

Address by His Excellency Ambassador Musa bin Jaafar bin Hassan

President of the General Conference of UNESCO

**on the occasion of the first session
of the Intergovernmental Committee
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
Algiers, 18-19 November 2006**

Bismillāh ir-rahmān ir-rahīm (In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate)

Your Excellency Mohamed Bedjaoui, Minister for Foreign Affairs,
President of the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,
Your Excellency Khalida Toumi, Minister of Culture,
Your Excellency Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
Distinguished Members of the Intergovernmental Committee
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

We are meeting again today, every one of us harbouring a yearning for discovery and a longing for authenticity and the heritage. We are meeting in Algiers, where we can see the archaeological monuments of the Algerian people, with their deeply rooted identity which reaffirms that the soil of this beloved country has accumulated successive layers of civilizations and the stories of the heroic deeds and unique achievements of the human imagination handed down the generations, from the tale of “Cleopatra’s daughter” in the kingdom of Numidia – the ancient name for Algeria – to the age of the Berber kings who founded the first stable state in the desert, the Phoenician seafarers then the Romans, and the Islamic state that brought together Berbers and Arabs in a single belief. This national cohesion led to the construction of mosques and buildings of outstanding architectural structure and traditional houses rich in humanity and history, which witnessed the struggle for independence and have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The archaeological remains alone make us dream, as the Algerian adage goes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your meeting is taking place today in the city of Algiers, which is brimming with music, folklore, traditional skills and crafts, in order to express the gratitude of Member States to Algeria, the State that guided the Convention to adoption by the General Conference of UNESCO on 17 November 2003 under the leadership of a son of Algeria, His Excellency Minister Mohamed Bedjaoui. It was also the first State to ratify the Convention, and deserves the fitting accolade of hosting the first meeting of its elected Committee.

Your meeting today is exceptionally important, as you are laying the foundation for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, which may thus continue to exist, create, and help to preserve the cultural identity of the groups that produce it and live it, in particular in this century, which is experiencing rapid change as a result of globalization. For yours is practically an emergency mission that can brook no delay. Waiting would make humanity lose some of the underpinnings of its creativity, diversity and cultural wealth, because the intangible cultural heritage is extremely fragile and liable to be forgotten and lost. It is composed of texts which are not, for the most part, written, and melodies which are stored in the popular memory and transmitted over time by all the various, diverse communities, cultures, artefacts and forms of creativity relating to such heritage. The safeguarding of such texts and melodies is fundamental to the safeguarding of the

cultural identity of communities and nations. So, the primary responsibility in building on the work consecrated by the Convention falls to you, so that we may reinvigorate the memory of these things rather than mourning their loss. As the intellectual Ahmed Hassan al-Zayat said: “The guitar makes its most beautiful sounds when it is broken, the lamp emits its most dazzling light when it is going out, and the pelican raises its eye to heaven when it surrenders its soul. People alone turn their gaze backwards to count the days and mourn them”.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The protection of the intangible cultural heritage fulfils another objective that UNESCO is working to achieve, namely helping to revitalize cultural industries, so that they may act as the raw material for many income-generating activities and help to create employment opportunities by developing cultural tourism, thereby contributing to sustainable development. This may be achieved by reinvigorating artistic creativity by building on such intangible heritage, teaching it, and developing the artistic talents of communities and in particular those of the rising generations. This may be done by involving the inhabitants and communities that produce such heritage to express their identity. The international community should work together with them and enable them to preserve such heritage. The role of regional and international cooperation and solidarity is to provide the heritage with a lifeline since it is the heritage of all humanity. The purpose is to improve the living conditions of people in their world and their capacity to work, produce, continue and survive together in solidarity on this Earth on which we all live happily, because, as Buddha said, all living beings weak or strong, small or big, visible or invisible, are all entitled to seek happiness.

Excellencies,

I am delighted and filled with happiness by the wonderful hospitality and generosity, reception and organization on this, my second visit to Algeria in my capacity as President of the General Conference. This time I have come by the kind invitation of your government; on my first trip, I had the honour of visiting the city of Ghardaia, with its amazing architecture and the traditional way of life of its inhabitants, a source of heritage and deep-rootedness linking the Algerian people with the people of Oman through ties of faith and heritage reaching far back into history and consolidated in the time of the modern Algeria. This is the era of love and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, under the leadership of the distinguished President, the veteran Abdelaziz Bouteflika. I greet him and convey to him our genuine solidarity, given that national reconciliation is a goal which the Algerian people are really and truly seeking as indicated in one of the sections of the Charter, which is aimed at achieving development and providing protection to individuals and communities. I also greet Algerian women, who are fighting to protect the Charter by inculcating the example of love and solidarity among the younger generations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Human civilization consists of a set of cultures, and constitutes the wealth of these cultures. There is a need to reaffirm the value of these treasures and include them when drawing up any development strategy, given that cultural action must not be overlooked in the preparation of social or economic plans for any community that aspires to development and peace. A sage once said: “People are capable of forming a community, and of regulating its existence in accordance with the community’s circumstances”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thanks go to the organizers of this successful and productive meeting from the Ministry of Culture of Algeria and the Algerian National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, and also to the Permanent Delegation of Algeria for its outstanding efforts in preparing the meeting, and to the Intangible Heritage Section of UNESCO's Culture Sector for its work to ensure a successful meeting, and indeed to all those who have worked here in Algeria in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Protocol, the Ministry of Culture, and the National Commission for their dedication in ensuring a pleasant stay for the delegations, and finally for the choice of Algiers as a well-deserved venue.

Before we conclude, allow me to quote some lines from the poet Omar Khayyam, who said:

Let him rejoice who has a loaf of bread,
A little nest wherein to lay his head,
Is slave to none, and no man slaves for him –
In truth his lot is wondrous well bested.

And to conclude, an original Algerian saying goes: “Be happy and you will become rich; have a heart and you will become strong”.

As-salāmu ‘alaikum wa-rahmatu llāhi wa-barakātuh (Peace and the mercy and blessings of God be upon you).