pre-Columbian peoples covers a period lasting two thousand years. History is a questioning of the past."

For Enrique Ayala Mora, it is less important to know how many volumes are devoted to the history of indigenous peoples than to ask which are the volumes of the *General History* that deal with the post-Conquest period, which also mention indigenous peoples still living on the American continent. "In several volumes," he says, "indigenous peoples occupy an important place, whereas in others, the space given to them is more limited. Once again, this is because of the absence of previous research on the subject. Nevertheless, the rule was to make sure that authors dealt with themes that had hitherto hardly been studied, or even not at all."

A pan-American spirit

Writing this history, then, has helped to train "general" Latin American historians, as Ayala Mora explains. "Before, we only had national monographs, or at best comparative research on two or three countries. Historians have a tendency to avoid general subjects. They prefer to study specific questions, like, for example, mining in Potosí in the 17th century. It was not easy to find a historian who could write on industrialisation across the con-

continent between 1880 and 1930!" The *General History* will therefore be able to claim to have served as a 'school', by raising the awareness of historians to Latin American subjects, inciting them to carry out research on common processes in the countries of the continent.

Finally, Ayala Mora underscores another important aspect of the collection. "This *General History*,"

he says, "is in some ways the echo of pan-American aspirations, which are currently in fashion in certain countries of Latin America." But, he adds, these aspirations are not recent. The birth of an indigenous identity as such can be traced to the 1781 Tupac Katari indigenous uprising in what is now Bolivia, an identity that was to become a reality during the independence era. Interest in a common Latin American history also received a boost by the integrationist ambitions that were popular in the 1960's among economists of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) and dependency theorists, including the future Brazilian President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso [1995-2002]."

Niels Boel,

Danish correspondent for the *UNESCO Courier*, travelled to Venezuela and Ecuador to meet **Germán Carrera Damas** and **Enrique Ayala Mora**, respectively Chairman and Member of the editorial committee of the *General History of Latin America*



© DR
Simon Bolívar (1783-1830), liberator of Latin America.



© UNESCO
Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1992, for her efforts to promote the rights of indigenous people.

For the first time, thanks to the *General History of the Caribbean*, populations united by their common culture but scattered around this region are given prominence in history, not as mere objects but as subjects and actors of their own destiny.

SHARED DESTINY



Old map of the Antilles.

A history of the Caribbean observed from inside the region, not from the ports and capitals of Europe – this was the unprecedented approach taken by the Drafting Committee on the *General History of the Caribbean* in 1983 in Kingston (Jamaica). The team of 18 scholars, most of them from the Caribbean but also from Africa, the United States, Europe and India, set out to examine the past of Caribbean populations, scattered yet nonetheless linked by custom and culture, in order to present it in a unified historical narrative.

Groups and cultures hitherto excluded from the historical narratives, or included as objects rather than as actors in making our history, would appear centre stage – much was at stake.

To write the history of the Caribbean region from inside, we had first to define that region. We began with the sea from which the region got its name, and then considered the lands lapped by that sea and finally added all the people who had inhabited those lands from pre-history to the present day, who by

their actions had connected the lands to the north, south, east and west of the sea. The *General History* therefore concerns the islands, but also the coasts on the Caribbean Ocean in South America, from Colombia to Guyana, and in Central America - territories which thereby had similar cultural heritages and experience of polity, economy and society, though at different times.



Print, a family of Caribbean Indians.

Bridge to a common history

In choosing to organise the *General History* through the use of themes, the Drafting Committee avoided the history being written merely as a series of chapters containing summary accounts of the histories of individual islands. Such histories had been written from the 17th century to the early 20th by the Creole elite. The histories written by the European and American academic historians had for their subjects war and trade in the islands and the mainland.

The first changes came through the broadening of historiography in European and American universities in the first half of the century. Change also came through the movement for political autonomy. Both factors led initially to changes of emphasis in the histories of individual islands, and later to the histories of topics which linked the islands, notably, the sugar industry, slavery, slave laws, and immigration, European and Asian.

