

**UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION**

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the first session of the General Assembly of States Parties
to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Mr Prime Minister,
Distinguished Ministers,
Madam First Lady of Azerbaijan,
Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open today the first session of the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, alongside illustrious guests who wish to mark this event by their presence. In addition to the 45 States Parties which deposited their instruments of ratification with UNESCO three months or more before the opening of this meeting, we have the pleasure of the participation of many observer Member States, some of which have meanwhile become or will soon become Parties to this Convention, and also non-governmental organizations which have played a very active role in the programme of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Mr Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, honours us by his presence. The world report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, drawn up under his presidency, has contributed substantially to the new ways of thinking about culture and development, cultural dialogue and cultural diversity. It has forged a new ethics of responsibility with respect to the cultural heritage, be it tangible or intangible. His remarkable speech at the Round Table of Ministers of Culture in Istanbul on the theme “The intangible heritage: a mirror of cultural diversity”, in September 2002, truly constituted the beginning of a real awareness of the importance of such heritage at the highest level. I thank him for having agreed to be among us today on another highly symbolic occasion.

I must also greet and extend my warmest thanks to H.E. Mr Mohamed Bedjaoui, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria, who has worked tirelessly for more than three years in drawing up this Convention, guiding with an enlightened vision and a firm hand in a velvet glove all the preparatory and intergovernmental meetings which led to the birth of this Convention, meetings which he very kindly agreed to chair from start to finish.

The Minister for Education, Culture, Sports, Sciences and Technology of Japan, Mr Kosaka, also deserves all our gratitude. Japan indeed understood very early the capital importance of the intangible heritage for the international community and has shown tremendous generosity by supporting the entire drafting process and many of the safeguard plans already introduced under the Proclamation of Masterpieces. I wish to reiterate all our thanks to him.

Many UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors are also backing this undertaking. I am thus very honoured by the presence of Madam Mehriban Aliyeva, First Lady of Azerbaijan and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for oral and musical traditions, who is playing an outstanding part in their promotion not only in her own country but throughout the world.

I should also like to greet Mr Kedebe Kassa, the representative of Mr Alpha Oumar Konare, President of the Commission of the African Union, whose presence shows the extent of the importance which Africa attaches to this major Convention for the continent. Thanks to Africa's

considerable wealth in intangible heritage, it will no doubt make it possible to offset, the continent's marked under-representation in regard to the tangible heritage.

Lastly, I wish to commend the participation of the presidents of our two governing bodies, Mr Musa Bin Jaafar Bin Hassan, President of the General Conference, and Mr Zhang Xinsheng, Chairperson of the Executive Board of UNESCO, who show by their presence the importance they accord to this Convention, of which they have been tireless champions.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We can all be gratified by the progress made in so little time and the speed with which this Convention is entering into force.

The intangible heritage, by its very nature and the fragility inherent in its mode of transmission, needed reinforced protection. This Convention thus fills a great void that needed to be dealt with urgently. It proposes very practical measures to preserve the numerous facets of this heritage, a mirror of cultural diversity.

The experience acquired through the programme of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was crucial for the drawing up of a Convention corresponding to the real needs and the specific nature of this heritage. Three years of meetings and intense debate, inspired by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in 2001, were necessary for its elaboration.

To date, 52 countries have ratified the Convention, which represents a record, only 30 months after its adoption. Thus, in addition to the 45 States Parties present today, seven have sent to UNESCO their instruments of ratification since 27 March: Albania, Madagascar, Zambia, Armenia, Zimbabwe, Cambodia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These States will be considered as States Parties three months after the date of deposit of their instruments with UNESCO. Many other countries have also informed me of their imminent ratification.

The States Parties which are meeting today, and the States which will become Parties in a few weeks, have great responsibilities in the implementation of the Convention, all of which will constitute incentives for other States to ratify it also. This is why I wish, in view of the importance of this stage, that a broader debate can be held, with the participation of the observers, so that the implementation framework is established on the basis of the widest possible consultation, allowing all the Parties concerned to adhere to it fully.

The meeting's agenda is therefore as full as it is important. In accordance with the provisions of the Convention, you will have to adopt your rules of procedure, to determine the rates of contributions to be paid into the Fund for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and even to rule on the distribution of seats in the Intergovernmental Committee. It is for you to examine the texts that are submitted to you by the Secretariat, to discuss them and to amend them as you think fit.

One of the major tasks of this Assembly is the election of the States members of the Intergovernmental Committee. The Committee as it is initially composed will have special importance since it will be entrusted with drawing up a set of operational guidelines for the Convention's implementation, guidelines which will have to be submitted to the next Assembly. The members of the first Committee will thus have the responsibility of determining provisionally

but decisively the orientation of the Convention. In addition, the Committee will advise the General Assembly on the use of the Fund.

Eighteen seats are to be filled at this session. But, as you know, the Convention stipulates that this number will be raised to 24 as soon as the Convention has 50 States Parties. That will be the case soon since 52 States have to date ratified it. It would therefore be desirable to organize an extraordinary General Assembly in the autumn to elect six members to the Committee, thereby enabling it to hold its first meeting with its full membership.

At such a historic moment as today not only for UNESCO but also for the entire international community, I should like to conclude by expressing the wish that many other States will ratify this extremely promising Convention so as to ensure that, throughout the world, the intangible heritage, undoubtedly the most fascinating manifestation of humanity's creative genius, may be preserved in an effective and responsible manner for future generations.

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states that "Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature". "Each creation draws on the roots of cultural traditions" [...] "For this reason, heritage in all its forms must be preserved, enhanced and handed on to future generations". I am delighted that today so many Member States of UNESCO have given a practical demonstration of their attachment to this injunction.

Thank you.