

**Speech by H.E. Suzanne Mubarak
On the occasion of reception of Mediterranean Cultural Award
Naples – 9, Sept. 2003**

Mediterranean Academy

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the kind words and the gracious hospitality. It is wonderful to be here in Italy, a land steeped in culture and history. A land with which Egypt's history is so intertwined. I am delighted to receive this Award today, as it represents a special recognition of a dream that I have long pursued, even when others doubted that it would see the light of day.

The Mediterranean Cultural Prize, awarded by eminent Mediterranean bodies, highlights how much the lands surrounding this particular sea have produced for humanity, and how much the peoples of the Mediterranean have contributed to the fashioning of all the values we hold dear in the world to day. In the process, over the millennia, through war and peace, commerce and exchange, migration and intermarriage, the Mediterranean culture was forged. It is not a unitary culture, but rather a rich mosaic of a many colours. It is a tapestry woven by many threads, showing its unique capacity to allow for wide individual variations of language and custom, while still creating an undeniable framework of affinity and identity.

Our value systems draw upon the great monotheistic religions that emerged from this part of the world to cover the globe with inspiration and hope, even if at times they have been politicised and misrepresented.

Our thought process have been forged in the crucible of philosophy and science, whose locus was for millennia one part of the Mediterranean or another.

Our art has evolved by the interaction of the best that our individual cultures have produced.

Our political tolerance is today evolving in keeping with the necessary cohabitation of so much diversity. On the northern shores of the Mediterranean, the great European experiment is unfolding... A community of nations, each discrete and identifiable, is allowing borders to melt away within a wider Europe of exchange and opportunity. Each nation, far from losing itself, acquiring greater depth and drawing greater strength from its closer union with its neighbours and other European allies.

We, on the southern part of the Mediterranean, also want to make a similar commitment to a borderless world, where ideas and people, not just goods and services, move about unhindered in the pursuit of a true and enriching dialogue of cultures. We want to maintain the rich legacy of our Mediterranean cross cultural and common heritage. We seek this of openness and dialogue to proceed across both shores of the Mediterranean, to unite us in a celebration of our common humanity, to allow the Euro-Med dialogue to be more than a political slogan. It has to be a real dialogue between cultures, to create the common foundation of a new global civilization founded on mutual respect, equity and justice.

Our Mediterranean, historically the cradle for the world's cultures and civilizations, must become the cradle of a global culture of peace in a world torn apart by war and hatred.

It is now more than ever that we need to join hands to assert the concepts of tolerance and sympathy that we have for long dwelt on. Such concepts that were the true force that gave strength to the waves of enlightenment that emerged on the Mediterranean shores.

We need to carefully examine the course of our relations and ask ourselves what went wrong. Where are lost opportunities and what triggered all this lack of understanding. Jointly we should work hard to replace cycles of hatred and violence with openness and understanding to ensure a better future for our children.

Egypt has always shown a great commitment to its Mediterranean ties. Along with all other interested Mediterranean countries. We can work now to preserve this rich legacy. Together we can initiate Mediterranean Cultural Heritage Network to promote Dialogue allowing thousand different dreams to

blossom.

This proposed Network can serve to bring together intellectuals from around the Mediterranean to consider the efforts that need to be undertaken to serve our cultural preservation objectives.

In the context of our future cooperation, Bibliotheca Alexandrina is willing to act as an anchor to these Networks to facilitate their activities in cooperation with the relevant ministries of culture. Actually, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's most recent research institute "The Center for Alexandrian and Mediterranean Studies" could serve as a launching pad to these Networks.

The ultimate objective of this ambitious cultural undertaking is simple and clear: underline the concept of togetherness and spread the culture of peace in face of whichever currents that attempt to make us lose faith in our own heritage of tolerance and sympathy. We want to build on the enormous efforts that were deployed and revive the best of the Mediterranean legacy of cultural diversity and civilized discourse. We should cement the bridges that often linked us together and confront the undercurrents of misunderstanding and scepticism that could drift us part.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is very much this vision of a space of freedom for the dialogue of cultures and of a beacon of knowledge and understanding that was the driving force behind my dream to bring about the rebirth of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina conjures up the image of a glorious past, of a shared heritage, not just between Italy, Greece and Egypt, not even of the whole Mediterranean, but a shared heritage for all humanity.

It was indeed at the ancient Library of Alexandria that:

§ Aristarchus was the first person to state that the earth revolves around the sun, a full 1800 years before Copernicus;

§ Eratosthenes proved that the earth was spherical and calculated its circumference with amazing accuracy, 1700 years before Columbus sailed on his epic voyage;

§ Callimachus the poet described the texts in the library organized by subject and author, becoming the father of library science;

§ Euclid wrote his elements of geometry, the basic text studied in schools all over the world even now;

§ Herophylus identified the brain as the controlling organ of the body and launched a new era of medicine;

§ Manetho chronicled the pharaohs and organized our history into the dynasties we use to this day;

§ 72 specialists first translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek in the famous Septuagint.

They and many others were all members of that amazing community of scholars, which mapped the heavens, organized the calendar, established the foundations of science and pushed the boundaries of our knowledge. They opened up the cultures of the world, established a true dialogue of civilization, promoted rationality, tolerance and understanding and organized universal knowledge. For over six centuries the ancient Library of Alexandria epitomized the zenith of learning.

The history of the ancient library is intertwined with that of the Mediterranean and from the Empire of Alexander to the Roman Empire. It was the glory of the Hellenistic Age, and its decline accompanied the decline of the Roman Empire. It was the dislocations of the Roman Empire that brought about the downfall of the old museum and the final disappearance of the ancient library over sixteen hundred years ago. The knowledge that had been forged there was to shine in the eastern Mediterranean and in Andalusia in a newborn light, as the torch of learning passed on to the Arabs and the Muslims who made their major contributions, and safeguarded the ancient library's past achievements throughout Europe's long medieval "dark ages".