In the established universities of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and in the



African slaves working on a sugar plantation.

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new ones such as the University of the West Indies, departments of Caribbean Studies were opened. Undergraduate courses were offered in Caribbean literature, history, culture and society supported by research the better to understand the activities which had shaped the region, and to identify the main elements which constitute Caribbean culture. The scholars engaged in these studies have come together either in the Association of Caribbean Historians or in the Caribbean Studies Association. By the 1980s therefore the foundations for a thematic General History of the Caribbean had been laid.

What does our History contain?

The main results of scholarship are reflected in the six volumes of our *History*. First come the autochthonous people, migrants from the Orinoco who inhabited the islands for hundreds of years before the European migration.

Situated at what had become the gateway to the New World, they were decimated in the north by enslavement, inhumane treatment and disease. In the east their tactical skills, employed both in war and in politics with the Europeans, enabled them to survive longer; nevertheless their numbers dwindled, and in the eighteenth century those that continued to resist were trans-

ported to Belize. The communities they established exist to this day and now teach their native language,

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Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian revolution (18th century).

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© UNESCO/Jens Boel



Castries market (Saint Lucia).

Garifuna, to the Kalinago who live in Dominica and St. Vincent.

To the North and the East of the Caribbean sea, these migrants from the middle and south of the mainland had, over several hundred years, made themselves into Caribbean people with a Caribbean culture. They survived long enough to interact with the European migrants to create the New Society, the title of our second volume. There, we look at this society between 1492 and 1650, at the Caribbean environment, at the effects on autochthonous societies of European occupation, at the basis for the forced migration, settlement and enslavement of African peoples, at the nature of the wars for lands and trade among the Europeans.

The third volume looks at *The Slave Societies*, at the human cost of enslavement, the various forms of resistance to slavery throughout the region with attention to the one which led to Haiti's independence at the beginning of the 19th century. It discusses the abolition of the British trade in enslaved Africans and the eventual Emancipation, the result of a combination of slave rebellions in the islands and the determined campaign of the humanitarians and free traders in Europe.

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Volume four, *The Long 19th Century* emphasizes themes rather than chronology. The disputes between the estate owners and the emancipated field labourers created the opportunity for government sponsored and funded migration from Asia, predominantly Indian. The constraints of indenture and the indignities attendant on being estate labourers affected the ways in which Creole societies developed in the twentieth century. The social and economic relations in societies once dependent on slavery and indenture have been characterized by ethnic and class conflict. However, by persistent resistance to these

oppressive regimes, these societies have also endowed themselves with the dignity and self-confidence of free men. The latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th have been marked by the impulse towards autonomy, as well as by the expansion of American capital and influence and the diminution of that of Europe in the region.

Volume five, *The Caribbean in the 20th Century*, looks at decolonization and neo-colonization in the face of the prevalence and persistence of the plantation, the ubiquity of underemployment, and the vulnerability of Caribbean economies. It explores the effects of moderni-

sation and mass communication on local cultures.

The final volume is *Methodology and Historiography*, in which we make available to readers the historical evidence and techniques used for writing this history. We conclude with the historiography of the particular territories, of history writing in all its branches, and close by tracing the changes in the interpretation of the past.

Roy Augier,

historian of Saint Lucia,
is the scientific director of the
General History of the Caribbean

HOW DID THIS ADVENTURE BEGIN?



© UNESCO/Dominique Roger

Haitian painting.

In December 1981, the Director-General convened in Paris a Working Group for the Preparation of a General History of the Caribbean to which he invited twenty scholars, Caribbean and European, in their personal capacities. To write a history of the region, of its people and their habitat, as if observed from the inside, seemed to the Working Group to require an inclusive vision. In their report they embraced geography, archaeology,

anthropology, ethnography, demography, sociology, ethnicity, religion, politics, socio-linguistics, rituals, music, dance, festivals, customs, oral-sources, historiography, cartography. The Group yet managed to reflect their own times; they managed to overlook gender and the environment!

