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Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International Round Table:
'Intangible Cultural Heritage: Working Definitions'

Turin, Italy, 14 March 2001

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have pleasure in opening this International Round Table on ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage: Working Definitions’. Intangible cultural heritage is gaining increasing recognition worldwide for the fundamental role it plays in our lives in the maintenance and enhancement of cultural identity and diversity. This meeting, convened in response to the requests of Member States, will therefore seek to address the scope and definition of this heritage, and to examine the possibility of preparing the first international normative instrument for its protection.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Italy and the regional and local authorities for their generosity in hosting the Round Table. I should also like to thank His Excellency, Mr Gabriele Saro, Permanent Delegate to UNESCO for Italy, for the prompt and significant initiatives he has taken to make this meeting possible. Italy, in hosting this meeting, demonstrates its strong support and commitment to one of the highest priority programmes of UNESCO: Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The very active and longstanding contribution of Italy to UNESCO's many different activities is exemplary. In the field of culture, Italy has often been commended for its active collaboration, particularly in matters relating to cultural heritage. More recently, Italy has led the way in highlighting the role of culture in sustainable development by organizing in 1999 an international conference, ‘Culture Counts’, which was held in Florence in cooperation with UNESCO and the World Bank.

I should also like to express my appreciation to the Fondazione Premio Grinzane Cavour, more specifically, its President, Mr Giuliano Soria, for so generously accommodating this Round Table in the Château de Grinzane Cavour, and for its considerable logistic support. It is most fitting that this meeting is being held in Piedmont, a region exceptionally rich in cultural heritage, including many exceptional architectural treasures and living expressions of traditional craftsmanship, and the birthplace of many notable artists and intellectuals, such as Beppe Fenoglio and Cesare Pavese. I also commend the Grinzane Foundation for supporting cultural heritage through the prestigious Grinzane Literary Prize, which distinguishes and rewards contemporary literature. By promoting creativity, imagination, memory and knowledge, this foundation nurtures traditions of reading and writing among young people, while safeguarding and revitalizing aspects essential to the topic of the present Round Table: intangible cultural heritage.

Finally, this round of thanks would not be complete without my expression of gratitude to Professor Francesco Francioni. As we are both former Chairpersons of the World Heritage Committee, it gives me particular pleasure to be sharing this podium with him.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we are all aware, intangible heritage worldwide urgently requires increasing protection in order to ensure its continuity and development. This is largely due to the specific nature of that heritage, which covers the most fundamental yet vulnerable aspects of living culture and tradition, most often embodied in the spiritual life, knowledge, skills and processes of an individual or a community.

It is increasingly evident that in many societies traditional forms of expression are undermined by globalization. The trends towards cultural homogenization which we witness in so many facets of life today can present a threat to the survival of many unique forms of cultural expression. The disappearance of this heritage is reflected in a diminishment of cultural diversity worldwide.

Intangible cultural heritage urgently needs to be protected and revitalized, and each government should take the necessary measures to ensure this. UNESCO, the only organization within the United Nations to have a mandate in the field of culture, has long played a leading role in this regard. As a laboratory of ideas, a catalyst of international cooperation and a clearing-house, the Organization must be able to anticipate and to propose responses to major issues arising in its fields of competence, and to do so in a standard-setting context.

The proposed international standard-setting instrument is the most effective means of encouraging Member States to engage in urgent actions for the protection of intangible heritage, as witness the example of the World Heritage Convention. At the forthcoming session of the Executive Board in May-June, I will submit a preliminary study on the advisability of developing such an instrument for its safeguarding. While it is up to Member States to decide whether to go on to adopt regulatory instruments at national level, we must provide a solid basis for their informed consideration of the issues involved.

