



THE ROLE OF NOWROUZ

IN THE RAPPROCHEMENT OF CULTURES
AND THE PROMOTION OF THE
CULTURE OF PEACE



Proceedings of the Round Table organized by the
Permanent Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran
to UNESCO

31 March 2010
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

In THE NAME OF GOD

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Preface

In September 2009 Nowrouz was inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity during the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It was the first multinational file to be inscribed by this Committee, and encompasses the seven countries of Azerbaijan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan and Turkey, although Nowrouz is celebrated by 300 million people not only in the Middle East, Central Asia, South East Asia, the Caucasus and the Black Sea area, but also in the Balkans and some African countries.

The celebration of Nowrouz was also added to the UN calendar by a resolution of its General Assembly on 23 February 2010. The decision of the UN General Assembly to acknowledge the International Day of Nowrouz is a manifestation of the increasing growth of global consciousness, as the importance of this occasion is recognized not only in the regions which celebrate it, but in the world as a whole. This New Year represents the promotion of coordination with the natural world and the dissemination of good intentions and global peace.

At the same time, this year we are celebrating several issues of great importance; 2010 is the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, and Nowrouz can not only play a significant role in the rapprochement of cultures of the countries of the region, but can also integrate various ethnic groups celebrating the first day of spring as their festival within each country. We take it as a good omen that in one of the Iranian cities, Yazd, a carpet is being woven which will be named the Carpet of the Rapprochement of Cultures, whose motto is “each guest, one knot”; it is hoped that this will later be displayed in UNESCO. We are also in the last year of the Decade for the Promotion of the Culture of Peace; taking into account the approval by the 35th General Conference of a resolution in this regard, we believe that Nowrouz, which represents friendship

and sympathy, is also well placed to play a significant role in the promotion of the culture of peace.

What follows are the proceedings of the Round Table organized by the Permanent Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran to UNESCO, in cooperation with the UNESCO Secretariat, and with the collaboration of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Tajikistan and Turkey, on 31 March 2010, from 10 am to 1 pm; as well as the speeches made during the related cultural events. Due to the richness of debate and the diversity of viewpoints we believe that this work can make a conceptual contribution to understanding the role that Nowrouz can play in the rapprochement of cultures and the promotion of the culture of peace.

Permanent Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran to
UNESCO

Message of H.E. Dr. Seyed Mohammad Hosseini
Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the
Islamic Republic of Iran

*In the name of the Lord of both wisdom and mind
To nothing sublime can thought be applied
The Lord of whatever is named or assigned
A place, the sustainer of all and guide
The Lord of Saturn and turning sky
Who caused Venus, Sun and Moon to shine
Who is above conception, name or sign
The artist of the heaven's jewellery*

(From the Shahnameh, composed by the Iranian poet Ferdowsi)

The inscription of Nowrouz in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and its inclusion in the calendar of the United Nations has once again indicated to the whole world Iran's great cultural and civilizational capacity. This year, which

has been named the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures by the UN and UNESCO, in which the Islamic Republic of Iran has played a pioneering role, is an opportunity to utilize the common heritage of humanity for the purpose of dialogue among cultures, paving the way for sustainable peace on the basis of global justice, and to convey the message of Nowrouz, which is the manifestation of the interaction among Islamic values and ancient Iranian traditions and is a cultural–historic link between Iran and its neighbouring countries. While being a symbol of unity among the people of the countries of the region on the basis of common customs and bringing the feeling of renovation, Nowrouz is a culture-producing festival that inspires hope in the future and brings with itself as a gift the culture of peace for human societies. The secret of the durability of Nowrouz is its linkage with nature, and in this regard its coincidence with the International Year of Biodiversity multiplies its importance. The spiritual message of Nowrouz is to emphasize the essence and nature of human beings and the humanity of mankind and, due to this fact, it incorporates friendship, sympathy and respect for relatives.

I am very pleased that this year Nowrouz has coincided with the celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the

composition of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, which is considered as an example of documentary cultural heritage with a great role in national unity through its safeguarding of the Persian language and keeping alive the link between the past and present in memories.