The Director-General then invited eighteen scholars, again in their own right, predominantly from the Caribbean to be the Drafting Committee. It had its

first meeting in Kingston in April 1983, considered the Report of the Working Group (1981) and used it to elicit themes significant for a history of the Caribbean. It abandoned the form of organization proposed by the Group for five themes, which with some elaboration would be the basis for a coherent history of the Caribbean.

R. A.

The faith of Islam in God and mankind has enabled it to play a significant part in the edification of human civilization. But its strength emanates not so much from the 'fixism' of an imposed order, but from the durability of a model that is always ready to be reinvented, starting from divine inspiration and the demands of the moment.

MESSAGES FROM ISLAM

The Muslim world displays an extraordinary cultural and doctrinal diversity – it is a veritable linguistic Tower of Babel, an ethnic patchwork, geographical mosaic, and a political kaleidoscope. This is reflected in UNESCO's collection entitled *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture*. While Allah may be unique, Islam is multi-faceted, varying from one country to another and changing over the course of time.

It would be wrong to think that Islam has fulfilled its mission once and for all, and can now only be proud of its past achievements. Islam has made major contributions to the edification of human civilization in such diverse fields as philosophy, geography, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and the arts, but its mission is still active, and is continuously being renewed. It is also important to ensure that the meaning of Qur'anic faith is updated, as verse 148 of the second Surah reminds us: "Every one has a direction to which he turns. So hasten towards all that is good."

Faith in Islam – like all other faiths – has no meaning unless it is rooted in the present. Faith is as much an interior practice as an openness towards others. It is true that, in Islam, man is an "object" within nature, but a special object, in that he is also a subject – of God, of course – but



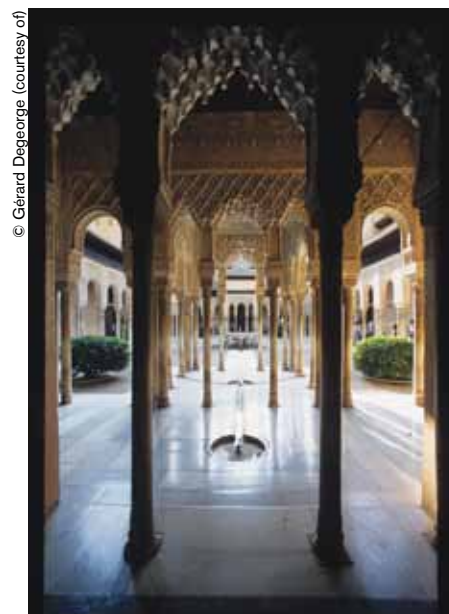
Al-Azhar University, founded in Cairo (Egypt) in 969.

also an autonomous subject, able to make choices and therefore to be responsible for his actions.

Integration of religious and social life

Some of our best writers were invited to contribute to a book, which I edited, entitled "The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture: The Individual and Society in Islam". In sixteen chapters, they attempted to show how the – sometimes faltering – quest to achieve a fragile equilibrium between rights, responsibilities and freedoms has liberated the individual in Islamic societies. A priority has been to calm our fears and anxieties, despite the rigour of certain key texts and the imperious interests of an often closed society.

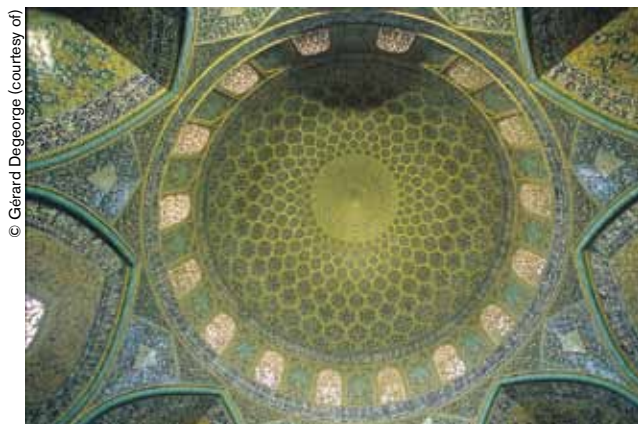
Drawing on a mass of historical and recent information, we tackled some fundamental issues, taking account of the subtle, but determinant polemics concerning the principles expounded within the Qur'an and the Sunnah [the set of



The Alhambra, Granada (Spain), symbol of the glory of Al Andalus, from the 8th to the 15th century.

declarations made – or tacitly approved – by the Prophet] and the burdens of everyday life.

