

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the ceremony for the proclamation  
of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity

UNESCO, 18 May 2001

Mr President of the Republic of Mali,  
Your Highness,  
Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,  
Your Excellencies,  
Mr President of the Jury,  
Distinguished members of the Jury,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have great pleasure in opening this first ceremony for the proclamation by UNESCO of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity, which will undoubtedly be a landmark in the history of our Organization.

As I said on Tuesday morning at the opening of the deliberations of the Jury, this ceremony is the culmination of ground-breaking efforts and debate within UNESCO over the past 20 years and more. The notion of intangible heritage did not originally arouse anything like the interest it does today and remained the preserve of a handful of specialized researchers.

In the aspect of its work concerning culture and how to preserve it in all its diversity, UNESCO very soon developed an instrument that helped make its reputation. I am referring to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which has been extraordinarily successful and many a time shown how useful and relevant it is. When I myself chaired the World Heritage Committee, just before being appointed to head the Organization, I was nevertheless very conscious of an imbalance. This had to do with the geographical distribution of the sites on the Heritage List, which were more broadly representative of the “North”. That imbalance in fact reflected a weakness in our system, which, being exclusively concerned with protecting the tangible heritage, overlooked the intangible heritage and thus left out a great many cultural features that are nevertheless fundamental in the map of cultural diversity, often belonging to cultures of the “South”. There was no way UNESCO could really do its job of preserving cultural diversity without giving equal attention to its two basic ingredients, namely the tangible heritage and the intangible heritage.

The great Malian philosopher and sage Amadou Hampaté Bâ, who followed UNESCO’s work very closely during his long career, said: “In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns down”. That telling image was a call to find ways of wresting from the ravages of the “fire” of history the “libraries of the intangible cultural heritage”.

As soon as I came to UNESCO, in November 1999, I sought to make this a top-priority issue for the Organization. For it is an urgent matter and every passing day leaves its trail of ashes. I have therefore embarked on two complementary and parallel courses of action, one in the short term – which is the Proclamation – and the other in the longer term, namely the drafting of a standard-setting instrument.

We quite clearly needed another standard-setting instrument, following the example of that put in place for the tangible heritage, in order effectively to protect the intangible cultural heritage and help the depositary governments and communities to vivify it. But the conceptual and legal reflection it presupposes can only be long term. Although we have already moved

forward, particularly as a result of the expert meeting I recently called in Turin to reflect on a definition of the concept of “intangible cultural heritage” and on the advisability, purposes and principles of a standard-setting instrument, we are still at a very early stage in devising such an instrument.

Hence I have at the same time sought to couple this long-term action with more immediate and also more concrete action. It was in this spirit that I set about drawing up an initial list of the intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO. The Executive Board has been fully supportive of this twofold approach.

Let me clear up any misunderstanding here. Just being on a list is obviously no guarantee of actual preservation. It may even be seen by some as a mere “hit parade”. But the list we compile does imply a number of commitments which, for their part, are very real.

For one thing, the fact of submitting a candidature should entail on the part of a State or group of States the compilation of an inventory of their own intangible heritage. Being thus more aware of the treasures they hold, they will undoubtedly be more attentive to protecting them and the local actors who keep them alive.

The other point is that the candidatures must not only highlight the cultural value of the item submitted but also propose detailed safeguarding plans. The quality of such plans has been an essential consideration in the acceptance of individual candidatures.

Furthermore, inclusion in the list by UNESCO is a commitment on its part to doing its utmost to assist the country or countries possessing the proclaimed masterpiece in financing the safeguarding plan. I hope that such inclusion will prompt many other donors to join those that have already contributed so generously to this funding, like Japan and Italy, or that have made pledges in this respect, like the Republic of Korea and the United Arab Emirates.

Needless to say, the experience acquired as a result of this first proclamation will contribute substantially to reflection and debate concerning the standard-setting instrument, starting with the next session of the Executive Board which is due to begin in a few days’ time. In the longer term, the complementarity of these two aspects is also clearly bound to lead to their fusion. We shall thus command a legal instrument and a list of cultural phenomena and spaces qualifying for protection under this standard-setting instrument.

Before coming to the proclamation of the masterpieces themselves, which you are all impatiently awaiting, I wish to thank the 18 members of our international Jury who have worked very actively for three days, and particularly its President, Mr Juan Goytisolo, a great writer and a specialist in oral culture. My tributes also go to the two Vice-Presidents, His Majesty the Kabaka of Buganda and Princess Basma of Jordan, whose experience and wisdom have been invaluable to us. I further welcome President Konare, President of the Republic of Mali and incumbent President of the Economic Community of West African States, an eminent historian and specialist of the African cultural heritage, who is honouring us with his presence here today. I should also like to thank very warmly Ms Munajat Yulchieva for the admirable expression of oral heritage she offered us at the opening of this ceremony. She has been a very active member of the Jury.