The question of terminology is the fundamental starting point. Thorough debate is necessary on this important question in order for the present Round Table to address a possible new working definition of the term 'intangible cultural heritage'. For this purpose, it will be necessary first of all to examine terminology and existing working definitions in use by Member States and relevant NGOs and IGOs and tentatively to redefine selected terminology relating to intangible cultural heritage used in the 1989 Recommendation. The recent study commissioned by UNESCO under the title 'A Preliminary Study on the Advisability of Regulating Internationally, through a New Standard Setting Instrument, the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage' will then be taken into account. The challenge of the present forum will be finally to propose a suitable working definition for UNESCO. This work and the outcomes of this Round Table will be fundamental to the task of legal experts in seeking to clarify terminology and draft definitions for a new legal instrument.

As you know, this heritage is of an ubiquitous nature, and many of its expressions such as language, traditional values and know-how are fundamental to cultural identity and ways of life. A working definition of intangible cultural heritage for UNESCO should encompass the domains of this heritage in which the Organization's programmes and activities play a leading role and in which it is able to respond with the highest levels of competence and comparative advantage to demands emerging in contemporary contexts, while discharging its specific missions.

This Round Table marks a key moment in the work of UNESCO in the domain of intangible heritage, and follows on from twenty years of ongoing research and activities that have sought to promote the preservation of this heritage and to enhance awareness of its significance. The 1989 Recommendation reflects sixteen years of painstaking analysis and expert debate in Member States prior to its adoption at the 25th session of the UNESCO General Conference. More recently, the 1999 International Conference co-organized by UNESCO and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and entitled 'A Global Assessment of the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore' represented the culmination of eight regional seminars held by UNESCO which systematically assessed the implementation of the Recommendation and the present situation in regard to the safeguarding and revitalization of intangible heritage.

In 1998, UNESCO launched a new programme, the 'Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Following the success of the World Heritage List, this programme aims to draw the attention of Member States to their intangible cultural heritage. Through this Programme, UNESCO encourages Member States to compile inventories of their intangible

cultural heritage and assists them in establishing safeguarding strategies. The Programme will also establish a list of worldwide intangible heritage for which UNESCO will provide technical and financial assistance for preservation and promotional actions.

The Programme serves to raise awareness of the importance and value of intangible cultural heritage in its diversity of forms, and to mobilize international efforts to support and safeguard it. The fact that nearly 40 Member States have submitted nominations for this list is indeed encouraging as it attests to the growing interest in this domain and the relevance of this Programme in Member States. The Jury composed of 18 distinguished personalities will meet from 15 to 18 May, and I shall have the honour of making my first Proclamation during a ceremony to take place on 18 May. Furthermore, I shall be reporting to the Executive Board of UNESCO shortly thereafter, once it is in session.

A cursory examination of the first candidate files already offers some idea of what most Member States consider to be the most outstanding cultural spaces or forms of traditional cultural expression in their countries.

These turn around religious events, cultural spaces, languages, social institutions or musical instruments. It is very noticeable that most of the nominations reflect holistic approaches, taking in all the aspects of the cultural space or form of cultural expression proposed.

The Present Round Table is both a culmination of previous efforts by UNESCO and its partners, and the beginning of an important new phase in its work in the field of culture. I call on you all, as experts in your respective fields, to give guidance to UNESCO so that the Organization's best endeavours to promote the protection of intangible cultural heritage will be crowned with success.

The role of Italy is significant in this process. I have accordingly asked my Assistant Director-General for Culture, Mr Mounir Bouchenaki, to co-sign, along with Mr Giuliano Soria, Director of the Premio Grinzane Cavour Foundation, a letter of intent which outlines areas of common interest relating to intangible heritage in which the Organization wishes to continue collaborating with the foundation. It is my sincere hope that UNESCO will establish and maintain many such active partnerships, through which meaningful contributions will be made to the protection, revitalization and promotion of this heritage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You may be sure that I shall be fully informed of your discussions and conclusions which, I am confident, will contribute significantly to further progress in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage worldwide.

I wish you every success in your important work.