

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the international meeting on
“the intangible cultural heritage: UNESCO’s role
and priority fields of action”

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 22 January 2002

Dona Ruth Cardoso,
Distinguished Minister of Culture,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly happy to be here with you today in order to open this meeting, which marks a decisive phase in UNESCO's work for the intangible cultural heritage.

First of all, I should like to express my sincere gratitude to the Brazilian Government and the regional and local authorities for their warm welcome. The hospitality that you have offered us here in Rio is no mere happy chance: indeed, Brazil is a country where recognition of cultural cross-fertilization and diversity of cultural heritage has played a key role in creating national identity. It is a sign of the importance that this country attaches to cultural diversity.

As you are aware, a vital text was recently adopted unanimously and by acclamation by our General Conference: I am talking about the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

For the first time, the international community has thus provided itself with a far-reaching standard-setting instrument that affirms its commitment to cultural diversity. Many countries have been at pains to emphasize that this Declaration constitutes for them a universal ethical frame of reference whose principles should inspire and influence all national and international policies at a juncture when it is becoming more urgent than ever to assert the equal dignity of all cultures.

It is a source of great satisfaction to me that, through patient consultation and coordination, this text has been completed. It will be a milestone, I am sure. But it is much more than a simple declaration. It is an inducement to each individual to take urgent and determined action to preserve, disseminate and show to advantage the treasures of humanity's cultural heritage.

The 1972 World Heritage Convention, which has to date been signed by 167 States, has marked an important stage in raising awareness of and protecting the heritage, and its role has been crucial in enriching our knowledge of various cultures. This Convention has become one of the triumphs of UNESCO's action, and there is no one who would not recognize its utility and its extreme relevance. With the adoption, at the most recent session of the General Conference, of the International Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, the tangible heritage as a whole is henceforth protected.

But even though it is a key feature on the map of cultural diversity, the intangible heritage has hitherto been basically neglected, probably because of its changeable nature and the difficulty of grasping it in its entirety. It has, in a way, remained the "poor relation" as far as our action is concerned. It was not until 1989 that the General Conference adopted a Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, to date the only international legal text on the subject.

This imbalance therefore needed to be corrected by a shift away from the exclusively monument-oriented approach to the concept of the cultural heritage. The sometimes ephemeral nature of the intangible heritage and its extreme vulnerability required us, to take urgent action to enhance, safeguard and, indeed, revitalize it.

This was the true significance of the first Proclamation of the 19 masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity in May 2001, which made it possible to start the preliminary process for

the official recognition of forms of cultural expression of outstanding value, while sensitizing the governments and the groups concerned to the value of that heritage, and to the importance of handing it down intact and making it better known.

Approximately 100 submissions are expected for the second Proclamation, which will take place in May 2003. That is almost twice the number submitted for the first Proclamation, and clearly reveals the interest that Member States take in it. The local impact of this recognition, as you will see from the documents distributed to you, is also remarkable.

But the principle of a standard-setting instrument adapted to the intangible heritage, which has just been endorsed by the General Conference, and which brings you together today, marks a new and important stage.

Providing the intangible cultural heritage with a legal framework means finding a set of universally acceptable principles that will take account of changing situations and information. The purpose would not be to impose any kind of straitjacket on these different forms, but rather to give meaning, form and significance to what might be identified as a collective duty to identify, recognize and enhance that heritage.

That objective is within our reach. I say this with all the more force and conviction in that some of our Member States have already taken relevant action on a national scale.

I should like here to pay a special tribute to the new Brazilian presidential decree, adopted in August 2000, which has led to a unique answer to the question of the preservation of the intangible heritage.

In quite a remarkable way, Brazil has set up a system of distinct inventory records covering four key areas: everyday knowledge and know-how, the rituals of social life, the forms of literary, musical, visual and theatrical expression, and collective cultural practices.

Furthermore, and this interests us greatly, provision has been made in this decree to reconsider and reassess the intangible cultural heritage included in the inventory every 10 years, thereby ensuring that the evolving and dynamic nature of that heritage and the social practices relating to it do not become fixed or ossified.

The objectives that Brazil has set for itself are highly instructive. They introduce, *inter alia*, a useful dialectic between national approaches and the concerted preparation of an instrument universal in scope. In so doing, they encourage us to take careful account of the work already accomplished both by States and by other United Nations intergovernmental organizations – I have particularly in mind the work carried out by WIPO, WHO, ILO and FAO, where expert groups meet regularly to discuss this issue.

The plan of action adopted at the Turin international round table, which I had the honour of inaugurating in March 2001, recommended forthwith a number of important provisions, such as the updating of various parts of the 1989 Recommendation and the drafting of a new instrument on the model of the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

Moreover, that plan of action proposed, besides a definition of the intangible heritage, that the fields concerned by it should include the oral cultural heritage, languages, the performing arts and festive events, customs and social practices, cosmologies and knowledge systems, and nature-related beliefs and practices.

So guidelines exist for further reflection. It is now your task to determine which key aspects of this heritage should fall within the scope of the future instrument.

Defining that content remains an arduous task, as the example of languages clearly shows. Should we retain them as they stand, or else, as the jury specifically decided for the Proclamation of masterpieces under its eligibility criteria, retain only those forms of cultural expression that are closely linked to them?

This work of defining and categorizing, which should combine scientific rigour and methodological clarity, is essential. It should be carried out jointly, with selected terminology, for the two questions are certainly closely linked. The content will thus largely determine the type of safeguarding to be envisaged.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you probably know, the year 2002 has just been proclaimed by the United Nations the International Year for Cultural Heritage, and this makes me very happy. It is therefore highly symbolic that your meeting is among the first events marking this year. It augurs well for the inclusion of the intangible heritage in a broader concept of the cultural heritage. Many other events will follow, culminating in November in the celebrations organized to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the World Heritage Convention.

The intangible heritage is a living fabric from which our history is built. It is not merely culture itself, but the crucible of culture.

We are in great need of your expertise, which will enable us gradually to make the connection between cultural debate and legal considerations.

This *de facto* and *de jure* dialectic stems from a dynamic process that must lead us to the next General Conference in 2003. On that occasion, I will submit to the Member States a preliminary draft international convention that can form the basis for extensive discussion.

I trust that its preparatory process will be as successful as that of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity: in a word, that it succeeds in reconciling viewpoints, finding middle ground and revealing common positions. We shall thus, through extensive consultations and exchanges which also include those who have expressed the most reservations about the very principle of a Convention, bring into being a consensus-based, mutually agreed text that highlights the basic principles we are seeking to promote. I think that the presence of some Members of UNESCO's Executive Board, together with their Chairperson, Ms Bennani, will greatly facilitate this process. They have come here as experts and will work alongside other experts on whom we have called in the fields of the human, social and legal sciences. But the debate will undoubtedly continue within the Executive Board itself and in other forums. I have in mind in particular the forthcoming Round Table of Ministers of Culture that I shall organize in mid-September in Istanbul, Turkey, and which will be exclusively devoted to the intangible heritage. The ministers will have an opportunity to hold extensive discussions on all the aspects that they consider relevant to this major issue, including the question of the legal framework.

Through my presence and my support, I should like once more to express very sincerely the great confidence that I place in you and in your experience, but also the great store that we, at UNESCO, set by your suggestions and recommendations.

By accepting my invitation, you have shown your determination to guide us. Be assured of my own determination to support you in your endeavours.

I thank you for your attention and wish you every success in your work.