

**Address of Hon (Mrs.) Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun
Minister of Education & Human Resources
Tertiary Education and Scientific Research**

Opening Ceremony

UNESCO Regional Conference and Ministerial RoundTable

18 July 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen

With due regard to all Protocol.

A very good morning to all of you.

Let me start by welcoming you all to this workshop where national Focal Persons, along with other Experts, will be discussing the preservation and protection of cultural heritage, a subject that has gathered tremendous momentum during the last few decades.

As you know, the discussions during the coming two days will help pave the way for the Ministerial RoundTable deliberations and the subsequent deliverable of a **Joint Statement** indicating priorities and the strengthening of synergies for safeguarding cultural heritage in Eastern Africa and the adjacent Indian Ocean Islands.

Cultural heritage: two words which encompass such a vast array of terms-- from tangible to intangible, from monuments to artefacts, music and dance inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.

I believe we will all agree that the safeguarding of culture directly contributes to the attainment of the SDGs that the global community has subscribed to. In effect, the SDGs epitomize a paradigm shift about

the notion of socio-cultural development which goes far beyond the mere span of economic growth.

SDG 11 (**Eleven**) clearly enunciates the crucial role culture has to play in making cities and human settlements safe, resilient and sustainable.

We all know that Cultural heritage is particularly at risk in a world with growing number of natural disasters and, worse, armed conflicts.

We have had many cases of “culture at risk” precisely because of its inherent vulnerability: its symbolic value is often targeted—with chilling effects, as has demonstrated the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and of the Timbuktu manuscripts or again the historic looting of African artefacts.

In such emergency situations, the protection of culture and its various manifestations is fundamental to energize re-development and foster peace.

The time is right, too.

It was Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, the 19th Century French critic and historian who stressed the three-pronged approach, famously known as *The Race*, *the Moment* and *the Milieu*.

Of course, he applied this to the contextual study of a work of art. But, if we reflect deeply, this applies as much to what brings us all together today.

The moment and the milieu are just right for us to engage in a common, concerted action leading to heritage safeguard.

The adoption of Resolution 2347 by the United Nations Security Council on the Protection of Cultural Heritage and the adoption of the “Florence Declaration” by Ministers of Culture of the G7 in this very year send a clear signal about the timeliness of this coordinated action.

Through this meeting, therefore, I am confident an increased awareness of the issues involved and the engaged discussions will lead to the defining of common actions.

For, distinguished Participants, it is up to us, the 13 countries covered by the UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa, to determine the nature of this sub-regional cooperation. Supported by our partners, we have to look for ways and means to enhance and sustain identified actions.

In this context, we would probably have to envisage collaborative actions through joint ventures.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Every one of our countries has a cultural history to tell and I would fail in my duty as a Mauritian if I did not narrate a segment of our story.

As you probably know, Mauritius is privileged to have two sites, namely the Appravasi Ghat and Le Morne on the World Heritage list. Much is done to sustain the preservation and development of these sites. I am delighted to note that visits to these sites are included in your three-day program.

Equally, our traditional values are illustrated by the ‘Sega Tipik’ and ‘Bhojpuri Geet Gawai’ which, I am certain, you will have to

opportunity to appreciate during the Reception hosted by the Ministry of Arts and Culture.

I must highlight, though, that we, in Mauritius, have been fortunate where peace and cultural preservation are concerned. We have known no armed conflict—rather the multi-country diversity of our roots and origins has resulted in a much-prized cultural diversity and the accompanying baggage of tangible and intangible heritage.

Add to that our being a prized destination for tourists and expats, and you have a cultural enrichment that prevents us from being siloed into narrow cultural roles.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am certain, that our several countries are all concerned about the safeguarding of our diversified cultural manifestations and artefacts.

However, we are also conscious that such a safeguard comes with a heavy price tag.

Sustainably can be--and generally is-- a costly enterprise!

At the same time, though, the tag is not exclusively financial: I think we will all agree that a number of conditions have equally to be fulfilled.

Thus, we need to have more awareness-building activities for cultural heritage conservation. This has to take the form of integration of indigenous and local culture into our school curricula.

Allow me a short parenthesis as Minister of Education.

We in Mauritius make sure our students cultivate a consciousness of our heritage, both tangible and intangible, built and natural. The idea is that our learners have to develop an understanding of the historical, social and aesthetic significance of that heritage.

You will appreciate, ladies and Gentlemen, that, in line with Agenda 2063, we too place Education and Culture very high on our own national agenda.

To resume with the other conditions that have to be met>

In the second place, conditions must be created for the local population to participate actively in the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage—a sense of ownership and empowerment must hence be developed.

Thirdly, in an age dominated by technology, digitization should be one of the core ways to both conserve and preserve heritage resources that are part and parcel of national and human patrimony.

And, fourthly, we must build the human capital that would be professionally equipped to take care of our heritage. Specialists have to be trained and retained--it takes professionals to help formulate and fine-tune management plans, for exmple.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I end, allow me don my hat as Chairperson of the Mauritian National Commission for UNESCO.

I am given to understand some Secretaries General of the different NATCOMs are present here today--and it is right it should be so.

For our NATCOM tasked to advance the ideals and objectives of UNESCO have an important contributory role to play in the safeguard of our tangible and intangible heritage.

Allow me to give some quick, even boilerplate, suggestions:

One, National Commissions should support all endeavors that promote cultural diversity and a culture of peace, thereby facilitating intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.

Two, they must encourage a wide civil engagement, especially that of youth, in the process of cultural safeguard.

Number three is obvious.

A Congolese proverb puts it thus:

“A single bracelet does not jingle”.

We must accelerate the process towards strengthening regional collaboration in Eastern Africa and the Adjacent Indian Ocean Island States on matters of cultural heritage protection, promotion and exchange.

And that, I have no doubt, will be very high on the agenda of our enterprising and resourceful Director of the UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am really appreciative of the endeavor of UNESCO Regional Office as well as UNESCO’s numerous partners in the field of cultural heritage protection to bring together a wide variety of professionals together.

You, dear participants, have to discuss the challenges that hamstring the protection of cultural heritage in the region.

I know you consider it a sacrosanct responsibility to combat the despoliation of our cultural property, whether tangible or intangible.

I also know that you will take the high road and come forward with forceful and ...“tangible” as well as implementable recommendations for presentation to the Ministerial RoundTable that will follow.

So, here’s wishing you good luck and fruitful outcomes to your deliberations.

I thank you for your kind attention.