Rather than presenting an exposition of Islamic doctrine, we decided to trace its penetration of the history of civilization, in an attempt to understand its influence – how it constituted a powerful and unifying force across a vast geographical, social and cultural area, and how Qur'anic teaching has been interpreted and translated into actions.



Cupola of Sheykh Lotfollah mosque in Isfahan (Iran).

© Gérard Degeorge (courtesy of)



Bridge built in the 16th century by Akbar, Mughal emperor who ruled India from 1556 to 1605.

(...)

A living religion and culture

From the Middle Ages to today, the Qur'an has been used as the reference not only when defining laws, but also the collective attitudes and individual behaviour of peoples that have embraced Islam, from the China Sea to the Atlantic coast of Africa. The two specificities of Islam are, then, its creative continuity and its mission to bring peoples together.

We know that the creation of values and their integration with reality has had a vast sphere of application, ranging from law to psychology, society, politics, economics and the arts. We should also remember that this organizing force of Islam does not emanate from the "fixism" of an imposed order, but from the

durability of a model that is always ready to be reinvented, starting from divine inspiration and the demands of the moment. The image of an Islam fossilized in its medieval form is in stark contrast with a living Islam, able to find new solutions, like Life itself.

The notion of Islamic fraternity leads to a more universal fraternity, which is necessary for the defence and education of man, of all men: preparing the child for its tasks as an adult, serving human rights, organizing relations between communities, confronting deviancy, injustice, inequality and oppression. In other words, the mission of Islamic faith is to bring all mankind together, regardless of beliefs, language or ethnicity.

In contrast to the caricature of Islamic culture, our book shows just how the law has been – and continues to be – the object of dialectic debate, providing the means to live by one's religion and also to live in today's world, while facing and overcoming ever renewed challenges. And it reminds us that the spiritual vacuum we suffer from today cannot be filled by fanaticism, by abdicating or by denigrating others.

Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, sociologist, is president of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Literature and Arts (Beit el Hikma)

AN AGE-OLD CULTURE

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Muslim and Christian playing the lute: musical dialogue.

(Source : Libro de musica de las cantigas de Alfonso X)

The geo-cultural coverage of Islam during the Middle Ages made it a universal pole of attraction, exercising an undeniable influence on its neighbours. Muslim thinkers and intellectuals fertilized the medieval soil in which the seeds of the European Renaissance were to sprout, bringing its own precious contributions to the adventures of science and the arts.

Age-old, but still very much alive today, Islamic culture has simultaneously developed a vision of the individual and of the universe, a philosophy and an art of living, as borne out by the illustrious remains of its heritage - an integral part of the heritage of all mankind.

This culture, momentarily halted by opposing developments, was able to delve into its own resources to find the strength to spring back. Remaining loyal to the roots of Islam need in no way be a barrier to the desire to be part of the present, to join in current debates and to be open to the dialogue between cultures.

The six volumes of the collection on various aspects of Islamic culture deal, respectively, with: the theological foundations of Islamic culture; the status of the individual in Islamic society; the expansion of Islam since the Revelation of the Qur'an; the contribution of Islamic thinkers to global knowledge; literature, the arts, architecture, and education in Islam; and Islam's quest for modernity.

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The Kaaba (Mecca, Saudi Arabia), which pilgrims circumambulate seven times (tawaf).

THE ROSETTA STONE OF BISOTUN



© Babak Sedighi

This inscription was the key evidence for deciphering cuneiform script.

An emergency protection plan has just been launched to safeguard Bisotun, Iranian World Heritage site, threatened by erosion. Bisotun contains an exceptional document of human history: an inscription repeated in three languages – Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian – that provided the key to deciphering cuneiform script.

