

TRIBUTE TO AFRICAN LIBRARIES

by Vartan Gregorian
President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

OPENING—Remarks by Tade

My name is Tade Akin Aina, Program Director Higher Education and Libraries in Africa, Carnegie Corporation of New York. I am here with my former colleague, Dr. Rookaya Bawa, currently Consultant to the Program. I bring you very warm greetings from the leadership of the Corporation, especially from our president, Dr. Vartan Gregorian . I also bring greetings from Ms. Deana Arsenian, Vice President, International Programs, and all our colleagues on the program. Dr. Gregorian sends his congratulations to Makerere University on the occasion of your 90th anniversary. Dr. Gregorian also sends his sincere regrets for not being here with you on this occasion. He has asked me to reaffirm his and our Corporation's commitment to Africa, African higher education and to Makerere university. Universities and libraries are institutions that are of great importance to Dr. Gregorian as he has in his own career being privileged to be a president of a university, Brown University and president of the New York Public Library. I have with me an address from Dr. Gregorian but before I read it, please permit me to use this opportunity to thank all those who day and night worked tirelessly to make this occasion happen. I mean all those who worked in the background to build, design, procure and order materials and make the dream of the Makerere University Research Commons come true. I thank my former colleague, Dr. Rookaya Bawa, her Assistant, Ms. Kim Hafner, the University Librarian Dr. Maria Musoke, the Makerere University Library staff and the Vice Chancellor of Makerere University. Thank you all. Now, I read the prepared address that Dr. Vartan Gregorian has sent me with..

Vartan Gregorian's Prepared Remarks

In 1848, when Andrew Carnegie left his native Scotland as a boy and emigrated with his family to the United States, he was poor and he had few prospects in life. He had little

access to education. Indeed, at the age of 13, he was already working in a mill to help support his family. But he wasn't going to let his life be measured by the few opportunities that were available to a person in his circumstances: he was going to make opportunities for himself. And he knew in order to do that, he had to become educated. He had to learn. And in order to learn, he had to read.

That is why libraries were so important to him. Andrew Carnegie was lucky because while, in his era, there were very few places where those who could not afford to buy books could find them, the young Carnegie was fortunate enough to know someone who changed all that. In his autobiography, Andrew Carnegie wrote about how Colonel James Anderson, a wealthy man, allowed him and other "working boys" like him to benefit from his personal library. As Mr. Carnegie said, "Colonel James Anderson—I bless his name as I write—announced that he would open his library of four hundred volumes to boys, so that any young man could take out, each Saturday afternoon, a book which could be exchanged for another on the succeeding Saturday."

Being able to use a library changed Andrew Carnegie's life, and he never forgot that. And later, after he himself had become wealthy, among his first acts of philanthropy was to begin helping to build free public libraries around the world. In fact, Andrew Carnegie and Carnegie Corporation of New York eventually helped to create over 2,500 libraries in the United States and across the globe. Indeed, Andrew Carnegie, began building public libraries in South Africa in 1911. And beginning in 1928, Carnegie Corporation of New York made grants for library support in South Africa, Rhodesia and Nyasaland. In Africa, as you know, our support for libraries continues to this day.

Like all of you assembled here today, we at the Corporation believe that libraries are the levers of change within societies. And without question, they are the key to the progress of any society that values learning and knowledge. Libraries serve a critical role in improving literacy levels, and act as information hubs, often providing a community's only access to electronic communication. But they are even more than that: they are a place of freedom. They are a place where individuals can explore whatever ideas they

want and learn about whatever subjects they are interested in, without anyone asking questions about what they want to know or why they want to know it. Libraries are where the past opens up to any man, woman or child who wants to learn its lessons. Libraries are where people begin to envision the future—for themselves, for their communities, and even for their nations.

Further, libraries, along with our museums and universities, constitute the very DNA of our culture. Cemeteries do not provide earthly immortality to men and women. Libraries, museums and universities too, are the true monuments to the lives of human beings, to the work they have done and all that they have learned and passed on to their descendants.