It is also worth mentioning that the anniversary of our country's great literary and cultural figure, Sibuyeh, with which UNESCO is associated this year, who is considered as the manifestation of dialogue between the Persian and Arabic languages, has added to the various dimensions of this year's Nowrouz. I hope that a spiritual spring and a future full of prosperity, hope, sympathy, justice, the eminence of humanity and spirituality will be provided, utilizing the cultural and spiritual message of Nowrouz's coincidence with the revitalization of nature.

Dr. Davidson Hepburn

President of the 35th General Conference of UNESCO

I would like to tell you how impressed I was by the celebration of Nowrouz under the theme “the Rapprochement of Cultures and the Promotion of the Culture of Peace”. I was moved by the very many cultures that came together to welcome the New Year. I was touched by the sense of interdependence displayed. This festival could not have taken place at a better time than spring when everything is fresh and flowers are in bloom. The Persian poet Omar Khayyam said, “Come fill the cup and in the fire of spring, your winter garments of repentance fling. The bird of time has but a little way to flutter and the bird is on the wing...”

Excellencies,
My Dear Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank Ambassador Majidi of Iran for inviting me to address you on this very auspicious occasion. You should all be familiar with the history and the purpose of Nowrouz; I need not therefore bore you with details. But from what I have read about this celebration, I have learned that there are many countries that observe Nowrouz as the New Year, the beginning of spring; whereas summer (June) represents the time for weddings, spring is the time for the rebirth of nature and new life.

This year the United Nations General Assembly recognized March 21 as “The International Day of Nowrouz” and on 15 March the United States House of Representatives passed the Nowrouz resolution by a vote of 384-2, recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Nowrouz. With this show of international support, it is no wonder that several countries have come together to honour the occasion.

I consider it very significant that the Member States concerned chose this event to focus their attention on the

theme “The Role of Nowrouz in the Rapprochement of Cultures and the Promotion of the Culture of Peace”. You might ask, how can Nowrouz accomplish this task? Let me draw some ideas from this 300 year-old celebration:

Nowrouz represents artistic expressions;

It promotes cultural identity;

It encourages dialogue;

It disseminates values of human rights, social justice, solidarity, equality, mercifulness and alleviation of poverty.

It is no exaggeration to say that all these elements are intrinsic to the preservation and sustainability of peace. In my view, any idea – tangible or intangible – that can promote these ideals is worthy of special recognition.

We are all aware that in a world torn by strife and divisiveness, peace may seem very illusive. A young girl once answered my question about peace in this way: “Peace is when I am fighting with my sister”. I have always remembered it because there is some truth to that comment.

Similarly, Nowrouz is caught up in a struggle of trying to avoid one-upmanship in celebrating without disagreement as

to the origin of the term of the festival. Historians are still trying to determine when and how the first feast was celebrated. There is however enough history surrounding Nowrouz that it can be a special guide for all who are ready to promote the culture of peace and harmony in the world.

The main word here is “rapprochement”, which means bringing together all of the forces that would form a sound foundation on which peace could be built. It does not mean joining as one entity, but rather that all celebrants honour in their own way while drawing from the historical data. Rapprochement is certainly doable, but it is by no means easy.

In the history of Nowrouz there are gruesome stories of what some leaders have done in order to stay in control. There are also a good number of folk tales highlighting the attributes of Nowrouz. For example, it was believed that whatever a person does on Nowrouz will affect the rest of the year. Another tradition is the visit of cemeteries on the last Thursday night or early Friday morning to read for deceased relatives. And yet another: if a person is warm and kind to relatives, friends or neighbours on Nowrouz, then the New Year would be a good one, while the reverse is true if the

person does evil things. These are examples that we can all emulate.

Rapprochement means moving in a positive direction. It means interdependence. That is why I am heartened to see so many different cultures, customs and traditions uniting for a common cause. Needless to say there must have been a great deal of excitement and rejoicing in days of yore. One of the most well-known individuals was Omar Khayyam, a noted Persian mathematician and poet, who gives a vivid description in his work “Nowruzania” of the celebration of the kings of Persia.