The inscribed property is located some 30 kilometres north-east of Kermanshah (Iran) on the main trade route leading from Kurdistan and the Mesopotamian region to the Iranian Central Plateau. The archaeological site includes remains dating from pre-historic times through the history of ancient Persia, associated with the sacred mountain of Bisotun and the Bisotun Monument, i.e. the inscription and bas-relief by Darius I the Great, dating from the time when he rose to the throne of the Persian Empire (521 B.C.).

The monument is carved in an inaccessible recess in the cliff, approximately 100 metres above the plain. The bas-relief portrays Darius standing and facing right. He wears a Persian garment, the 'royal' shoes, a bracelet and a crown. In his left hand he holds a bow as a sign of sovereignty. His right hand is raised at face level. With his left foot Darius is treading on the chest of a figure who lies on his back before him and, according to the legends, represents Gaumata, the Median Magus and pretender to the throne whose

assassination led to Darius's reign.

Gaumata, also dressed in Persian attire, is raising his arms as a sign of submission. On the right, rebel leaders are walking towards the king. Their hands are tied behind their backs and a long rope is bound around their necks. Below and around the bas-reliefs, there are some 1200 lines of inscriptions telling the story of the battles Darius had to wage in 521-520 BC against the governors who attempted to take apart the Empire founded by Cyrus. Apparently, the decisive battle took place on this site.

The key to cuneiform script

The Bisotun inscription is one of the most remarkable documents of human history. The inscription is repeated in three languages: Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian. This is the only known Achaemenid monumental text to document the re-establishment of the Empire by Darius I. The last phase of the inscription is particularly important, as it is here that Darius introduced for the first time the Old Persian version

of his *res gestae* or achievements. Darius states that he had the Old Persian cuneiform script specifically made for the purpose of composing this inscription. In addition to Bisotun, this Achaemenid writing was used for other royal monumental inscriptions, such as those in Persepolis and Susa. This cuneiform writing is referred to the ancient Mesopotamian system. However, in Bisotun, it is partly alphabetic, partly syllabic. Each word is separated by a special symbol.

Another "Rosetta Stone", the inscription was the key evidence for deciphering cuneiform script. Although the German scientist, Georg Friedrich Grotefend, had partially deciphered the Old Persian cuneiform writings in 1802, it was Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson who in 1835 copied the inscription and began the tedious and rigorous work of its decipherment.

Bisotun is an outstanding testimony to the important interchange of human values on the development of monumental art and writing. The symbolic representation of the Achaemenid king in relation to his enemy reflects traditions in monumental bas-reliefs

(...)

that date from ancient Egypt and the Middle East, and which were subsequently further developed during the Achaemenid and later empires.

Conservation: first steps and challenges

Taking note of the outstanding universal value of this document, one of the most remarkable of human history, the World Heritage Committee, at its 30th session, decided to inscribe Bisotun on the World Heritage List in 2006. But the property is subject to various types of threat.

The first of these is urban development. The plain of Bisotun is agricultural land with sporadic villages and small industries. The biggest industrial agglomeration is a petrochemical plant. The current studies have not so far ascertained any chemical impact on the inscription. The visual impact of the portal frame industrial buildings in the plant demand serious attention, however. Second, Bisotun is located in a seismic region. As a result of previous earthquakes, there is a transversal fissure across the whole inscription. Precipitation water seeps through these cracks and causes further erosion. The inscription is carved directly on the rock and is thus subject to physical, chemical and biological erosion.

To urgently address further erosion of the inscription, UNESCO mobilized necessary funding for an international expert mission. The mission was undertaken by Professor Costantino Meucci, a specialist in stone conservation, at the end of 2008. As a result an emergency protection plan is now being implemented. The plan calls for establishing emergency scaffolding, reducing seepage by leading the water away from the inscription surface through pipes and conducting further studies for long term conservation of the property.

Iranian authorities are now implementing these urgent conservation measures. Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO) also plans to draft

a proposal for significant expansion of the protective boundaries. Nevertheless, the implementation demands rigorous monitoring. The development of a long term conservation plan is the prerequisite for further interventions. Owing to the sensitivity of the property, the plan

should be drawn up with adequate technical input at international and national levels. This demands further international assistance.

