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- DECLARATION OF THE ORAL HERITAGE OF MANKIND
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Considerations for and suggestions of procedures for launch and
implementation of a programme entitled
« Declaration of the oral heritage of humanity »

Réflexions sur et suggestions pour le lancement et la mise en oeuvre
d'un programme intitulé
« Déclaration du patrimoine oral de l'humanité »

by / par

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**CONSIDERATIONS FOR AND SUGGESTIONS OF PROCEDURES FOR
LAUNCH AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A PROGRAMME ENTITLED
"DECLARATION OF THE ORAL HERITAGE OF HUMANITY" ***

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the Consultation of Experts on the case of the
Djamâa-El-Fna Square and the Programme on
the Oral Heritage of Mankind held by UNESCO
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As I stated in my other document, I think that protecting this Square will contribute to safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage that is permanently handed on and worked out in this place. Nevertheless, based on the Venezuelan case and other comparable experiences in South America, I think that if our interest is launching and implementing a worldwide Programme to safeguarding significant elements of the Oral Heritage of Humanity, then protecting emblematic physical places in which significant activities are carried on may constitute an advancement, but would not be enough. We would have to include some additional dimensions into both our analysis and the Programme. As I said in my other document, we would also have to think in "cultural spaces" that are not necessarily attached to differentiable and fixed physical places, and very particularly: we would have to include into our analysis and programme the practices of specialized individuals---be they storytellers, shamans, or other significant practitioners---whose special capabilities to hand on and permanently work out this Heritage are recognized by their communities. The practices of these specialists do have to be strengthened and stimulated (and this includes considerations about places, but does not end there), because they are who may keep alive---and ever growing--- these cultural assets, and their practices constitute themselves part of that Heritage.

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The discussion of the experiences of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon Basin, as well as of those of diverse population groups in Venezuela---be they indigenous peoples, Mestizo, or Afro-Venezuelan---that I offered in my former paper shows that our concern should not be limited to physical places. Neither should it be just to collecting stories, which may be recorded and published, and constitute valuable but frozen elements of the Oral Heritage. Based on these experiences, I think that we will have to find practical ways to deal with more difficult things: the practices of those individuals who are recognized as specialists by their communities, in the context of certain forms of social life. No doubt, this is a complex issue to be addressed, but not an impossible task. In this document I will offer some practical suggestions that I hope may contribute to our efforts of thinking and designing a Programme on the matter.

But before offering those practical suggestions, and in connection with the stated above, I would like to offer a first suggestion for the Programme on the Oral Heritage of Humanity. I think that it should strengthen and stimulate the practices of those who are recognized as storytellers, or as other kinds of relevant specialists, and should also stimulate the conditions that make possible their ways of learning and practicing their art. In this regard, it should take into account that their practices are not just vehicles of cultural heritages, but also intangible cultural heritages themselves. This first suggestion is mainly of a general and conceptual character, but in the following pages, I will make some practical suggestions that would make it operationable.

But, I still have to make another conceptual remark of practical significance. As you may remember, in that other document I also pointed out the need of taking into account the simultaneous existence of diverse cultures within any given country, and that we would have to consider the peculiarities of each of them as well as of the diverse Oral Heritages involved. For example, in the case of Venezuela, I pointed out the importance of considering particular groups of population, such as each of the indigenous peoples, the descendants of the old African slaves, and very particularly the case of women within each and every population group. The need of special consideration of the case of women within each culture must be emphasized because in Venezuela, as in most countries around the world, public places are still predominantly men's spaces, in which active women participation is still less significant. Therefore, if the Programme that we are planning is only going to be concerned for---let us say--- "public" culture and/or culture in "public" places,

most of the valuable Heritage that in every culture is handed on and permanently worked out through the practices of women particularly in "private" spaces will remain unprotected.

Consistently, my second suggestion for the Programme would be that it should deal with cultural diversity within countries in effective and practical ways, and it should consider the storytellers and other significant specialists that are recognized as such by diverse communities from each of these cultures, including both male and female specialists, taking into account both "public" and "private" spaces that the involved communities consider relevant for this Programme purposes. Consistently, and as a corollary of the former, my third suggestion would be that the Programme be named of the "Oral Heritage of Humanity"---instead of "Oral Heritage of Mankind" ---which might constitute a symbolic and hopefully suggestive indication for those who will frame their actions within the Programme.

Conventional research on the matter has focused in collecting stories, but has paid little attention to the art of storytelling itself and other cultural practices related to the handing on and permanent working out of Oral Heritages. The specificity of the artistry of the narrators and other significant practitioners, as well as of their ways of learning have rarely been the main objective of the scholar research. Paradoxically, it was precisely the interest in recording stories that contributed to put the storytellers and other significant practitioners in a sort of second place. They were not considered important, and their creativity was not taken into account, because researchers assumed that the stories were the important thing, and that those who hand on and permanently work out these stories would be their "informants". Such a generalized and institutionalized approach is but one more evidence of the fact that most researchers have not been receptive enough to the patterns of appreciation of the communities who did recognized these storytellers' skills as important in themselves.

