



The Office Of The Principal and Vice-Chancellor

PROF M S MAKHANYA
OPENING REMARKS
WORKSHOP ON UNESCO'S MEMORY OF THE WORLD
PROGRAMME FOR SOUTH AFRICA
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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

The word “heritage” has a few meanings, including the following: inheritance, legacy tradition, birthright and custom. All of these speak to crucial aspects of our collective histories and cultures and the role that we must all play in ensuring that what has gone before, that which found its genesis in our pasts, is not lost - scattered in the winds of time - but can be learnt from, built upon, re-envisioned and most important for our purposes, committed to memory for generations to come – an enduring legacy.

In his famous sonnet *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day*, William Shakespeare says in the final stanza

But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of the fair thou ow'st
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
So long this lives and gives life to thee

These words convey the belief that endures today, that as long as that which has been written down or recorded endures (in this case a written tribute to his love), the person or event about whom it is written will be remembered and in so doing, achieve a kind of immortality. They live on in our memories forever. In Shakespeare's case this sonnet was written sometime between 1564-1616, but scholars and poetry-lovers today – well over 400 years later - still speculate on the identity the person to whom the sonnet was addressed and in so doing they acknowledge the truth of that assertion. In this way, words (and objects) that are passed down, foster immortality. This is something that we as the guardians of our heritages and our collective global heritage, need to take very seriously - more particularly when it comes to Africa and South Africa.

Africa in particular, begins from a point of fragility. While much work has been done on retrieving and committing to record some of our earlier histories as conveyed by means of African oral traditions, much has been irretrievably lost, due in no small part to a lack of foresight and appreciation on the part of our forefathers (and here I use the word in a generic sense) of the fundamental role that our histories and cultures play in shaping and affirming our identities.

I would suggest that much of the societal fragmentation and disintegration - that sense of dislocation - that we as Africans experience, has its roots in a past that has no voice. What we hear are mere echoes, fleeting insubstantial murmurings. Enough to tell us that in our pasts there were glorious feats and rich lives and traditions. Tantalizingly close yet forever beyond our reach. This generation of Africans must deal with that. For many in Africa, our histories, cultures and languages have been stolen from us, firstly by those who came and imposed a new order and way of doing things and secondly, by time itself. And because much of what happened in those dark times was not recorded it is lost forever. A monumental tragedy for us.

So, knowing what it feels like to be dispossessed of one's history, surely we must understand the urgent imperative to not only record, but more importantly preserve, our languages,

cultures, traditions, histories and so on. As we create the story of our lives in all of its richness and fullness so it should be recorded and preserved as a fitting legacy for the generations to come. Future generations should never suffer the sadness of a past forgotten and irretrievable. Our failure to fulfil our responsibility and duties in this regard will merely perpetuate that sense of loss that we feel and this time, we will have only ourselves to blame.

Heritage is the mirror of the world and its memory. But as I have just mentioned, that memory is very fragile and every day, important bits are lost forever. UNESCO has launched the Memory of the World Programme to guard against collective amnesia by calling for the preservation of valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world, thus ensuring their future dissemination¹.

The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme was established in 1992 by UNESCO to a growing awareness of the parlous state of preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage in various parts of the world. The ***Memory of the World*** is the documented, collective memory of the peoples of the world and their **documentary heritage** – which in turn

¹ Memory of the World. http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID

represents a large proportion of the world's cultural heritage. It charts the evolution of thought, discovery and achievement of human society. It is the legacy of the past to the world community of the present and the future. And perhaps in the light of what I shared with you earlier in regard to Africans and South Africans, you will understand just how important this programme is.

Much of the *Memory of the World* resides in libraries, archives, museums and keeping places across the globe and much of it is now at risk. Furthermore, the documentary heritage of many people has also become dispersed because of accidental or deliberate displacement of holdings and collections, "spoils of war" or other historical circumstance. Sometimes, practical or political barriers hinder access, while in other cases deterioration or destruction are the threats.

The former Minister of Arts and Culture, Minister Pallor Jordan, established a National Committee of Memory of the World to serve as a custodian and to advise the Department on South Africa's documentary heritage, and to coordinate the listing of South Africa's documentary heritage onto the World Register. It was in this gathering that the committee invited the broader stakeholder community to discuss the programme and

partnership on the programme, to further enhance South Africa's participation on the programme.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to join you for this UNESCO Memory of the World Programme workshop. As the Chairperson of the Culture Sector of the South African National Commission for UNESCO, I would like to congratulate the National Archives of the Department of Arts and Culture and the South African National Committee of the Programme on organizing the workshop to raise awareness amongst the heritage institutions and the public at large.

Like you, I look forward to hearing the presenters, who will give a more detailed background to the Programme and pave a way forward in regard to working together to preserve, raise awareness and make our documentary heritage accessible to the people of South Africa, the region and the world.

My very best wishes for a fruitful and successful workshop.

I thank you.