

**Ministry of Education, Women Affairs and Culture &
Tonga National Commission for the United Nations
Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

**Address by
Dr. Tevita H. Palefau**

Hon. Minister of Education, Women Affairs and Culture
& President of the Tonga National Commission for UNESCO

on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the Second Pacific Meeting and First
National Consultation Meeting on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the
Intangible Cultural Heritage

Royal Tonga International Hotel
Fua'amotu, The Kingdom of Tonga
2 December 2008

FAKATAPU

* (to observe Tongan protocol in relation to Diplomatic Corps, Ministers, Nobles and HODs who are present at the opening)

* In attendance also will be:

Presiding Priest:

Rev. Sitaleki Liki Afu, SUTT Mala'evakapuna

Rep. of Japanese Government:

Mr. Akira Ouchi, Counsellor & Representative of the Government of Japan

UNESCO Apia Office:

* Dr. Visessio Pongi, Director & UNESCO Representative to the Pacific, UNESCO Apia Office;

* Ms. Emily Waterman, Cultural Advisor, UNESCO Apia Office

UNESCO Paris – Section for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

* Mr. Fernando Brugman, Programme Specialist, ICH

* Ms. Kaori Iwai, Assistant Programme Specialist, ICH

* Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you here today on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Second Pacific Meeting and the First National Consultation Meeting on the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. For me, this occasion marks a significant milestone and decisive phase in both the Pacific's and Tonga's work for intangible cultural heritage.

Before I continue, I would like to extend my warm greetings to all participants, especially from our neighbouring Pacific Islands, as well as our technical and resource personnel from the UNESCO Offices in Paris and Apia. I am most honoured also, to welcome in particular, Mr. Akira Ouchi, Counsellor and Representative of the Government of Japan whose generous government is funding the two meetings that will take place this week. I congratulate your country, Sir, for being one of the first countries to realize the importance of intangible cultural heritage, and giving decisive impetus, including substantial financial assistance to implement relevant programmes, from which we are all benefitting today.

Our presence this morning symbolizes our recognition and support to achieve our common goal – **SAFEGUARDING THE PACIFIC'S**

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, and FAST TRACKING COUNTRY ACTIONS TO PRESERVE, REVITALISE, PROMOTE and TRANSMIT INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS THROUGH THE RATIFICATION OF THE 2003 CONVENTION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE. My personal presence confirms also the priority that I am giving to this programme, and to ensure that my Ministry takes the necessary measures to ratify the Convention before the next Session of the UNESCO General Conference in October 2009. I consider it very befitting also that Tonga is hosting these meetings because her national dance, The “Lakalaka” (which is to be performed later this morning) was proclaimed by UNESCO in November 2003 as a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, and further accepted by UNESCO on 5 November 2008 for inclusion on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. These are truly very proud and sentimental moments for Tonga, and I do hope that one day, our neighbouring countries in the Pacific will be able to share the same sentiments and landmarks in the history of our intangible cultural heritage.

The preservation and promotion of cultural diversity are fundamental missions of UNESCO. Equally, the erosion and impoverishment of our cultural life, especially intangible cultural heritage, which is the fundamental value and basic source of our cultural identity and cultural expressions, affects us daily. The need therefore to safeguard these living treasures is urgent. I strongly believe that UNESCO has already fulfilled its responsibility in standard setting through the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and other related activities such as the proclamation of related Decades and International Years and provision of continuing technical assistance to Member States. The onus and need for urgent and immediate action is now on us, and the first crucial step, I believe, would be to ratify the Convention to commit and bind us politically in the right direction towards safeguarding our intangible cultural heritage before it dies out once and for all. As the great Malian philosopher and sage Amadou Hampaté Bâ said: *"In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns down"*. Similarly, the Director General of UNESCO, Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, in his own words at the First Ceremony for the Proclamation by UNESCO of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in May 2001 stated that *"preservation of culture is an urgent matter and every passing day leaves its trail of ashes"*. The Pacific

region is probably the richest reservoir of intangible heritage and diverse languages which are gradually disappearing and eroding. Article 2.2. of the Convention fully recognizes language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage. Yet, it is extremely sad to note that only one country in the Pacific region (Papua New Guinea) has ratified the Convention.

When I was writing up this speech, I remembered one of my favourite song tracks of the 1970s, "*Paper Roses*" by Marie Osmond. The song talks about imitation love and artificial paper roses, and if I were to sing it to my wife, she would be very offended. In the same way, we would be very disappointed if we were sold imitation perfume or crafts instead of the original. My underlying theme is that our culture or love for our culture should be original, not fake, nor imitative nor artificial. The added advantage of ratifying the Convention is the provision for States Parties to undertake research to find true ownership of the forms of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, and be proud of this ownership and creativity.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me express my ardent wish to see many of our Pacific countries ratify the Convention by 2009. I believe that each of our countries has, already in existence, the internal systems and

infrastructure to protect and safeguard our intangible cultural heritage. My plea therefore to each one of you is to return to your countries and your government and collectively coordinate the ratification process without any further delay. I took the liberty to air this opening ceremony live on radio to allow Tongans all over the nation to share our urgent and emotional need to safeguard our culture and to facilitate the ratification of the Convention. I wish to assure them also of my own determination to support the programme.

I thank you for your attention and wish you every success in your deliberations over the next four days. Allow me also to express once again my gratitude to the Government of Japan and UNESCO for their continuing and generous support for a worthy and significant cause for humanity.

I now declare the Second Pacific Meeting and the First National Consultation Meeting on the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage officially open.

Tu'a 'ofa atu.