I wish to thank them all cordially for the hard work done and their many suggestions for improving the procedure for the next proclamation. Although 60 or so countries made known their desire to submit their candidatures and requested preparatory assistance, 36 candidature files were finally transmitted to UNESCO. Thirty-two were submitted to the Jury for consideration, the others having failed to meet the administrative criteria for acceptance.

Following its deliberations, the Jury has recommended to me the proclamation of 19 masterpieces.

After careful consideration of the Jury's recommendations, I have decided to follow them in their entirety and to proclaim the following 19 cultural spaces or forms of cultural expression "masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity". I shall cite them in the French alphabetical order of the submitting countries:

1. **The Cultural Space of the Garifuna**, submitted by Belize and supported by Honduras and Nicaragua, which comprises the language and culture of this community born of the interbreeding characteristic of the region. The present-day Garifuna are the descendants of African slaves who fled the island of St Vincent and were exiled in the seventeenth century following their fierce opposition to British and French colonization. Their language, but also their music and dance, are essential aspects of this culture now seriously at risk.
2. **The Gelede Oral Heritage**, submitted by Benin and supported by Nigeria and Togo, which includes not just narrative but an entire ritual ceremonial taking place every year after the harvests or to mark important events. The performance, with its very distinctive carved masks, is chanted in Yoruba. It recounts the history and myths of the Yoruba-Nago peoples. The mythical origin of these ceremonies is traced to the time of the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society; they are thus thought to be intended to appease the anger of mothers.
3. **The Oruro Carnival**, submitted by Bolivia, is a ceremony typical of the syncretism between Andean traditions and the Christian religion. After the arrival of the Spanish settlers the traditional Ito festivity of the Uru people, held at Oruro, was banned. Some features of the festivity, such as the dances or certain Andean divinities, have found their way into the carnival, which takes place before Lent each year.
4. **Kunqu Opera**, submitted by China, which represents the oldest Chinese theatrical tradition, combining music, dance, poetry, costumes and masks. The major arias alternate with declamations and acrobatics, and the singing is always accompanied by stylized and very elaborate movements and gestures. Kunqu has greatly influenced all the other forms of theatre which have sprung up in China.
5. **The Gbofe Trumpets of Afoukaha: the Music and the Cultural Space of the Tagbana Community**, submitted by Côte d'Ivoire, which represent a type of trumpet but also an entire ritual in the community. The trumpets are at the heart of this ritual, reproducing the sound of the human voice and giving out a melody that is taken up by the chorus, and subsequently by the other singers and instruments.
6. **The Mystery Play of Elche**, submitted by Spain, is a unique example of a medieval drama representing the death, assumption and coronation of the Virgin by means of a very elaborate setting consisting of a horizontal "earthly" stage and a vertical "heavenly" stage. The performance is all in song and takes place every year on 14 and 15 August.
7. **The Cultural Space and Oral Culture of the Semeiskie**, submitted by the Russian Federation, encompassing the traditional culture of the communities of Old Believers living in the Trans-Baikal region. The customs and rituals of the

community, particularly the still renowned religious music, are grounded in the culture of medieval Russia, as are its legends and proverbs.

8. **Polyphonic Georgian Singing**, closely associated with Georgian national identity, requiring considerable technical proficiency.
9. **The Cultural Space of the Sosso-Bala**, submitted by Guinea, which includes the festivities surrounding the Sosso-Bala, a type of sacred xylophone kept in the village of Nyagassola. A symbol of the liberty and cohesion of the Mandingo people, this xylophone is kept by the Balatigui, the patriarch of the Dökala family, who may only play it on special occasions, such as the Muslim New Year and certain burials.
10. **Kutiyattam Sanskrit Theatre**, submitted by India, which represents a tradition dating back more than two thousand years associated with the culture of the state of Kerala. Since the performances are traditionally staged in temples, each gesture is charged with sacred significance. The presence of fire on the stage as a symbol of divinity, the purification of the actors and the sanctification of the stage suggest that this form of theatre probably derives from a Vedic ritual.
11. **Opera dei Pupi Sicilian Puppet Theatre**, submitted by Italy, representing knightly epics and sagas of mythological origin. The text, always improvised from the plot of a well-known literary work, offers a unique mix of written and oral traditions. The puppets and the scenery are works of exceptional artistic refinement.
12. **Nōgaku Theatre**, submitted by Japan, which, in the Nō and Kyōgen forms, represents the tragic and comic traditions of classical Japanese theatre. In Nō, which makes extensive use of masks and very stylised symbolic gestures, the hero is often a supernatural being who assumes human form, while Kyōgen rests upon comic dialogue. Both have deeply influenced all genres of Japanese theatre.
13. **The Crafting and Symbolism of Crosses**, submitted by Lithuania and supported by Latvia, are the expression of age-old skills and ritual practices and, above all, symbolize the identity of the Lithuanian people. The crosses and small altars, placed on high posts, are particularly fine examples of geometric and floral sculpture. The crosses are the subject of ceremonies on religious feast days throughout the year.
14. **The Cultural Space of Jemaa el-Fna Square**, submitted by Morocco, is a cultural and artistic crossroads forming part of the urban fabric of Marrakesh. It is a meeting place for the local population and for storytellers, acrobats, musicians, dancers and snake charmers. It is also a place for business, the sale of medicinal plants and henna tattoos. This exceptional diversity makes it the symbol of Marrakesh.
15. **The Cultural Space of the Boysun District**, submitted by Uzbekistan, is one of the world's oldest inhabited regions, noted for its religious, craft and artistic wealth, which finds expression notably in traditional Uzbek singing. The district has traces of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Islam, together with such older beliefs as shamanism and totemism.