The collecting and publishing of tales, legends, and mythological tales emerging from storytellers', shamans', and other practitioners' performances may be an adequate strategy for establishing some partial aspects of larger cultural dynamics, as well as for perpetuating them as frozen cultural heritages, ensuring their availability for posterity and for social groups with reading habits. These activities are currently associated with the idea of "rescue". In contrast, researching and analyzing the diverse ways of existence and appreciation of the art of storytelling and of other

significant practices, as well as of storytellers', and other practitioners' techniques and ways of learning, may be a useful strategy for establishing a foundations for the design of programmes for the strengthening and development of these cultural practices.

It is precisely with these purposes that I would like to make a forth suggestion, I think that the Programme should promote research initiatives oriented by, for example, some of the following questions:

- a) What are the cultural spaces, or circumstances, in which storytelling and other cultural practices involving the handing on and working out of Oral Heritages take place? Are they attached to particular physical places? To which ones?
- b) What are the social meanings and ways of existence of storytelling and those other cultural practices?
- c) What are the involved communities' patterns of appreciation of both storytelling and those other cultural practices' performances?
- d) Who are those individuals who are recognized as storytellers or as other relevant cultural specialists in each community? Why are they considered to be particularly good? How are their performances?
- e) What do they tell about? What practical knowledge do they contain? What social representations, values, and believes? What are the elements of their stories---or of other practices---that the group in question consider significant for their lives?
- f) How have those storytellers and other specialists acquired their skills? What are some of their professional "secrets" that may facilitate others to learn their art (at least what are those that they may share)?

I am sure that we will be able to add new questions to this list during our meeting in

Marrakech, but perhaps more importantly other questions may be added by concerned population groups. And it is in connection with this that I have another suggestion, one that I consider to be extremely important. My fifth suggestion is that these research initiatives to be promoted by the Programme should involve the collaborative work of professional researchers and the concerned population groups. In this way these studies will have better chances of overcoming some of the shortcomings and biases of more conventional research on the matter. Researchers participating in these joint programmes will have to do both: developing receptive attitudes towards communities' patterns and preferences, and leaving aside their own--and culturally conditioned--images of what should be considered storytelling and what should be not, or who is a "good" storyteller, and what are "authentic" or "traditional" performances. I must at this point emphasize that is already well known that prejudices against humor and sex have been the sources of censorship in published compilations of so-called "oral literatures," these censorship practices have sometimes been confessed by the very collectors in the prefaces of their publications. But, in any case, overcoming those shortcomings and biases of conventional research will not be the exclusive advantage of assuring the active participation of the concerned communities in these research initiatives. My own experience practicing this kind of research has taught me that it also contributes to fostering interest on both these practices and involved specialists in those communities in which there is a certain decline in this regard, and that it also stimulates active reflection and exchange among the members of the communities about these cultural practices, their current status in their lives, and what can be done about it.

Importantly, this kind of research with its characteristics of promoting active reflection and exchanges among members of the involved populations, as well as of facilitating them to acquire some research skills from professional researchers, also contribute to the bottom-up design of initiatives for the safeguarding of these Oral Heritages. And this precisely would be my sixth suggestion: that the Programme should promote the idea that concerned population groups be responsible for making decisions regarding the safeguarding of Oral Heritages, and that they should receive appropriate technical assistance for this purpose.

In connection with the former suggestion, and consistently with what I already stated regarding the need that researchers avoid imposing their criteria and ideas in the research process, I

will make my seventh suggestion: that the Programme should stimulate that those professionals and institutions charged with the task of providing that mentioned technical assistance should avoid imposing their criteria about what are the most appropriated means for safeguarding those Oral Heritages. They should develop sincere and open attitudes in providing information and assisting the concerned populations in an ample range of possibilities, including those that make intensive and creative use of electronic technologies. We already know of numerous cases of external experts who think that they have the right to say what is good or bad for what they consider to be "traditional" populations---and in putting the word traditional between quotation marks I am trying to call your attention to certain conceptions that assume that "traditional" is equivalent to "unchangeable." These kinds of attitudes implicitly assume the superiority of the expert point of view vis-a-vis the involved population regarding matters that are part of the lives of this population. On the other hand, we also know of very positive exchanges between professionals who have managed to assist indigenous peoples and other populations in acquiring skills to manage the most recent technologies, and in consciously appropriating them and use them to implement their own agendas. The existence of these former good experiences also open the room for my eight and final suggestion: that the Programme should promote and facilitate meetings, exchanges, and training opportunities between qualified individuals of the very concerned population groups.