Libraries are as old as civilization—the object of pride, envy and sometimes senseless destruction. From the clay tablets of Babylon to the computers of a modern library stretch more than five thousand years of humankind's insatiable desire to establish written immortality, to ensure the continuity of culture and civilization, and to share their memory, their wisdom, their strivings, their longings, their fantasies and their experiences with future generations.

There were libraries in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago. Books then were clay tablets stamped with wedge-shaped marks and baked in the sun. Tens of thousands of them are now stored in museums, many still awaiting translation. The early collections included immense commercial records, documents of state, which were housed in the temple under the custody of a priest. We also know that in 600 B.C. there were libraries of a sort in Greece. Not long after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, he founded the city of Alexandria, and there, around 300 B.C., he built an Academy to serve the Muses, known as the Museum. It gave poets, historians, musicians, mathematicians, astronomers and scientists an opportunity to live and to work under royal patronage. The results are now the stuff of history: at Alexandria, Euclid worked out the elements of geometry; Ptolemy mapped the heavens; a scholar and poet, Eratosthenes, determined the circumference of the earth; another, Herophilus, recognized the connection between a

heartbeat and a pulse, and he articulated the difference between arteries and veins; yet another developed a systematic method of cataloging and shelving books.

Looking back on these accomplishments, we can recognize that libraries constitute the diaries of mankind. They carry our nation's heritage and the heritage of the entire human race—the record of its triumphs and failures, a legacy of its intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements. The library represents humanity's collective memory. It is more than just a repository: it is truly an instrument of civilization. The library is a laboratory of human inspirations, a window to the future, a wellspring of action. The library is a source of self-renewal. It is the link between the solitary individual and collective mankind. It represents our community. The library is the university of universities, containing the source and unity of knowledge. The library is the only true university even within a university. There are no entrance examinations and no subsequent examinations. Neither are there diplomas or graduations, for no one can graduate from a library. Above all else, the library represents and embodies the spirit of humanity. The library marks an act of faith in the continuity of humanity. It is an act of honor to the past, a witness to the future, hence a visible judgment of both.

A library is also the one, unique place where we can satisfy the love for learning and for reading books that is a critical component of our lives. After all, reading provides a renewal. What is renewed is the imagination. Its active independence is able to take the measure of everyday events from a point just beyond our reach. That point, the act of reading provides. Reading constitutes a self renewal, an imaginative act and a human act. It forces us to see how we would be poorer, what kind of experience we would be missing and what strengths we would lack if we did not read.

And in our libraries, we find an oasis, a place of reflection and contemplation. A library is a sanctuary, a haven for privacy, a retreat as well as a source of recreation for the renewal of one's imagination and the development of one's mind. The library provides a place and space for imaginative recreation, for imaginative rebirth. As American author

Rita Mae Brown succinctly put it, “When I got my library card, that is when my life began.”

When another author, the late Jorge Luis Borges, who was one of Latin America’s great contemporary writers and a former librarian, became blind, he imagined paradise in the form of a library. He once wrote the following moving tribute to the book: “Of all of mankind’s diverse tools, undoubtedly the most astonishing are his books. All the others are extensions of the body. The telephone is an extension of his voice; the telescope and microscope extensions of his sight. The sword and the plow are extensions of his arms. . . [Man] has created the book, however, as the worldly extension of his imagination and his memory. . . Mankind owes all that we are to the written word. Books are the great memory and [imagination] of the centuries.”

“I believe,” Borges concluded, “that books will never disappear. It is impossible for it to happen. If books were to disappear, history would disappear. So would men [and women].

For all of Africa and Uganda in particular, preserving history, with all its tragedies and triumphs, its injustices, reconciliations and rebirths, is a critical component of progress. It is an essential part of the roadmap that leads to the future for every citizen of the country. In that connection, Carnegie Corporation of New York is extraordinarily proud to have helped the people of Uganda, particularly Makerere University to build and renew the Research Commons. These buildings, these books, and the treasures of knowledge they hold are our joint investment in the future. I celebrate with you all that your future will hold.

Thank you very much.