



Address by His Excellency
Mr Mohammed BEDJAOUI
Minister of State,
Minister of Foreign Affairs

at the opening
of the first session
of the Intergovernmental Committee for
the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage



Algiers, 18-19 November 2006

Madam Minister of Culture,
Mr President of the General Conference of UNESCO,
Mr Director-General of UNESCO,
Mr Diplomatic Adviser to the President of the Republic,
Representative of Algeria to the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to participate in an exceptional and long-awaited event, a truly happy occasion. So many people, all of us who have been engaged for several years in the exciting endeavour of drawing up and launching the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”, have been looking forward to this happy event.

You will understand why, then, as our session begins, I am brimming with satisfaction and pride. You will also understand why I wish to bring to this solemn ceremony some of the convivial feeling that, as in traditional artisans’ guilds, has guided our work, industrious and inventive, and worthy of a truly humane guild.

It is, therefore, an immense privilege for me to welcome you here today, in Algiers. A privilege that is combined with the pleasure of seeing so many eminent personalities here in this room, so many friendly and familiar faces, so many people who are all convinced, as I am, that humanity’s best investment is in what is human, in the preservation of all that human beings are capable of creating anywhere in the world to combat the deadly amnesia of time.

This profession of faith is unshakeable and your presence here the striking proof of it. Thank you all for coming to Algiers to take part in this eagerly anticipated happy event which, fortunately, did not keep us waiting too long.

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Today we are holding the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, following the preliminary work done by the recent extraordinary General Assembly of States Parties, which unfortunately I was unable to attend. If it is true that those not present are always in the wrong, the Director-General of UNESCO as well as the Ambassador of Brazil came most courteously to my defence and explained the reasons for my involuntary absence from that important meeting. I thank them both.

I am here with you today, honoured by a presidential mandate under which I am obliged to respect certain customs, for example, the important ritual of expressing gratitude. Let me assure you that in the particular circumstances it is with inexpressible pleasure that I engage in this exercise which can, as I well know, be perilous at times. I will therefore take pains not to leave anyone out when naming those women and men without whom we would not be here today, and acknowledging all those who deserve our gratitude, without listing them in any particular order of merit, a nearly impossible task.

I would therefore like to mention:

- Mr Mounir Bouchenaki, the former Assistant Director-General for Culture, whose dynamic and devoted team, to whom I express my sincere thanks, is now under the brilliant leadership of Ms Françoise Rivière. I would like to single out one of the members of this young team, who greeted me in Rio de Janeiro with a resounding scatological interjection.

I would also like to mention:

- the celebrated professor Economidès, worthy heir to the wisdom of Socrates;
- Ambassador Sonia Mendieta de Badaroux, Delegate of Honduras, who, with good grace, accepted the nickname “beautiful Helen” bestowed on her in a felicitous slip of the tongue by professor Economidès,
- Ms Noriko Aikawa, Adviser to the Director-General, whose irreplaceable foresight helped us to avoid a good many difficulties,
- our eminent Rapporteur-General, Ambassador Barrios Iniguez of Bolivia,
- Professor Francesco Francione and Professor Tullio Scovazzi,
- His Excellency Mr Olabiyi Yai, eminent Ambassador of Benin,
- the unexcelled Khaznadar, whose many outstanding intellectual gifts include being the author of a remarkable article on intangible cultural heritage issues, which I have just read again with renewed interest,
- the Delegation of the Netherlands, which produced the huge and exceedingly useful glossary on the intangible heritage,
- and, lastly, if I may be permitted to mention my family, Ms Assia Bedjaoui, who discreetly but effectively inspires her father in private life.

So there you have it. The list of those who deserve our gratitude is long. I cannot, however, conclude without paying tribute to His Excellency Mr Luis Felipe de Macedo and His Excellency Mr Farouk Logoglu, who admirably acquitted their missions as Chairperson and Rapporteur at the extraordinary meeting of the General Assembly. Even though the task was complex, each of the items on the agenda was handled without exception in a remarkable and rigorous manner.

Many thanks to all of you.