16. **Hudhud Chants of the Ifugao**, submitted by the Philippines. These epics, sung by the Ifugao of the mountainous regions of the Philippines at the different stages of terraced rice-growing, comprise over 200 stories of some 40 episodes each, the telling of which often lasts three or four days. They are of value as an anthropological, historical and literary record.
17. **Royal Ancestral Rite and Ritual Music in Jongmyo Shrine**, submitted by the Republic of Korea. This rite, which takes place in the Confucian royal shrine dedicated to the ancestors of the Joseon family on the first Sunday in May, is a unique example of a Confucian-type rite inspired by the classical Chinese texts on ancestor worship and filial piety. The forces of Yin and Yang find expression in turn in the various types of dance and music.
18. **The Cultural Space of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella**, submitted by the Dominican Republic, where music plays an essential part in the ritual practices associated with the worship of the Holy Spirit. The brotherhood has its roots in the community of the Congos, an ethnic group of African origin, and practises a form of worship of the Holy Spirit involving the use of percussion instruments. The brotherhood consists of musicians and plays in honour of the Holy Spirit on special ritual occasions.
19. **The Oral Heritage and Cultural Manifestations of the Zápara People**, submitted by Peru and Ecuador, are in a language which is now spoken by only five persons and is the depository of the myths and exceptional knowledge of the Amazonian communities. The Zápara, who live in the Amazonian forest, possess unrivalled knowledge of the fauna, flora and traditional medicinal techniques, expressed in their language and myths.

Mr President of the Republic,  
Your Highness,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This proclamation endorses cultural spaces and forms of cultural expression which reflect the creative spirit of their makers and the diversity of human ingenuity. Many of them are in need of urgent and immediate safeguarding. I am happy to see that a great many of the masterpieces proclaimed are from the developing countries. This proclamation serves therefore, as was my wish, to offset the scant representation of some of these countries where the tangible heritage is concerned. I am also satisfied to note that States have, in submitting their candidatures, given preference to living cultural spaces each of which is a “total social fact”, to borrow the very apt expression of Marcel Mauss, with economic, social, cultural and philosophical significance. In the aggregate these spaces bring together languages, music, epics, rituals and traditional knowledge, all of which are forms of cultural expression under threat of extinction. We have observed from the submissions that countless threats arise, whether from the adverse effects of globalization, the displacement of peoples as a result of political and socio-economic instability, environmental degradation, the runaway development of tourism, or the process of “folklorization”.

So I want to repeat the promise I just made, at the start of my address, to see to it that, following this proclamation, adequate support is given to the local associations and organizations that have undertaken, under the action plans included in the candidature files, to revitalize the oral and intangible heritage of the cultural space in its original setting and in close cooperation with the communities concerned.

Some of the candidates proclaimed today will be invited in October, during our General Conference, to present their masterpieces to the representatives of the 188 Member States who will be gathering here, at UNESCO Headquarters. This will also provide an opportunity to put in place a system of financial and technical assistance for the implementation of the safeguarding plans.

I shall also put out a call for candidatures for the next proclamation, to take place in May 2003, and I hope that we will receive even more submissions. I invite in particular those regions which are not yet sufficiently well represented to make a special effort to submit high-quality candidatures to us. The deadline for submission will be 30 June 2002 and the process of scientific and technical evaluation will last from July 2002 to April 2003. In May 2003, just before the spring session of the Executive Board, the second proclamation of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity will take place.

My sincerest congratulations and thanks therefore go to the States and communities represented on this first list of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity, and to the non-governmental organizations which have in so short a time evaluated the files. I want to invite those not selected for this first proclamation to submit their candidatures again the next time round, reformulating them in accordance with the Jury's recommendations.

I am convinced that this ceremony constitutes a milestone in the history of efforts to promote the world heritage, for it very clearly signifies recognition of the specific contribution of the intangible cultural heritage to the essential task of preserving cultural diversity.