He also wrote “the Rubaiyat”, in which he gives commands such as: “Wake! For the sun or open the Door... Come fill the cup...”.

My challenge then to you is that as you celebrate this special event you combine these ancient philosophies with your modern interpretation. I am certain that such an innovation would be indispensable to the strengthening of the culture of peace.

Mr. Hans d'Orville
UNESCO Deputy Director-General a.i.

*Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Permanent Delegates to UNESCO,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,*

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you at UNESCO House on behalf of the Director-General, Madam Irina Bokova, on the occasion of Nowrouz.

Celebrating Nowrouz is a delight for us here at UNESCO, the House of cultures in their diversity. Indeed, we are proud to be one of those places in the world where we have a myriad of

different New Year celebrations, which are opportunities to have a glimpse into the richness of different cultures in the act of bridging the past and the future, tradition and renewal.

Included on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 as a cultural tradition shared by many countries, Nowrouz is not surprisingly one of the most favourite events in the Turkic world, for many countries and people of Central Asia and their neighbouring countries and of course the Persian-speaking world. It is the beginning of the calendar and it happens at one of the most meaningful periods of the year, spring, the start of agricultural activities, the renewal of nature and warm days. It is a time of unison, of unison between nature and people and between people, since it is the custom to pay visits to each other, friends and neighbours. It is a time of dances, traditions, culinary events and games. Nowrouz's lesson is that renewing times are an opportunity to build bridges among people. This is a strong message.

The folkloric groups gathered are a living evidence of how creative diversity promotes the values of peace, solidarity among generations and within families, mutual understanding and good neighbourly relations, thereby contributing to cultural

diversity and friendship among peoples from different communities and countries.

Nowrouz is not just a delightful event to us at UNESCO. It is a reminder of our mandate and missions: constructing the defences of peace in the minds of men and women. As a New Year it is also a moment when we may reflect and think about our own renewal.

At the dawn of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are frequently asking ourselves how UNESCO can, and should, adapt its action to the changing contexts of globalization. The meaning of many key notions and approaches has changed in recent years. To renew reflection and action towards peace, the United Nations declared 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures and designated UNESCO as UN system lead agency.

As tonight's event is organized in the context of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, it must be mentioned that four main strategic lines of action for the Year of Rapprochement have been devised. They involve promoting reciprocal knowledge of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity; building a framework for commonly shared values; strengthening

quality education and intercultural competences; and fostering dialogue for sustainable development.

To strengthen the outreach and impact of the Year, the Director-General has called on all UNESCO's partners to mobilize with the purpose of reaching these objectives: the National Commissions for UNESCO, agencies of the United Nations system, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors and Artists for Peace, UNESCO Chairs and Associated Schools, Clubs and Centres, parliamentarians, locally elected officials, the world of culture, the sciences, education and the media, opinion leaders, youth organizations, and civil society as a whole, including the private sector.

To accompany UNESCO's work in the area of the dialogue and the rapprochement of cultures, the Director-General also established a High Panel on Peace and Dialogue among Cultures with some twenty personalities from different geographical and intellectual spheres. Their task is vital to reset the compass for a world that, while more and more connected and economically integrated, seems to grow divided, unequal and distrustful.

The first meeting of the High Panel marked the official inauguration of the International Year for the Rapprochement of

Cultures, which has a rich calendar of foreseen events. Today's celebration of Nowrouz marks an important highlight of the International Year and I wish you all a happy New Year filled with renewed and meaningful rapprochement.

Ms. Katerina Stenou

*Director of the Division of Cultural Policies and
Intercultural Dialogue*

*Mr. President of the General Conference,
Mr. Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of the Islamic
Republic of Iran,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen the Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

In the name of the Director-General, Madam Irina Bokova, I welcome you and extend my best wishes to you for the festival of Nowrouz, which announces both the New Year and spring, and concerns millions of people from numerous countries, in an extensive geographical zone which

covers, among others, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.¹

It is a great honour for me, in my capacity as focal point of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures which we are celebrating throughout 2010, to be among you on the occasion of Nowrouz, which is being held at a highly symbolic time and place.²