I would like to welcome you to Algeria, which is proud to play host to the representatives of all the world’s cultures.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The subject that concerns us is, in truth, strange. It could raise more than one question for the man in the street, usually accustomed to giving the word “heritage” a physical, concrete meaning. For our part, we are interested in an “intangible” heritage, a surprising idea.

In the excitement of the legal work that was to give rise to the Convention of 17 October 2003, I had not personally taken notice of the interesting paradox that transformed what was intangible and ethereal into a heavy dense matter, something that could be inventoried, counted, and made profitable.

And yet, what a weight! How much can the creations of some two hundred billion human beings, who have walked the Earth since the dawn of time, weigh? How many scales would be needed to weigh the productions of the twenty thousand peoples and ethnic groups who have left their trace and fertilized Gaia, our planet endowed with life but pursuing its solitary course through the cosmos?

Intangible culture weighs a great deal, as much as thousands of years of invention by human beings, everywhere and in every circumstance, eager to mark time's endless course with their passage, which like them would be fleeting, if their way of life and talent did not allow them to survive their own death through their works.

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Without art and its symbolic power, the trace of a bare foot on a beach could well be washed away by the tireless, indifferent wave of time, that the Ancients justly personified as the god Chronos, devouring everything, even his own offspring. Caught in the swell of the ephemeral, each of our peoples strives, nevertheless, to ascribe permanence to their life through culture while Time, the great sculptor, has taken pains to give it form and meaning, following its fancy of turning a footstep into a dance step, a thought into a belief, a word into music and a habit into meaningful behaviour.

Defying the natural laws of physics, intangible production expresses the life of human beings, joined in space and time, and called upon to live and produce significant beauty in the continuous chain of human evolution.

This humanity of living people is an inalienable legacy, weighing us down with the bearable lightness of beings, doomed, admittedly, to obey the laws of gravity, but constantly being pulled toward their artistic production, which expresses the relationship between human beings, between humans and nature, and between humans and the cosmogony of the universe.

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The intangible heritage of humanity is both heavy and fragile, like the baton that passes from one athlete to another to assure victory in a relay race or, better still, Euclid's stick, inside which, it is said, the inspired mathematician hid from destruction a manuscript demonstrating, even then, the theory of the Earth's rotation.

The scholar could have faith in the future of science knowing that he could rely on the solidity of the chain forged by the "The Brotherhood of the Awakened", to use the title of a recent book. The discoverer knew that none of the links were likely to break in the evolving chain of creation. Like him, we know that what is being relayed is intangible and priceless, with serious consequences in case of loss. This is the reason why UNESCO, under the resolute leadership of its Director-General, has launched this tremendous endeavour to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

What an amazing challenge! Nothing to lose in any case, and sparing no cost, so that nothing is lost of what has sprung forth and still springs forth from the human spirit, today like yesterday, and tomorrow like today. To ensure that nothing is lost of the matter that illuminates our earthly night with a burst of sparks.

From the dry and arid earth, we must harvest, by the armful, miraculous crops of a pure and impalpable nature: ancestral expression and body language, theatres of shadow and light, millennial melodies and dances, the entire range of the world's knowledge and skills. Everything that marks time with the heartbeat of each human group, and fashions the stamp of national identity. This is UNESCO's nearly impossible task.

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This is also the challenge of a Convention that was to “find 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”.

You will have guessed that it was in those terms that, on 27 June 2006, the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, defined the ethical imperative that was to guide the States Parties embarking on a wonderful adventure, as extraordinary as that of the Argonauts in search of the fabulous Golden Fleece.

Our Golden Fleece is not a simple, unique object, be it magic or legendary. The object of our quest is neither material nor located in a far-off land like Colchis. Our Golden Fleece is present throughout the world, shifting and fluid, taking on wherever it is found a thousand and one different forms from time immemorial. More complex than that of Jason, ours is a vast quest, much too exciting to be discouraging.

Aware of the intangible value of that which we wished to safeguard, we were eager to get started, because we knew that at the end of our journey, the ultimate reward was awaiting us: to enjoy beauty wherever it is found, including, and perhaps above all, in the most remote corners of the Earth. We know, like Benjamin Constant, that “to sense beauty wherever it is found is not one sensibility less, but one faculty more”.

