

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE MINISTER OF CULTURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF CUBA, ON BEHALF OF THE COMMUNITY OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STATES (CELAC), AT THE 19TH FORUM OF MINISTERS OF CULTURE AND OFFICIALS IN CHARGE OF CULTURAL POLICIES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN AND THE FIRST MEETING OF MIINISTERS OF CULTURE OF CELAC**

Hon. Dr. Shirley Sitaldin, Minister of Education and Community Development of Suriname and President of the Pro-Tempore Secretariat of our Forum, esteemed colleagues and heads of delegations, distinguished delegates and guests that are with us here today,

Allow me, in the first place, to express our satisfaction at meeting here in Paramaribo, a beautiful and hospitable venue for our important work sessions, and, at the same time, to thank the Government and the Minister of Education and Community Development of Suriname for her tireless preparatory work and the excellent conditions created for our historical encounter, a symbol of the change of epoch we are living in our Big Homeland.

The outstanding work carried out by this Forum, which for over twenty years has enabled the encounter of Ministers and top-ranking officials of Culture of Latin America and the Caribbean, has been of extraordinary worth, and its contribution to the unity of Our America will remain indelibly recorded and forever recognised.

When we hailed the appearance of the Forum, the times and the distinctive signs of the region were different. It was an act of infinite faith in our future, for at that moment there was no government instance that would take us under its wing. However, we were convinced that culture could anticipate itself in this colossal endeavour of building unity in diversity, for to do so, we needed to know each other better, build bridges and open doors, so that our identities and our symbolic production could bring us closer together in a fruitful dialogue, such as the one that has characterised this Forum.

The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), in the Declaration of Santiago, during its First Summit Conference, recognised it to be “one of the oldest forums on cultural matters including Latin America and the Caribbean” –the only one that actually includes us all–, and expressed its appreciation for the excellent willingness of its members to hold, together with the 19<sup>th</sup> Forum, the First Meeting of Ministers of Culture of CELAC, a juncture where we have had the privilege to play a leading role.

We thus consider that all we have gained in experience and achievements, regardless of how modest they might seem at a given moment, should now be preserved and projected in the new conditions created in the region. No doubt new actions of common interest will be added, which will increasingly address the outreach of the strategic goals that our Governments have set in the framework of our new Community.

The road taken and the combination of objectives we have fulfilled enable us to underscore the pressing and priority need to strengthen our ties, to move forward in all those aspects that unite us and in the interests we share, which, given their scope and relevance richly deserve not to be influenced by issues where we have not reached consensus and that could tend to separate us, so that nothing should hinder the contribution that can be made through culture to the political, economic, social and cultural unity and integration of our region, achieving the necessary balance between unity and diversity, to which the Presidents and Prime Ministers subscribed in Santiago de Chile.

It is pertinent –and only fitting– to recognise the contribution made by the different countries that have held the Presidency of the Forum and have successively formed part of its Pro Tempore Secretariat, which sustained the continuity of our encounters and tasks during these fruitful years. We should also mention the favourable response that UNESCO had to the request the Ministers made in that context regarding its presence in the Forum, which gave way to the Technical Secretariat that, from the Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean (ORCALC), has made an efficient contribution to our tasks as countries, an assistance that we should always appreciate.

Today we consider that –in light of these elements--, on the occasion of this transcendental date, we are able to evaluate the viability of progressively moving towards the fusion of these two concertation mechanisms in the field of culture, which group exactly the same countries and identical authorities, and, above all, bearing in mind that they fully coincide insofar as their spirit and objectives, without risking the continuity of our successful actions or neglecting what we have resolutely built together and constitutes the sustenance of our joint activity.

We are persuaded that with this fusion we would be taking a step consistent with the position of the Santiago Summit in favour of not duplicating or overlapping regional experience or institutions. We would likewise be in complete harmony with the present moment in the region, which our respective Heads of State and of Government have promoted and headed through CELAC, and to whose development and strengthening we can contribute, as we achieve in its ranks the urgent support that the Caribbean and Latin American cultural action deserves.

Our agenda in these inevitably intense work sessions will enable us to exchange, update and project our work, convinced that it will be more encompassing and have a greater impact on our societies. To achieve this, we will necessarily have to practice the complementarity, solidarity and cooperation that we should encourage among our countries, aspects that we should share with the integration mechanisms acting in the region –whose presence enriches this gathering– so that present asymmetries may be progressively reduced, and the more vulnerable countries and those with a lower relative development, such as the sister Republic of Haiti, may be particularly favoured.

The challenges before this meeting are so great, challenges to which we are committed to give a viable response, that it should be expressed in our concrete

statements or agreements, so that we may conclude our meeting feeling that we have fulfilled the task derived from the great theme that has brought us here together: culture and sustainable development. Its efficient implementation, without undermining the national efforts made in each of our countries, demands a consistent multilateral exercise, where there can be no space for unilateral measures with extraterritorial effects, which run counter to the full expression of creative potentials and prevent the flow of cultural goods and services.

The Declaration of Santiago highlighted the Latin American and Caribbean character of Puerto Rico, whose rich national culture and defence of Spanish as its mother tongue –to name two elements that are particularly close to us– give proof to that effect. This makes us feel particularly identified with the consideration of our Heads of State and of Government that Puerto Rico is an issue of interest to CELAC and, as a result, it should also be addressed in our meetings of Ministers of Culture.

My esteemed fellow patriots of Our America, as José Martí, a universal man of all times, called this group of nations and peoples that we represent here today,

We are deeply grieved by the death of one of CELAC's main founders and promoters. The example of Commander President Hugo Chávez Frías inspires us to redouble our efforts in favour of Latin American and Caribbean unity, cooperation, solidarity and integration, and that will be our best tribute to him during our present sessions and in the years to come.

We urgently need, more than ever before, to value the cultures we treasure and our capacity to enrich them. The global and homogenizing world where we are to act places us in the midst of a civilisation crisis which today threatens the very existence of the human race, the maker of culture. To ignore the role of values, to postpone our contribution to the sense of responsibility that we should instil in every citizen, from a very early age, are positions that are incompatible with our deeply-rooted commitment to life. The demand for more just relations, more responsible behaviour, and a life of dignity for all, are at present essentially cultural tasks.

We trust that the exchange and results of this Meeting will boost the confidence you have placed in us and I thank you all for the fraternal and effective support you have given my country in the fulfilment of the honourable mission it has been assigned as the head of CELAC during this important period.

Thank you very much.

(Non-official translation into English language facilitated by the “Portal of Culture of Latin America and the Caribbean”, project of the Forum of Ministers of Culture and Officials in Charge of Cultural Policies of Latin America and the Caribbean, coordinate and financed by the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean).

