

*Second ordinary session
of the Intergovernmental Committee
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*

**Statement by His Excellency
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Chairperson of the General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention**

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Mr President of the General Conference of UNESCO,
Mr Director-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be among you once again for this important session of the Intergovernmental Committee, to which the Director-General, Mr Matsuura, has most kindly invited me, for which I thank him deeply.

No genuine discussion about the intangible cultural heritage and the need for it to be safeguarded would be complete without talking about Japan, which is welcoming us today and whose experience is exemplary in this field. As I only have six minutes when six hours would not be enough, I will devote these fleeting, intangible moments to an evocation of the rich and instructive Japanese model. This seems to me the best way of introducing and inspiring our discussion.

May I remind you first of all of what we all know and appreciate, namely the active, inspirational and effective role played tirelessly by Japan in both the complex negotiation and the exacting process of drafting an international standard-setting instrument to protect intangible heritage, that is to say safeguarding nothing less than the national identity of each country and the immortal soul of each people.

How to explain Japan's deep-rooted attachment to intangible cultural heritage?

Once defeated by the inhuman tragedy of nuclear fire, the Japanese nation, proud of its distinct identity, refused to die because the land where it had prospered by dint of creativity and labour forbade it to sink to its knees. The formidable minds of the Japanese people were determined to continue to forge a link in the eternal chain, to unite indissolubly the generations tested by those events with those of the past and the future and remain true to themselves, above all in adversity. This is the fabulous and acute

consciousness of men and women subjected to the cruelty of history, who understood that the very principle of the existence of a country, of a people and above all of a united nation lies entirely in the safeguarding of its intangible heritage. Indeed, it is this that is the eloquent stamp of the “smiling Japanese spirit”.

Without neglecting the reconstruction of such intensely material matters as the economy, rapidly reassuming its position at the banquet of the world's nations, Japan also made a point of giving priority to the adoption of a law safeguarding its intangible heritage. Indeed, there could be no feast of nations in a truly human world if the ardent passion of national identity were not maintained at its centre, sealing the destiny of the men and women of a country that neither grandeur nor beauty could desert. It is the intangible that enabled Japan to survive its darkest hour. The Japanese identity was thus maintained in this divine part of the world where death is disregarded, while a splendid *art de vivre* is cultivated to its most refined degree.

A country in Asia and of Asia, Japan is nevertheless other. At once attached and opposed to Asia, happily poised in its position as garland to the planet, the Japanese archipelago is in fact, thanks to its well-nourished traditions and always sophisticated modernity, a large and singular continent. Greatly diversified in its constituent elements, it has forged a formidable national cohesion out of its fragmented land, making a jewelled necklace that nothing, and nobody, can tarnish or destroy. Despite threats of all kind, natural and historical, this archipelago compels respect and admiration for always overcoming the odds and gaining pride of place in the world while proudly keeping its distinct identity intact. The divine Aïshi, the wise goddess of nature, has always found willing followers in the men and women who populate this archipelago. Is this one of those unfathomable mysteries so abundant in Asian mythology? I would be happy to call it the miracle of the cult of a well-preserved and deeply assimilated intangible heritage.

One of the oldest works of Japanese literature tells, more than ten centuries before Robinson Crusoe's odyssey, the story of a man shipwrecked on a distant island. It is the novel *The Tale of the Hollow Tree*, in which I believe the key to the story, ancient tribute to the immaterial, is none other than a magic melody plucked on a zither, the koto, which plays a decisive role in the adventures of the shipwrecked man.

But I encourage you to read, as I once did in a single night, a night of ecstasy thirty years ago, *Thousand Cranes*, that bewitching novel by Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata, magician and interpreter of the movements of the female soul at their most secretive. He will show you that art and creativity are the expression of a serious and unsmiling performance in the manner of the immutable tea ceremony in which movements of the body, choreographed down to the minutest detail, show the birth and growth of a feeling of tenderness between two people who meet and discover the transparency of their emotions over the translucent colours of teacups. In Kawabata's hands this celebration of the intangible plays a part in the success of something that reaches beyond refined entertainment to attain love. The fascinating impression in that instant is that the serious and unsmiling game calls into play the very depths of the soul in a sort of timeless parenthesis, an escape beyond the everyday.