Junko Taniguchi, UNESCO Office in Tehran, and **Farzin Fardanesh**, consultant at UNESCO

MONUMENTAL CHALLENGES AT BISOTUN

Inscribed in 2006 on the World Heritage List, the Bisotun site in Iran is located along the ancient trade route linking the Iranian high plateau with Mesopotamia and features remains from prehistoric times to the Median, Achaemenid, Sassanid and Ilkhanid periods and after.

© Babak Sedighi



Bisotun, Iranian World Heritage site.

The prehistoric remains within Bisotun include Palaeolithic cave finds, the earliest evidence of human presence at the spring-fed pool on the plain under the rock. These finds provide testimony to a highly developed industry datable to the Middle Palaeolithic era. In addition there are remains from the Median period (8th or 7th centuries B.C.) as well as from the Achaemenid (6th to 4th centuries B.C.) and post-Achaemenid periods. The Median fortress is a structure on the mountain slope, just under the Darius monument. Of the post-Achaemenid remains, the Seleucid figure of a resting Heracles dates from 148 B.C. Though not of high standard technically, it is important because of its datable Greek inscription.

The Parthian remains comprise reliefs of Mithradates (123-87 B.C.), Gotarzes II (around 50 B.C.) and

the Parthian stone which bears a crude carving of a sacrificial victim on an altar. The Sassanid remains consist of several smaller monuments and objects. They include three large sculptured capitals, which are important documents for the history of Sassanid art.

Last but not least, remains of Sassanid and Ilkhanid palaces were excavated in the western section of the core zone. On the ancient caravan route, there is a Safavid caravanserai, which has recently been restored as a guest house. Close to this caravanserai, there is another building which was used as a prison until recently, but is now given to ICHHTO, which is responsible for the management of the property.

Bisotun includes other significant properties. Taq-e-Bostan is another site located northeast of Kermanshah City. The property is situated by a mountain of the same name and a spring. It includes Sassanid reliefs of Artaxerxes II, two carved vaults and the King Khosrow Parviz Hunting Grounds. More to the east are the Eshaqvand carved tombs. These properties are located within an area of some 540 hectares.

J. T. et F. F.



Children at Katha public school (Govinpuri slums, south Delhi, India), during an astronomy class.

Teaching science: child's play

People cannot be educated by forcing them to memorise formulas, says French physicist Christophe Galfard, who has vowed to make the general public, and young people in particular, love science. In his view, science is a cornerstone of modernity and science education a strategic goal for the future.

Interview by Linda Tinio (UNESCO Bureau of Strategic Planning)

How can science education play a strategic role for the international community?

Scientific knowledge today is the result of an accumulation of thousands of years of knowledge that has shaped our era. Possessing that knowledge increases the ability to create techniques and technologies and imagine worlds in step with modernity. From a strategic standpoint, I think it's absolutely fundamental for as many people as possible to have access to that knowledge, precisely

to be able to look ahead, understand what is happening around us, tap into our world's potential forces and dream of possible futures.

How can science education be promoted among policymakers?

By convincing them of two obvious things. The first is that technology and scientific knowledge have applications in industry and the workplace in general, and that they have an impact on the economy. The second, which is subtler, is that those

applications shouldn't be expected to produce immediate practical results. Even Einstein's theory didn't have immediate effects. Today it is the basis of almost all space technology, an application nobody imagined at the time it was conceived.

What are the main challenges facing science education today?

One of science education's greatest challenges is to reach the broadest possible public, in particular young people, who usually have a more in-

(...)

nocent and more wonderstruck view of the world than grown-ups.

