

Opening Speech at International Conference on Cultural Heritage in Africa
by H.E. Ambassador KANO Takehiro
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Nairobi, Kenya

Your Excellency Ms. Hanna Wendot Cheptumo, Cabinet Secretary for Gender, Culture, the Arts and Heritage, Republic of Kenya,
Your Excellency Ms. Umami Bashir, Principal Secretary, Culture, the Arts and Heritage, Republic of Kenya,
Mr. Lazare Eloundou Assomo, Director of World Heritage Center, UNESCO,
Mr. Albino Jopera, Executive Director of African World Heritage Fund,

Excellencies, Esteemed guests, partners, and valued colleagues.

It is a great honour and pleasure to address you today, as we gather here in Nairobi for the International Conference on Cultural Heritage in Africa: A Dialogue on the Concept of Authenticity.

As one of the contributors to this important event, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly share why Japan chose to support this conference.

Japan became a State Party to the World Heritage Convention in 1992. As we began preparing to nominate our own cultural properties for inscription on the World Heritage List, we encountered a fundamental challenge: the prevailing concept of “authenticity” in heritage conservation, which was largely based on the values and practices associated with stone architecture in Europe, did not align with the context of Japanese cultural heritage, particularly our wooden structures.

In Japan, wooden buildings have been preserved and passed down over generations through continuous repair, replacement, and restoration of components to maintain their functionality and structural integrity. Through these regular repairs, traditional construction techniques have also been handed down. However, at the time, such practices were not considered to meet the strict principle of retaining the original elements, and thus were seen as lacking in authenticity.

To address this issue, Japan convened the Nara Conference in 1994, initiating an international dialogue on the concept of authenticity. This led to the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity.

The Document recognized the need to respect cultural diversity and consider the specific cultural contexts in understanding and assessing the authenticity. It also emphasized that values such as form, function, use, traditions, spirit, and setting may

be as important as material substance.

Eventually, as you may be already aware, Nara Document on Authenticity opened the door not only for the recognition of Japan's wooden architecture, but also for the inscription of a wide range of cultural heritage sites to the World Heritage List, across Asia and beyond.

I will not go further into the details of the Nara Document, as this week you will hear directly from two distinguished experts: Professor Nobuko Inaba and Professor Toshiyuki Kono, former President of ICOMOS. They have been deeply involved in the journey surrounding the Nara Document. They will share their insights on its development and impact over the last 30 years.

A few years ago, the Government of Japan received a project proposal from the UNESCO Nairobi Office, proposing an international conference on the concept of heritage authenticity in Africa. It immediately reminded us of Japan's own path leading to the Nara Document. We felt strongly compelled to support this initiative, recognizing its potential to contribute meaningfully to a more representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List.

Since committing our support, we have received regular updates from the UNESCO Nairobi Office and His Excellency Ambassador Peter Ngure, my dear colleague in Paris. Each briefing has shown us how this initiative, supported by governments, experts, and communities across the continent, has grown into a truly Africa-led movement with remarkable momentum and dedication. We are sincerely honoured to play a part in this endeavour.

I hope that the discussions we will share throughout this week prove to be both enriching and productive. May they serve as a platform for the meaningful exchange of knowledge, experiences, and diverse perspectives. Through our collective dialogue and collaboration, I believe we can begin to shape a shared vision, which will one day lead us to shape the future of heritage conservation in Africa and beyond.

In closing, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Her Excellency Ms. Hanna Wendot Cheptumo, Cabinet Secretary for Gender, Culture, the Arts and Heritage, Her Excellency Ms. Umami Bashir, Principal Secretary, and to all representatives of the Government of Kenya, for your outstanding leadership and insight, as well as your warm hospitality, in hosting this important gathering.

I also wish to pay tribute to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and UNESCO Nairobi Office, for their indispensable role in bringing us all together.
Thank you.