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Is it merely by chance that this happy initiative of UNESCO has been launched at a time when rapid globalization seems to be leading to a uniform centralization that dampens the scents and waters down the colours of our different identities? A standardizing globalization of “ready-to-think”, in the spirit of “ready-to-wear” and “ready-to-eat”? If that is the case, let us again welcome chance, which so often gets things right.

I remember that at the height of triumphant European classicism, an exceptional woman of letters dared to introduce a fantastic concept into the art world: the relativity of taste. The idea was not only modern, it was revolutionary.

The classical European spirit, as we know, went hand in hand with a rigorous absolutism that acted as both judge and censor. Works were regarded as inadmissible if they failed to meet the criteria of Beauty, whose ethnocentric uppercase letter established the arbitrary superiority of a certain Academy.

That was when Madame de Staël – for it is about her that we are talking – made her appearance. Rebellious and daring, she went to the south of France to take the air and noticed that the quality was not the same as in the north. Not better, but different.

Ever curious and free of prejudice, Madame de Staël then stepped lightly across the border and discovered Germany and its creative genius. An extra dimension had just been added to French taste, which considered itself to be unique and unequalled. The Whole became Part. The Absolute became Relative. That significant discovery was the same one that still needs to be defended today, because human beings are overly cautious and inclined to look no further than their own horizon. Yet the further away the horizon, the more our faculties expand and awaken, and with them our senses, dulled by habit.

Out of Madame de Staël's discovery arose a new discipline that teaches us not to see the world as a major body governing minor satellites, granting recognition to them case by case, often just for a brief moment of capricious and transient political fashion.

By giving equal weight to the qualitative production from the northern and southern regions of the same country, by balancing the aesthetic scales between two countries unknown to each other, Madame de Staël changed the perception of a reality that had been assumed to have been known forever.

Bold and rebellious, the celebrated woman of letters revealed to all the tremendous spectacle of a range of human territory the entire beauty of which lay in the diversity of its culture and identity. In this new vision the world became a group of small complementary islands – “archipelagos of difference” in Christian Ruby's excellent formulation¹ – all belonging to the larger community of humanity.

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Archipelagos of difference? That is the structure of the kingdom we defend. It is a kingdom from which no one can be banished, even the most impoverished. Our wealth lays within this kingdom where poor relations do not exist and “minorities” cannot be excluded.

Oral literature, folklore, proverbs: for a long time, all this was swept away with a contemptuous stroke of the pen by the partisans of a dominant, castrating and arbitrary ideology. The time has come to free ourselves from the deceptive power of unfair and unjustified uppercase letters, which set up false idols too easily. Whether it is fashioned from peat or clay, marble or gold, every statue has its place in our “archipelago community”.

It is high time for us to consider that all human productions, fruit of the nourishing earth, are equal with respect to the interest and pleasure that they offer to all when served on the same tray at the world's table .

¹ Christian, Ruby; *Les Archipels de la différence*, Paris, éditions du Félin, 1989.

Eager to taste the flavour of difference, we await all those earthly foods, filling up a unique and infinitely generous basket, like some sort of babelian cornucopia, rich with all the flavours prized by human beings, who are different each time yet always the same.

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Before concluding, I must stress once again the challenges of this tremendous task.

Safeguard the intangible cultural heritage! Preserve immaterial objects! Is that not an insane project? Have we not got something better to do? Would the financial resources involved not be more profitably used to address the weighty subjects of war and politics, which all too often lead to contamination of drinking water, defoliation, the destruction of vegetable and animal species, and the twilight of human civilization?

Certainly not! While some lavish colossal sums on laboratories that furbish chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, UNESCO has decided to safeguard humanity's intangible cultural heritage. Nothing less than that.

To what end? Because men and women, who are far from being Martians, think that it is important to combat all forms of cultural chauvinism and to teach respect and admiration for the Other.

The stakes are enormous because materialist political mentalities will need to be revolutionized. The intangible heritage is a solid value that contributes to the reconstruction of a truly humane humanism, in a kingdom where no one is banished, a kingdom that takes its motto from Confucius: "Sharing, dissemination, these are the flowers of humanism".

Thank you.

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