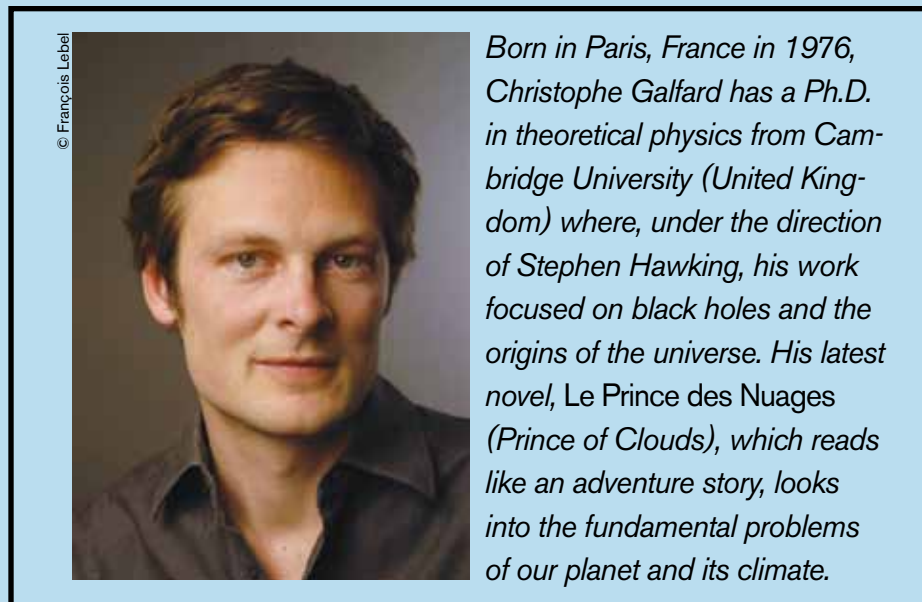
But people cannot be educated by forcing them to memorise formulas. The American physicist Richard Feynman said that science formulas are the guardians of the memory of what we know today. To draw young people's attention to the sciences, they must be presented in an exciting way. We must tell them a story, raise their awareness of the beauty of our world, of the beauty of science, and capture their imaginations... Science education must have a fun, playful aspect. In any case, that's my approach.

We're incredibly lucky to be the first people since the dawn of humanity to see pictures of distant galaxies and hear sounds coming to us from the other end of the universe. Those scientific discoveries open our minds up in the same way art does, don't they?

How can science education spread ethical values?

Science in itself conveys ethical values. The British physicist Stephen Hawking told me that, despite the political roadblocks, British, American and Russian scientists never stopped communicating during the Cold War. Science remained united in the bipolar world of that period, illustrating, in my view, its universal and humanistic aspect.

Science education instils values inherent to the search for truth in our world, values that bring people together whatever their political or religious views.



Born in Paris, France in 1976, Christophe Galfard has a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from Cambridge University (United Kingdom) where, under the direction of Stephen Hawking, his work focused on black holes and the origins of the universe. His latest novel, Le Prince des Nuages (Prince of Clouds), which reads like an adventure story, looks into the fundamental problems of our planet and its climate.

Do you think the present economic crisis will have a harmful impact on science education?

I really hope governments will not cut funds for fundamental research on account of the economic downturn. That would be a huge mistake because industries and economies rely mainly on scientific breakthroughs to rebuild themselves. A thoughtless reaction like that would have a negative long-term effect.

In what direction should science education develop in the future?

I think there are three directions for the future that meet the needs of students, researchers and the public at large.

First, it's important to make students aware that science lets us look at the world through modern eyes and to show them why it's im-

portant to know about science even if they have no intention of following a science career.

As for research, I'm delighted to note that more and more universities integrate new scientific knowledge into their curricula every year. If that could be expanded to all the universities in the world, it would really be a good thing for humanity.

As for the general public, it's important to popularise science so that everybody can have access to it. Let's imagine you want to share the joy of reading a poem in Russian with somebody who doesn't speak that language. Well, you're not going to force him or her to learn the Cyrillic alphabet, are you? You're going to translate the poem into a language he or she can understand. The same goes for mathematical equations.

This column, launched by the UNESCO Bureau of Strategic Planning, tackles forward-looking topics of interest to the general public and the Member States of the Organization. It features intellectual opinions likely to foster UNESCO's reflection, programming and action in its various areas of competence.



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