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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

DG/2006/160
Original: French

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Algiers, Algeria, 18 November 2006

Mr Chairperson of the General Assembly of the States Parties, Minister of State,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria,
Mr President of the General Conference of UNESCO,
Madam Minister of Culture,
Distinguished Representatives of States Members of the Intergovernmental
Committee and of States Parties to the Convention,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be among you today on the occasion of the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

I should like, first of all, to thank the Algerian authorities for the warm welcome extended to us and for their sterling efforts in organizing this meeting.

I should, of course, pay a special tribute to Mr Mohamed Bedjaoui, Chairperson of the General Assembly of the States Parties and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria. We owe him heartfelt thanks for his untiring efforts at our side for several years, chairing throughout and guiding with an enlightened vision and a sure hand, all of the preparatory and intergovernmental meetings that have led to the adoption of the Convention. Without his wisdom, expertise, experience and ingenuity, we would probably not be meeting today, ready to work on the form and manner of implementation of a major convention on the world's cultural diversity.

I am therefore very happy that the very first session of the Intergovernmental Committee is being held in "Algiers the White", in tribute to Algeria, the first Member State of UNESCO to ratify the Convention. I am also gratified that Algiers has been named Cultural Capital of the Arab World for 2007 and I wish to congratulate you, Madame Minister of Culture, and the Algerian authorities, on this important recognition.

Madam Minister, your country Algeria is a land with a rich intangible cultural heritage. It has long taken great care of that heritage and I was happy to proclaim last year the Ahellil of Guarara a Masterpiece of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is thus without great surprise, but with much gratitude, that I have noted Algeria's intention to establish a regional centre for the intangible heritage under the auspices of UNESCO. We can only encourage this initiative and you can count on our full cooperation.

I also wish to extend warm congratulations to the 24 members of this Committee, some of whom were elected very recently, and to express full support for them in the engaging, but fascinating, work that awaits them.

I am also very pleased to have you among us, Mr President of the General Conference, on this happy occasion.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The lengthy research work carried out by the international community on the function and the values of cultural expressions and practices and of cultural monuments and sites has paved the way to new approaches to understanding and protecting our cultural heritage.

The role played by communities and groups in identifying, revitalizing and transmitting this heritage was highlighted in particular, and the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was the high point of that recognition.

It is a major undertaking, which should help to bring peoples closer together, improve mutual understanding and promote constructive intercultural dialogue, thereby providing a valuable tool for achieving the ideals of our Organization.

It concerns the safeguarding of a living heritage that instils a sense of identity and feelings of continuity and solidarity in the communities by which it is held and which constitute, and here I quote the 2003 Convention, “a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development”.

I consider the 2003 Convention to be a pivot between the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

As with the 1972 Convention, the 2003 Convention aims to safeguard the heritage, an evolving, constantly changing heritage that would lose if it were to take a fixed form. To some extent, it deals much more with those who “make” the heritage than with the objects in which the heritage is embodied and transmitted.

In the same way as the 2005 Convention, the 2003 Convention will defend living cultural expressions, which bear witness pre-eminently to creativity, values and contact among the peoples of the world.

The three Conventions together constitute the bedrock on which the efforts of the international community to foster cultural diversity will be based, through the promotion and the safeguarding of tangible and intangible property and expressions, belonging to the past and the present, to tradition and modernity.

The States Parties to these Conventions are required, for the purposes of implementation, to put in place an effective set of operational measures at the national level in order to protect, publicize and recognize in a more appropriate manner the value of their societies’ collective and individual traditions and cultural expressions.

Thus, with their diverse but complementary objectives, specific scope and differences as to the measures that they propose, the three instruments call for the establishment of a dialectical relationship between the policies that will be conducted by States, in cooperation with civil society and international organizations.

Much ground has been covered since action first began to raise awareness of the values of the intangible cultural heritage and today, when the first meeting of the committee is being held. However, the real task is only now beginning as we move to implement the 2003 Convention.

During the session, you will be required first of all to adopt the Committee's Rules of Procedure, which will govern and establish the framework for your debates.

Once you have elected the members of the Bureau of the Committee's first session and adopted the agenda, you will begin to discuss the operational guidelines on the implementation of the Convention.

You will thus have to reflect on the mechanism of assistance that you consider most appropriate, since the 2003 Convention does not provide for particular organizations to assist the Committee.

You will then be invited to discuss the criteria for the inclusion of items in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; and you will end this session by electing the members of the Bureau for the second session of the Committee.

Your debates, despite being preliminary in nature, will give us useful pointers – as will indeed the comments that you will transmit in writing to the Secretariat – for drawing up the documents on which subsequent discussions and the decisions of future sessions will be based.

As you know, the Assembly of the States Parties should meet every two years, in June, and the Committee every year, in autumn, and it will always be possible to hold extraordinary sessions.

The way ahead is therefore still long until the inclusion of the first items in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and it will be necessary to decide on a specific work schedule to enable us to reach our "cruising speed".

The first inclusions could only be decided on in autumn 2008, at the third session of the Committee which will follow the second session of the General Assembly, in June 2008, during which the procedure will be approved.

I should therefore like to propose a schedule for the coming two years, which should be marked by ordinary and extraordinary sessions of the two statutory bodies of the Convention.

The Committee could thus plan to hold an extraordinary working session in spring 2007 to discuss the main points of the texts which, at the request of the first General Assembly, held in 2006, are to be drawn up as a matter of high priority: the draft operational guidelines, the draft text on the accreditation of advisory non-governmental organizations and the criteria for the selection of items for

inclusion in the two Lists established under the Convention and for the granting of international assistance.

Most of this work could be finalized at the Committee's second ordinary session in early autumn 2007, thus enabling the General Assembly to approve, if possible before the end of 2007, all of the necessary provisions.

The Committee could then invite the States Parties, by circular letter, to make nominations for the first inclusion in the Convention lists.

The first inclusion of items of the intangible heritage, and the inclusion of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity, could be accomplished during the Committee's third ordinary session in autumn 2008.

As you can see, much is expected of your competences and your commitment, but I have no doubt that you will perform the duties assigned to you with both wisdom and perspicacity.

As today's agenda is very full, I shall conclude by assuring you of my confidence in your work which, I am convinced, will mark a memorable page in the history of the implementation of our Convention. Your discussions, I know, will be held in a spirit of understanding and consensus, as you are all keen to take urgent action to safeguard this form of heritage which we hold so dear.

Thank you.