Spring has hesitated to make its appearance here in Paris, but I do not doubt that the celebrations of Nowrouz will help it to feel more confident and accompany the efforts of nature to open a new year of peace and prosperity for all.³

¹ Monsieur le Président de la Conférence générale,
Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, délégué permanent de la République islamique d'Iran,
Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs les Ambassadeurs,
Mesdames, Messieurs,

Au nom de la Directrice générale, Madame Irina Bokova, je vous souhaite la bienvenue et vous adresse nos meilleurs vœux pour la fête de Nowrouz qui annonce à la fois le Nouvel an et le printemps, et concerne des millions de personnes de nombreux pays, dans une zone géographique très étendue qui traverse, entre autres, l'Azerbaïdjan, l'Inde, l'Iran, le Kirghizistan, le Pakistan, la Turquie et l'Ouzbékistan.

² C'est un grand honneur pour moi, en ma qualité de point focal de *l'Année internationale du rapprochement des cultures* que nous célébrons tout au long de l'Année 2010, d'être parmi vous, à l'occasion du Nowrouz qui se tient à un moment et dans un lieu hautement symboliques.

³ Le printemps a hésité à paraître ici à Paris, mais je ne doute pas que les célébrations du Nowrouz l'aideront à se sentir plus confiant et à accompagner les efforts de la nature pour ouvrir une nouvelle année de paix et de prospérité pour tous.

Nowrouz, as many of you in this room know well, is associated with numerous local traditions – stories, legends, rites, traditional games, songs, dances and festive meals, with a great symbolic charge. By the values of peace, solidarity, justice, friendship, sympathy, mutual respect, reconciliation and neighbourliness that it promotes, Nowrouz constitutes an eloquent illustration of diversity and dialogue, internally and among the countries which share it. UNESCO cannot be other than extremely happy to celebrate it within its walls, as its message resonates in unison with its own ideals.⁴

Since 2009, Nowrouz has figured on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, instituted by the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Seven States Parties to the Convention jointly proposed it: Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Turkey. This international recognition is the fruit of the long efforts of these seven countries as well as Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and

⁴ Le Nowrouz, beaucoup d'entre vous dans cette salle le savent bien, est associé à de nombreuses traditions locales - récits, légendes, rites, jeux traditionnels, chants, danses, repas festifs, avec une forte charge symbolique. Par les valeurs de paix, de solidarité, de justice, d'amitié, de sympathie, de respect mutuel, de réconciliation et de bon voisinage qu'il promet, le Nowrouz constitue une illustration éloquent de la diversité et du dialogue, à l'intérieur et entre les pays qui l'ont en partage. L'UNESCO ne peut qu'être extrêmement heureuse de le célébrer dans ses murs, tant son message résonne à l'unisson avec ses propres idéaux.

Tajikistan, who have worked on this dossier for several years. Unfortunately, these last three countries, not having yet ratified the Convention at the time of the deposit of the candidature, were not able to be formally associated with it.⁵

On 23 February it was the General Assembly of the United Nations itself which, in New York, voted for a resolution declaring 21 March the “International Day of Nowrouz”, further underlining the importance of this celebration.⁶

Nowrouz is a good example of what intangible cultural heritage is, this heritage which is transmitted from generation to generation, and procures for communities a feeling at once of identity and continuity; a heritage which does not cease to transform and recreate itself throughout time to give sense to our life by tightening the bonds which unite us. Nowrouz is

⁵ Depuis 2009, le Nowrouz figure sur la Liste représentative du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l’humanité, instituée par la Convention de l’UNESCO pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel. Sept États parties à la Convention l’ont conjointement proposé : l’Azerbaïdjan, l’Inde, l’Iran, le Kirghizistan, l’Ouzbékistan, le Pakistan et la Turquie. Cette reconnaissance internationale est le fruit d’efforts de longue date de ces sept pays ainsi que de l’Afghanistan, du Kazakhstan et du Tadjikistan, qui ont travaillé depuis plusieurs années sur ce dossier. Malheureusement, ces trois derniers pays n’ayant pas encore ratifié la Convention au moment du dépôt de candidature, ils n’ont pu y être associés formellement.

