

**Address by Ms Khalida Toumi, Minister of Culture,
at the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Mr Minister of State, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chairperson of the
General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention,

Mr Minister of National Education,

Mr Director-General of UNESCO,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished participants,

We are here today to begin implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Represented by the renowned Mr Mohamed Bédjaoui, my country made a significant contribution to drawing up the Convention and was the first signatory State to ratify it.

Algeria is today happy and honoured to welcome the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This is yet another sign of my country's ongoing commitment to work for the protection and promotion of cultural legacies. Algeria had already established an intangible cultural heritage centre in 2004, dedicated to the work of the celebrated master of Algerian music, Mr Hadj Mhamed el Anka. The centre is housed in a listed monument, the Villa Mahieddine, which is now being restored.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank UNESCO and its Director-General, Mr Koichiro Matsuura, for having accepted Algeria's proposal to host the regional centre for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and I am pleased to inform you that we are currently engaged in the consultations necessary to its establishment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The basic aims of this session are, first of all, to establish the commitment of the international community to the intangible cultural heritage and, secondly, to lay the foundations of an efficient organization that can respond to the new challenges of preserving our precious cultural heritage and transmitting it to future generations.

The conventions of 1972, on the tangible heritage and of 2003, on the intangible cultural heritage, are the two complementary vectors used by the illustrious institution of UNESCO to preserve that part of the past that structures the present and maps out the future course of humanity.

Algeria knows full well what it means to have been chosen to welcome, in a historic meeting, this august assembly. It is fully aware of the responsibilities that it bears.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all agree that the intangible cultural heritage, made up of gestures and body language, ceremonies and rituals, music and literary productions, knowledge and expertise, has thus far been preserved through individual, and social and collective memory. This heritage naturally expresses the cultural and symbolic universe of cultural communities, which understand its essence and meanings, and perpetuate that universe by reproducing it.

It is, therefore, a constantly evolving production, cumulative and structured-by cosmogonies, visions of the world, myths, beliefs, and aspirations, by history, the stories and myths of creation, as well as by experience, the sense of self and the necessary meaning given to their destiny by communities themselves.

In short, the intangible heritage is both the trademark and the signature of peoples' identity. This notion, which is nearly impossible to grasp and which we would like in good faith to define and render more comprehensible, must never be used carelessly as a subject for laboratory dissection in order to derive from it clones or fakes destined for the

creation of new discourses, re-readings and reinterpretations of the history and memory of peoples. We are convinced that intangible heritage is to the identity of peoples what the DNA map is to the human genome.

It is important to be fully aware of the effects that careless treatment of intangible heritage issues can have on cohesion, stability, social harmony and traditional balances. The world is, unfortunately, full of examples of the consequences of such treatment. I would venture to say that one of the main benefits of the Convention will be to protect humanity from these dangers by at last removing intangible heritage issues from the laboratory and placing them on the international agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to turn now to the much debated subject of globalization. Globalization is already producing a “formatted” culture. If we wish to preserve the plural, fertile, creative and in a word, human, character of culture, if we wish simply to be in harmony with another convention to which we attach particular importance, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005, then we must take responsible, sustained, concerted and resolute international action.

Can the peoples of the South tolerate further attempts to remove their heritage on the pretext that it will be better safeguarded and even-the height of sensitivity-that it is better appreciated elsewhere? I do not want to believe that globalization is pursuing colonialist tactics and adding the

final chapter to the iniquitous history of spoliation by definitively dispossessing peoples of objects and their meanings.

Even in the culinary arts, our sense of generosity naturally makes us want to share our skills, but not to be dispossessed and ultimately deprived of them. You know that we Maghrebi are, for example, very attached to our traditional couscous, which is more nourishing than mere food: couscous is not simply a masterpiece of the intangible cultural heritage, it is a true sign of Maghrebi identity. The remarkable Ibn Khaldoun defined a Maghrebi as someone who shaves his head, wears a burnoose and eats couscous. Need I remind you that all the knowledge and skills relating to this dish are possessed by women?

Even Rai music and songs created in the villages of western Algeria and today listened to, reproduced, transmitted and appreciated worldwide, return to us (re)worked by cultural industries through which they are transformed into mass entertainment, simplified, stereotyped and modified by another aesthetic. It is not, however, my intention to prevent the circulation of cultural products.

My aim is to share a concern with you: how can we combine for our benefit the contradictory effects of globalization which, at the same time as it increases audiences and popularizes practices, surreptitiously transfigures and (re)models the product, sometimes to its detriment? The countries of the South may well be sources of intangible heritage, imaginations, mythologies, visions of the world, in short, a living, vital culture, but they must also, and above all, meet the challenge of

participating in their development for their own benefit, and that of humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my hope that we learn all the lessons we possibly can from the many benefits, as well as the few disadvantages, that have resulted from the implementation of the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. With regard to advantages, I would suggest that a world intangible cultural heritage centre, similar to that relating to the tangible cultural heritage, be established as rapidly as possible. I would also hope that a greater North-South balance in the lists of masterpieces as well as more effective use of the expertise of the countries of the South can be achieved.

In fact, at this session, we will be addressing the question of the criteria and means for the accreditation of consultative organizations to the Committee. We should take advantage of this occasion to get specialized institutions involved now in the field of intangible cultural heritage in the areas of expertise, study and advisory services.

It is because the Convention proposes to safeguard peoples' cultures, even humble people, in any case those from this side of the world, that our States and their specialized institutions will be called upon for years to come to invest in the intangible cultural heritage and strengthen their knowledge and skills in it. You can easily see that safeguarding culture thus requires not only paying careful attention to our points of view but also unwavering international solidarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another stereotype that still permeates cultural discourse today is the opposition between oral tradition and writing. It appears that only learned, that is, written matter is worthy of interest. This risks leaving a large part of humanity-women, the other half of the sky-by the wayside. The convention, by enhancing the status of local customs, skills, trades, traditions and syncretisms, pledges the future to the building of what is most human in each of our cultures. This is not the least of the convention's virtues, and I wish, once again, to pay a glowing tribute to UNESCO's work on it.

I could not conclude my speech without bringing you the good news that throughout 2007, Algiers will be the capital of Arab culture. This outstanding event will provide Arab culture with an opportunity to exhibit all its wealth, refinement and intellectual creations in Algiers. It will also give Algeria and the Maghreb a chance to demonstrate what they have contributed to Arab culture and what they owe to its influence.

I am happy and proud to invite once again all the Arab countries to participate in this historic event. I would also like to invite other countries, particularly those that share the Arab culture with us, to come and exhibit in Algiers the products of their contact and exchanges with the Arab cultural world.

It is also with pleasure and honour that I extend an invitation to UNESCO, the illustrious institution of cultural promotion, whose presence

and participation will safeguard us from forgetting and ensure us of the valued presence of each and every one and the solidarity of all.

I thank you.

Khalida Toumi

Algiers, 18 November 2006