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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the award ceremony
for the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers

KYRGYZSTAN, 11 June 2004

Your Excellency, President Akaev of the Kyrgyz Republic,
First Lady Mrs Akaeva,
Mr Prime Minister,
Mr Aitmatov, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how much I enjoyed the performance of musicians and artists; it was most impressive and truly memorable.

It is a great pleasure and honour to be with you today to attend this ceremony and to present the diploma for the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers, which was proclaimed as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in November 2003.

I am particularly pleased to present this diploma to His Excellency Mr Askar Akaev, President of the Kyrgyz Republic, whose commitment to the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of his country is very well known.

The Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers, the Kyrgyz national candidature, was selected by the International Jury, together with 27 other candidatures, for the Second Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity last November. This ancient form of cultural expression of the nomadic Kyrgyz people, the great Kyrgyz epics, represent a veritable oral encyclopedia of Kyrgyz social values, cultural knowledge and collective memory. The Akyns' art of storytelling, which combines spirited singing, improvisation and musical composition, is performed at religious and private festivities, seasonal ceremonies and national holidays. I enjoyed watching it in Issyk-Kul on the occasion of Mr Chingiz Aitmatov's 75th birthday celebration.

The First Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was made by UNESCO in 2001 as a first practical response to the urgent need to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage. By establishing a list of the intangible cultural heritage, the Proclamation has highlighted a form of heritage that has been all too often overshadowed by the monumental and natural heritage.

The Second Proclamation of Masterpieces took place in November 2003, soon after the adoption by the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO of the international Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Masterpieces Proclamation programme was unmistakably a vital link in the process leading to its adoption.

The new international convention will provide Member States with mechanisms of assistance for the identification, safeguarding and promotion of forms of expression of the intangible cultural heritage. It will also stimulate the exchange of information, experience and joint initiatives in the field of safeguarding.

I am confident that the success of the Second Proclamation and the adoption of that Convention will give fresh impetus to the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, which is being recognized by more and more people as a vital factor in the preservation of cultural diversity throughout the world.

The new Convention will take effect three months after the thirtieth state has ratified it. Algeria and Mauritius have already completed the basic procedures and I am sure that several others will join them shortly. Given the urgency of safeguarding the vulnerable components of the intangible cultural heritage, I hope that the Convention will come into force as soon as possible.

As is stated in the Issyk-Kul Declaration on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations in Eurasia, which has been adopted by the participants in the two-day international conference on this theme, “Early ratification of this new international instrument will be crucial as it will provide Member States with mechanisms of assistance for the identification, safeguarding and promotion of forms of expression of the intangible cultural heritage. It will also stimulate the exchange of information, experience and joint initiatives in the field of safeguarding.” In fact, it is my expectation that the Convention will enter into force in late 2005 or the first half of 2006. I would like hereby to encourage the Kyrgyz Republic to join with international efforts by becoming one of the first States Parties to the Convention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO’s recognition of this outstanding form of artistic expression is a reward for the efforts of the Kyrgyz Republic to protect this example of the intangible cultural heritage. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the national institutions involved, and to compliment the practitioners for keeping this unique form of cultural expression alive. Particular thanks are due to Professor Beksultan Jakiev and Mr Sadyk Sher-Niyaz for their outstanding efforts on behalf of the Art of Akyns and the project leading to its inclusion in the Second Proclamation. I am sure we all greatly appreciate their hard work and unflagging commitment.

The Proclamation of the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers, implies not only a high international recognition of this art, but it also means the commitment to implement the safeguarding plans proposed in the candidature file.

In this regard, I am most pleased to announce that, thanks to the UNESCO/Japan Fund-in-Trust for the Safeguarding and Promotion of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO will provide financial assistance for the implementation of such an action plan. A total amount of 150,000 dollars will be provided to assist the national authorities in charge of the safeguarding of the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers.

We hope that this action plan will contribute to making young people more interested in and aware of the importance and uniqueness of the oral heritage transmitted by their ancestors. Despite these threats, the epics remain an essential component of Kyrgyz identity and continue to inspire contemporary writers, poets, and composers. In every sense, it is an inspiring story.

Thank you for your attention.