And it was in Italy that the new light of the European renaissance was to flourish. In Italy, and from it to the rest of Europe, the great light of reason and of art was reborn. The new-found vigour of Venice and Florence not only resembled the great city-states of antiquity, but also crafted a precursor to the modern European state.

Art was reborn by the genius of Michelangelo and Rafael, and in the exquisite studies of Leonardo da Vinci. Reason, that great underpinning of science, was to find its modern expression through Italy's

“Academy of the Lynx” (sometimes called the “Society of Lynxes”), the first modern academy of science, born exactly 400 years ago (1603), and which counted among its members Galileo. The Italian academy was to be followed some 60 years later by the Academy of Science in France and the British Royal Society. The first beginnings of the modern age of science and technology were launched!

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The old Mediterranean of Antiquity, where our two nations played such important roles for so long, is no more. The Mediterranean of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance is also gone. Even the last two centuries, the recent past, of colonialism and emancipation, of war and peace... that page of history has also been turned. Today we enter a new century, a new era.

The new Mediterranean in which we live, with all its promise of a new Europe and a new Mediterranean understanding is still a place of hard conflicts and much bloodshed... from the Balkans to the Middle East, from Algeria to Corsica the painful images of intolerance and prejudice cannot be ignored. It is as if our Mediterranean region that invented science and reason, and crafted for the world the legacy of humanism and tolerance is somehow still in the grip of lack of understanding and sympathy.

It is against this backdrop that the new Library of Alexandria is launched, and it is against that backdrop that our new Bibliotheca Alexandrina acquires its special significance:

§ in a time of war, it is a gesture of peace...

§ in a time of division, it is a symbol of unity...

§ in a time of brutality, it is a celebration of our common humanity...

It is a vision that embodies beliefs that I have cherished and worked for over many years. For I believe that human beings are best reminded of their common humanity through learning, and that they acquire broadened horizons by exposure to other cultures, and that they become better citizens, of their country and of the world, by the nurturing effect of books and reading.

Another pearl in the crown of knowledge and wisdom in our country today is the “Reading For All” campaign. This national campaign, to which I dedicate sincere efforts and long years, brings the fruits of both heritage and contemporary culture to millions of families that could have otherwise been deprived of such enriching encounters.

Today, the “Reading For All” campaign is admired in Egypt, just as well as in many Arab and other countries. It is perceived as a success story of the quest of knowledge and enlightenment; it is another dream that came true.

Inspired by a lifetime affinity to books and libraries, I pursued yet another campaign “Read To Your Child”. This campaign is particularly close to my heart; I even recorded a little note – an appeal – that I address to parents and grandparents, through Egyptian TV, asking them to make the time and effort to read a page or two to the children.

Dedicated to our younger generation, this campaign has managed to provide hundreds of titles, in Arabic just as in other languages, for children of all ages and of different interest; it has been attracting thousands of boys and girls to the amazing world of books.

In Egypt today, networks of small elegant public libraries for children are multiplying. Such libraries have become a haven for our young readers who could give free rein to their creative imagination and explore the vast world of knowledge.

I am proud of the response that was engendered. The “Reading For All” and the “Read To Your Child” campaigns are enthusiastically adopted by people in my country.

Equally taken to heart by Egyptian men and women is a vast and spreading web of libraries. We have refurbished old libraries and established new ones. My vision behind these libraries was to promote the “learn to learn” style.

These libraries that now dot the Egyptian landscape are not meant as mere depositories for the storage of books. They are rather meant as vibrant institutions that affirm the right to read, the right to access books effortlessly and adequately, and above all the sacred right to knowledge. I am proud to say that Egyptians have taken to heart the role of libraries in social and economic development.

To my mind, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was the culmination of the enormous national commitment that

Egypt is making to education and culture and to which I have personally dedicated more than twenty years of relentless, tireless and passionate efforts to support libraries, reading campaigns and education projects.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This enormous complex would not have been possible if our friends, who share the dream of reviving the spirit of the ancient library in terms suited to the new millennium, had not so generously supported Egypt's commitment. Our thanks go to each and every one of them, especially to the generous support of Italy in making our manuscript museum such a successful venture, and their equally important contribution to the restoration laboratories, not seen by visitors, but ever so essential, for the library's mission.

This Award, is truly an encouragement to all those who pursue their dreams, to all those who are inspired by the vision of things yet to be, for those who are imagining a better future and striving to make it real...

Those, who do not look at our imperfect world and ask "Why?" but rather, those who look at the world as it could be, and ask "Why not?".

This library presents a symbol of our continuous collaborative work together.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Again it is a great pleasure to receive this prestigious Award for my role in the rebirth of the Library of Alexandria. As I say to my friends and colleagues who have accompanied me on this long journey, that is just the beginning. All that is past was prologue. We have indeed achieved much in getting the great library built, and in getting its unique institutional basis created... But the best is yet to come, as the beautiful building that has risen so dramatically on the shores of the Mediterranean becomes a true center of dialogue, learning and understanding.

I am confident that our new and future generations will make the best out of these cultural reservoirs that we are so happily entrusting them with. I am also hopeful that the future generations will continue to pursue the Mediterranean legacy of knowledge, tolerance and diversity. I am hopeful that what we are giving them today will help them lead the way to bring about a better tomorrow where hope, peace and prosperity will reign supreme-forever and ever.

Thank you.

Suzanne Mubarak

President of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina