DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

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The decision to commission a UNESCO General History of the Caribbean, taken by the twenty-first session of the General Conference of UNESCO (1980), was an instance of the change in cultural policy—which resulted in a shift in emphasis from the ‘common heritage of all mankind’ to acknowledging the ‘diversity of cultures’ and commissioning the histories of Africa, Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as a revision of the History of Mankind. In all these cases, the brief of the Director-General was for a history observed from inside the region not from the outside, as if from the ports and capitals of European colonizers. Cultural identity, unity in diversity, and therefore the cultural heritages of the regions, were to inform the themes chosen for the history, giving prominence to those groups, persons and cultures hitherto either excluded from historical narratives, or treated more as objects than as actors in the description of events.

By December 1981, when the Working Group for the Preparation of a General History of the Caribbean met in Paris, the ideas and aims expressed by the UNESCO General Conferences of 1978 and 1980 were widely shared by the twenty scholars, Caribbean and European, whom the Director-General had invited in their personal capacity to break ground for the project. The aspirations of the ground-breakers embraced geography, anthropology, archaeology, ethnography, demography, society, religion, politics, ethnicity, culture, rituals, customs, socio-linguistics, music, dance, festivals, oral tradition, historiography, and cartography. One is tempted to conclude etcetera, and rightly so, because their successors noticed that, in 1981, the Working Group had overlooked gender and the environment. The inclusiveness of their vision of the history of the Caribbean was, no doubt, due to the desire of the twenty scholars that the history of its people and their habitat should be written as if observed from inside the region.

How was this vision to be made concrete in a few volumes, limited to twenty chapters each? How, within that general framework, to deal adequately with the wide diversity of size, ancestry, religion, language, custom, politics? How to set the chronological limits to volumes without cutting off themes artificially? How to integrate
the material into a Caribbean narrative and avoid writing history as merely summary accounts of the larger islands?

The task was given to the Drafting Committee which first met in Kingston in April 1983. Of its nineteen members, twelve were from the Caribbean and seven from Africa, India, Europe and the Americas. At first, the Committee used the text of the Report of the Working Group (1981) to elicit the themes significant for Caribbean history. But in the discussion which followed, the form of organization proposed by the Working Group was abandoned and replaced by five themes which would make for a coherent history of the Caribbean region while being consonant with the UNESCO guidelines.

These were Autochthonous Societies, New Societies: The Long Sixteenth Century, Slave Societies, The Long Nineteenth Century, The Caribbean in the Twentieth Century, and they became, with slight elaboration, the titles for the first five volumes of the history.

The Drafting Committee also promised to consider adding an annexe containing maps and statistics, and this in time became the sixth volume, Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean.