



**AU Commissioner for Education, Science Technology and Innovation (ESTI),
H.E. Prof. Mohammed Belhocine Opening Keynote Address at the Seminar
on Teaching of African History - May 30th 2024**

Salutations!

1. Good afternoon, dear colleagues, educators, and history enthusiasts!
I am honoured to welcome you all to this symposium on the Teaching of African History: Pathways to Africa's Renaissance and Integration. The theme we explore is both timely and crucial especially as this Symposium is part of the commemoration of Africa Day.
2. I acknowledge the presence of our Education and Skills Development partners, educators and students. Thank you for joining us at this symposium. It is through a deep understanding of our collective African story, in all its richness and complexity, that we can empower future generations to be the architects of an African renaissance and an integrated continent.
3. This year is unique as our focus is on the transformation of education and skills development systems in Africa, through the implementation of the AU Year of Education under the theme – *“Educate an African fit for the 21st Century.”*
4. For too long, the dominant narrative of African history has been told and shaped by the lens of colonialism, with emphasis on exploration, conquest, and exploitation of the continent's vast resources by European powers.
5. Furthermore, historically, *“the purpose of colonial schooling was twofold: to respond to the immediate economic needs of the imperial capital and to develop local foot soldiers and systems that will continue to uphold the imperial mission and social order”*.

6. *“Colonialism of knowledge is not only about deceitfully establishing hierarchies amongst various cultural knowledge systems (European knowledge – superior; ‘other’ knowledges –inferior) but also transitioning and enforcing this social construction into a human embodiment and an unquestioned universal lived reality that is upheld/defended by both the colonizers and some colonized people. In the colonized, this is made possible through “intellectual colonization” which Toure & Sloan (1972) define as “a sum of acquired habits, of uncontrollable behavior, a way of life, a way of thinking of which the whole constitutes a sort of “second nature” that really seems to have destroyed the original personality of the colonized” (p.8). Undergirding intellectual colonization is a “colonized complex that blemishes our evolution and even marks our reflexes” (p.8), to the extent that the colonized learn to proclaim their inferiority and justify their domination.”*¹
7. This one-sided portrayal of history, and this intellectual colonization not only diminish the vibrant pre-colonial history of Africa, the rich tapestry of African civilizations, empires, and intellectual achievements that existed long before European arrival but it also instills a sense of inferiority and dependence.
8. As educators, it is our responsibility to challenge this limited narrative and to illuminate the profound depth and brilliance of Africa’s past. Africa’s history stretches back a millennia.
9. Archaeological finds suggest that Africa is home to some of the earliest evidence of human habitation, from Toumaï, a 7 million year old Australopithecus uncovered in Chad in 2003 to Lucy, the 3,2 million year old Australopithecus found in 1974 in Ethiopia.

¹ Dei George, Chizoba Imoka, Colonialism: Why Write Back? - <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/03/colonialism-why-write-back/>

10. Ancient Egypt stands as a testament to the ingenuity and organizational skills of Africans. Their pyramids continue to inspire awe, while their advancements in hieroglyphics, engineering, and medicine continue to be studied today.
11. Across the continent, from the West African empires to the sophisticated kingdoms of the Bantu people, Africa boasts a rich history filled with innovation, trade, and cultural exchange. Here in Ethiopia, the rock hewn churches of Lalibela are a marvel and sight to behold.
12. History shows that the empires in the Sahel, namely Ghana, Songhai and Mali, had great glory. Timbuktu had a well-established university system in the 11th and 12th century, long before the European universities. Timbuktu was the academic, intellectual and economic centre of the world then. In one of his books, Cheikh anta Diop reports that the Students of Timbuktu were once sent to the Cities of Timbuktu and Gao, with pens and copy books, with a mission to record, neighborhood by neighborhood all households living there. This resembles very much a systematic population census and shows that there was interest in data collection and use likely for decision making purposes.
13. Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312 to 1327 as the ninth king of the empire, was the richest man in the world even in today's terms.
14. Africa's story is not only one of grand empires and intellectual pursuits. It is also a narrative of resistance and resilience throughout. The African spirit of resistance has burned bright throughout history. The foyer of Nelson Mandela Hall is replete with the pictorial gallery of the doyens of this resistance and foundation of the African Union. We must celebrate these heroes who fought for freedom, justice, and the dignity of their people.
15. These stories serve as powerful examples for our youth. It is important that our classrooms celebrate these achievements as we seek to promote the unity and solidarity of African states; coordinate and

intensify cooperation and efforts to achieve a better life for the peoples of Africa.

16. Aspiration 5 of Africa's continental development blueprint Agenda 2063 talks of an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics. A central tenet of this aspiration is the *"entrenchment of Pan Africanism and the common history, destiny, identity, heritage, respect for religious diversity and consciousness of African people's and her diaspora."*
17. In the teaching of African History, we also have to be reflective with broadened perspectives on the development of Africa, the critical challenges, opportunities and lessons that we must draw from our history, as we strive to address issues such as poverty, inequality, and governance in order to achieve Africa's renaissance and integration.
18. Indeed, it is worth asking new questions: *"What sort of development should be taking place in our communities today? Whose knowledge informs this development? To what extent is the vision of development that is advanced aligned to and grounded in the indigenous epistemologies, histories and the aspirations of local people? How are community members coming to learn and use multiple lenses of critical inquiry to understand the processes of colonization and the impact on social development?"*²
19. In the teaching of African History, we need to infuse inspiration and motivation in our pedagogical approaches so that our learners become agents of change on the continent, by being empowered to take on leadership roles and contribute towards Africa's growth, integration, and development.
20. We also need to reflect on how our teaching shall provide opportunities for our learners to generate new ideas and perspectives on how to address contemporary challenges, through creative

² Ibid

thinking, and to contribute innovative solutions to the continent's development.

21. All this, must be done without shying away from some obvious **blots** in our history, those with sensitive and controversial topics. We have had conflicts in Africa. We just recently commemorated the 30th anniversary since the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Here in Ethiopia there was the conflict in Tigray. We have on-going challenge in Sudan and in the Sahel region, among others.
22. What alternative and creative pedagogies can history teachers and their learners employ when engaging sensitive and controversial topics? We should do this in ways that promote empathy, cognitive, social and value based justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance for others. These blots in our History must not impede our quest for progress as we strive to realize the aspirations in Agenda 2063.
23. This seminar offers a good forum for reflection on these issues. It is therefore important to explore the transformative power of reframing African history in our classrooms. We must retell the African experiences and perspectives that have been conspicuously absent or, at best, marginalised in current international research and debates on history education.
24. I urge all of us to engage in open and productive debate. Let us challenge each other, learn from each other, and ultimately, work towards the transformation of our teaching of Africa's History.

Thank you all.