Yet why and how can one text be singled out among so many others of equal value in a country where genius has, ever since the distant Edo period and under the protection of the Tokugawa Shogunate, always managed in unseen, original and enduring ways to preserve its traditions and values in a spirit of modernity thanks to a unique alchemy whose secret it guards? Why forgo mentioning Noh in which the performers sing their parts, moving in an almost static fashion, or Kabuki in which the make-up of the Onnagata alone constitutes a complete art form, or Bunraku with puppets delicately accompanied by the samisen, a three-stringed lute, or again the subtle art of

Ukiyo-e prints, “pictures of a floating world”, symbolizing the *permanence* of what is nevertheless *ephemeral*, woven in a style of grace and sensitivity, or the exceptional munificence of Imari porcelain or yet again the ikebana art of flower arrangements, born in the seventh century, with its highly stylized compositions, or the tradition of the hanami, celebrating the superb blossoming of cherry trees in a ritual of the ephemeral, and finally, the high art of poetry with the tanka, ancestor to the haiku, the three-lined poem with its dazzling seventeen syllables of azure and gold.

We must, however, call a halt here to the inexhaustible list of the wonders of the *art de vivre* of a quality of life that not only benefits humanity but also the whole plant and animal kingdom, as borne out in the words of the aesthete, Matsuo Basho,

“*Orchid*
breathing incense into
butterfly wings”

Yes, we will have to forgo saluting the know-how of those Japanese artists who have, from time immemorial, excelled in the sculpture of wood, raising this material to the dignity of marble. We will have to forgo evoking that great figure in Japanese painting, the artist Sesshiu who could even paint with his toes. And we will have to forgo evoking works such as the *Man'yoshu* (*Ten Thousand Leaves*), an anthology of 4,500 poems compiled in the eighth century.

Yes, we have to call this list to a halt here, as a few words are not enough when it comes to literary giants such as Mishima, Inoue, Kawabata, Kenzaburu, Tanizaki or the potential Nobel Prize winner Haruki Murakami, all eminent bards of the fecund tension between tradition and modernity. Yes, the great Junichiro Tanizaki, committed not only to grasping the breadth of

human feelings, but also and above all, the bronze-tinted haziness that surrounds them, in his brilliant work, *In praise of shadows*.

The intangible construction of the Japanese soul into which I, who am so uninitiated, have dared to venture deserves more than these too fleeting moments and seconds, derisory dust of time. However, aided by a Japanese proverb, I will say, in excuse and regret, that “unspoken words are the flowers of silence”.

Counting on you all for your gracious indulgence, I would like to think that my bold incursion, in the form of an all-too fleeting journey into a minute part of the rich intangible cultural heritage of our host country, will nevertheless prove an inspiration and a stimulus to us all, and launch us enthusiastically into our work as we lay the milestones that will prepare the ground for activity to truly safeguard the world’s cultural heritage.

By preserving and cherishing its intangible heritage, each people, though well anchored in its own time, cannot help but feel the euphoria of escaping into timelessness while remaining at the heart of its daily existence. It may then feel at one with itself and able to taste what Françoise Sagan calls “the milk of human kindness”,¹ in national and fraternal solidarity.

Thus may we be encouraged in closing. We have, you and I, the certainty that the best of resting places, beyond the torments inherent in the human condition, lies within humanity, in a final paradox of which you all continue to prove a vibrant and fascinating example. In the history of humanity, it is highly likely that the future lies in the discernment of human beings who remain true to what they are. And herein lies the formidable intelligence of the descendants of the celestial land of Japan, a steadfast intelligence that will not let it be forgotten that we are all first children and then parents. This is

¹ Françoise Sagan: *Des yeux de soie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1975, p. 72.

how, beyond the vicissitudes of history, the mission of the builders of eternity is consolidated.