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Address by
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to the opening session of the
Third Round Table of Ministers of Culture
“The intangible cultural heritage: a mirror of cultural diversity”

Istanbul, 16 September 2002

Mr President,
Mr Minister of Culture of Turkey,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to open this Third Round Table of Ministers of Culture which, in this United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage, and coming closely after the end of the Johannesburg Summit, is of prime importance.

The fact that so many of you have responded to UNESCO's invitation is eloquent testimony to the growing awareness within the international community of the importance of our joint efforts to defend cultural diversity and the intangible cultural heritage.

Allow me first of all to say how grateful we are to the Turkish authorities for having agreed to host this meeting in the fascinating city of Istanbul, which is a major centre of the world heritage. I know, Mr President, that your country, has spared no effort to ensure that this Round Table is held in the best possible conditions. I therefore wish, on behalf of UNESCO, to express to you our deep gratitude. If I may also say so, Mr President, we are most honoured by your presence.

I should also like to express my sincere thanks to Mr Javier Pérez de Cuéllar for his vibrant plea in favour of the intangible heritage, cultural diversity and sustainable development.

Finally, I should like, once again, to express my sincere thanks to the ministers of culture, heads and members of delegations, and observers who have come to participate in or follow the debates. These meetings, which supplement the day-to-day contacts we have with your Permanent Delegations and National Commissions for UNESCO, play a fundamental role, helping us to gauge your expectations and expand our vision of the policies to be pursued with regard to cultural development.

Thank you all very much.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is now two years since the Second Round Table, which many of you attended, was held at UNESCO. As you will remember, its theme was "Cultural diversity: challenges of the marketplace". The debates at that round table were fascinating and impassioned, so much so that you were unable to agree on a final communiqué. We therefore took leave of one another in the midst of our unfinished debates, with the

feeling that we were not able to advance any further. And yet, less than a year later, at the 31st session of the General Conference, the Member States of UNESCO adopted the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity unanimously by acclamation. That Declaration will, I am convinced, become a landmark not only in the history of UNESCO but also in the history of humanity as a whole.

I should therefore like to introduce our Third Round Table, whose theme is “The intangible heritage: a mirror of cultural diversity”, by reminding you that it is often the liveliest debates that are the most fruitful, and that approaches which initially seem very far apart, indeed diametrically opposed, may often lead to common positions, which are all the stronger for having been arrived at in this way.

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity sets forth a number of principles, including one which is in my view primordial: “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”. Let us make no mistake, this does not mean adopting an essentially curatorial approach by seeking above all to preserve unchanged the relics of the past and to steer clear of modernity. “It is diversity itself which must be saved, not the historical content of diversity in each period, which ultimately cannot be prolonged beyond its natural end.” Those highly pertinent words are by Claude Lévi-Strauss; UNESCO has long since adopted them as its own.

Clearly cultural diversity, which finds expression in particular in artistic creation and cultural goods and services, cannot be imagined without a suitable policy for heritage preservation, the foundation on which exchanges, innovation and creativity may be built. We need to develop a more global approach to the reflections of our cultures and to ensure that they are no longer viewed in isolation, but rather as part of their relations with that physical environment – both cultural and natural – and non-physical environment. We must also recognize that the intangible heritage, by virtue of embracing all the practices, representations, spaces and forms of expression associated with human creativity, plays a vital role in the construction of our identity, culture and imaginaire. M de Cuéllar provided us with some edifying illustrations of this in his brilliant presentation.

Without wishing to trace in detail the evolution over the past 20 years of the meaning of the cultural heritage, I definitely sense that we are today somehow more favourably disposed to renewing our approach to the world heritage, and to paying due attention to the intangible heritage, an area still largely neglected as a result of an essentially monumental conception of the artistic heritage.

In addition to developments in scientific thinking, this new situation has no doubt arisen because we have all been seized with a sense of urgency.

The progressive loss of this heritage in several areas of the world and its vulnerability to the extreme effects of globalization, even as the heritage plays a vital role in the perpetuation of cultural diversity and human creativity, impels us to take immediate action.

We must therefore act now, in concert, to keep this heritage alive. At stake is our capacity to maintain the links between defence of cultural diversity, safeguarding of the world heritage and respect for sustainable development, the sole guarantee of a global vision of humanity capable of evolving in a just and equitable manner. Moreover, this was one of the major lessons of the Johannesburg Summit, where cultural diversity was deemed to be indissociably tied to our planet's economic, social and ecological dimensions, and in the political declaration at the end of the Summit was termed a "collective strength" in the service of sustainable development.

To achieve this aim, various courses of action are open to us:

First, by encouraging all States, with the active cooperation of researchers, creators and bearers of culture, to identify more precisely the forms and items of the cultural heritage present on their territory, for example by drawing up inventories and registers, or by establishing resource and documentation centres;

Secondly, by making greater efforts to draw attention to and promote the enormous diversity of forms in which the intangible cultural heritage manifests itself by sensitizing the States and communities concerned to the value of such heritage and their responsibilities towards it, for example, by the adoption of national or regional legislation, the creation of local or national management bodies and the introduction of educational programmes; and

Lastly, by mobilizing the international community to safeguard this heritage through the establishment of technical and financial mechanisms for cooperation and assistance. The Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which I inaugurated in May 2002 and the second edition of which is currently under way, was in this regard an innovative and instructive experience. In this process, our constant concern has been to provide the greatest number of countries with an opportunity to demonstrate the richness of their heritage, to propose concrete plans of action for safeguarding it, and to promote specific national or multinational policies.

It is in this same spirit that UNESCO is presently engaged in the preparation of an international convention, the preliminary version of which will be submitted to governmental experts from all the Member States a few days from now, in Paris, from 23 to 27 September.

Among the three courses of action I have just outlined, the most important in my estimation is the necessary and desirable interaction between national policies and international action, the latter being both a stimulus and a catalyst. This interaction must guide our debates and shape our proposals since it is by respecting and recognizing our differences and national specificities that we may achieve consensus.

We have not chosen an easy path: there is a broad diversity of understanding and interpretation regarding the very nature and scope of the intangible heritage, a diversity of existing conceptions and legal systems, and a diversity of national experiences in the area of cultural policies.

We must not view such diversity as an obstacle, but rather as a source of enrichment for our reflections and initiatives.

All the international meetings of experts that we have organized in the last three years on the intangible heritage have led to considerable progress in our perception of this vast and complex field. The establishment of the Proclamation of Masterpieces has required much clarification on points of terminology and definition. That task of constant improvement has been of great assistance in our progress towards the preliminary draft convention, which still needs further elaboration. For we need to understand what type of action is most appropriate to participate in the safeguarding of the intangible heritage at the international level and what type of linkage between national and international action can be envisaged. I should like in this connection to thank President Bedjaoui, former President of the International Court of Justice and current President of the Constitutional Council of Algeria, very warmly for the generous contribution that he has made by agreeing to chair the work of the groups of experts who met several times this year to produce an initial outline of the preliminary draft convention.

Numerous initiatives have been taken meanwhile: specific measures and national laws have been adopted, regional seminars and national awareness-raising campaigns have been organized and prizes have been instituted. I take this opportunity to thank the United Arab Emirates most sincerely for their generosity in instituting the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nayan Prize, which provides greater recognition for outstanding forms of expression of the intangible heritage.

I also wish formally to thank all other donor countries, like the Republic of Korea which has established the Arirang Prize, countries that, according to their means, constantly support UNESCO's efforts to safeguard and promote the intangible cultural heritage.

Mr President,
Minister of Culture of Turkey,
Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

With this round table, I have the feeling that we are entering a new phase in the development of debate and consultation. Your status as leading political decision-makers and actors enables you, after many necessary years of inquiry and reflection, to place the intangible cultural heritage on a definite political agenda. This is undeniably a great turning point.

For my part, I hope that we can benefit fully from your presence to measure the progress achieved at the national level, evaluate proposals and experience and open up new prospects for the future. UNESCO's concern is to find, in the light of the latter, the best means of action at the international level, while identifying which type of cooperation is most appropriate for their support. I should now like to repeat, in order to endorse what you have just said to us, Mr de Cuellar: "International partnerships and interaction are an essential ingredient for creativity in problem-solving, a quality that requires a willingness to frame bold questions. It means a readiness to seek fresh definitions, reconcile old opposites, and help draw new mental maps".

Therefore, over and above the presentation of the various accounts of national experience to which we shall be very attentive, I must confess that I am counting on you to restore faith and vigour to the principle of international solidarity, which alone can enable us to give an international dimension to the safeguarding of the intangible heritage.

I am convinced that, together, we can accomplish such an objective.

Thank you.