⁶ Le 23 février dernier, c’est l’Assemblée générale des Nations Unies elle-même qui, à New York, a voté une résolution déclarant le 21 mars « Journée internationale du Nowrouz », soulignant davantage encore l’importance de cette célébration.

all the more illustrative of the spirit of the Convention as it is a heritage shared by numerous countries, demonstrating to what extent intangible cultural heritage can gather and bring closer together numerous communities beyond frontiers.⁷

If UNESCO sets itself up, in the terms of its mandate, as a global legislator, it is precisely as it has the good fortune to be able to captivate all the vivid force of the creative genius of all the cultures of the world to affirm or reconstruct the fundamental unity of humanity, to rediscover this “mother language” that everyone can hear and speak, whatever their cultural, religious or other roots.⁸

You will have guessed that Nowrouz equally constitutes a good example for the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, for which UNESCO has been

⁷ Le Nowrouz est un bel exemple de ce qu'est le patrimoine culturel immatériel, ce patrimoine qui est transmis de génération en génération, et procure aux communautés un sentiment à la fois d'identité et de continuité. Un patrimoine qui ne cesse de se transformer et de se recréer à travers le temps, pour donner sens à notre vie en resserrant les liens qui nous unissent. Le Nowrouz est d'autant plus illustratif de l'esprit de la Convention que c'est un patrimoine partagé par de nombreux pays, démontrant combien le patrimoine culturel immatériel peut rassembler et rapprocher de nombreuses communautés au-delà des frontières.

⁸ Si l'UNESCO s'érige, aux termes de son mandat, en législateur mondial, c'est précisément qu'elle a la bonne fortune de pouvoir captiver toutes les forces vives du génie créateur de toutes les cultures du monde pour affirmer ou reconstruire l'unité fondamentale de l'humanité, pour retrouver cette « langue-mère » que chacun peut entendre et parler, quelles que soient ses racines culturelles, religieuses ou autres.

designated lead agency by the United Nations General Assembly. This Year offers our Organization an inestimable opportunity to relaunch the missions with which it has been charged by its founding fathers, conscious that hatred, violence and conflicts have at their origin “the mutual incomprehension of peoples”. If this was true at the time of the creation of UNESCO in 1945, it is even more so today when the compression of space and time makes our societies more and more interconnected and interdependent in all fields of human activity, at the global level.⁹

However, mutual incomprehension persists, even if it was hoped that the intensification of the circulation of knowledge, inventions and creations would have favoured such a rapprochement. Incomprehension and mistrust seem rather to have increased as if this proximity of cultures had engendered a feeling of uneasiness, leading to turning in on oneself and rejecting the other.¹⁰

⁹ Vous l’aurez deviné, le Nowrouz constitue également un bel exemple pour l’Année internationale du rapprochement des cultures dont l’UNESCO a été désignée chef de file par l’Assemblée générale des Nations Unies. Cette Année offre à notre Organisation une occasion inestimable de réactualiser les missions qui lui ont été confiées par ses pères fondateurs, conscients que la haine, la violence, les conflits, avaient pour origine « l’incompréhension mutuelle des peuples ». Si ceci était vrai au moment de la création de l’UNESCO en 1945, il l’est encore plus aujourd’hui où la compression de l’espace et du temps rend nos sociétés de plus en plus interconnectées et interdépendantes dans tous les domaines de l’activité humaine, à l’échelle planétaire.

¹⁰ Mais l’incompréhension mutuelle persiste même si on avait espéré que l’intensification de la circulation des connaissances, des inventions et des créations

The objective of this Year 2010 is fully in line with this changing international context: to celebrate the richness and the unifying power of our creative diversity, on the one hand, and contribute to dissipating the amalgams born of ignorance, the prejudices and exclusions which lead to tension, insecurity and conflict, on the other hand. Campaigning for dialogue and reciprocal knowledge means favouring respect for all cultures, thus breaking down the barriers which separate them.¹¹

It is perhaps not by chance that the date of 21 March, the first day of spring for a large part of the world, was retained by the same United Nations General Assembly to also celebrate the International day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and by UNESCO to celebrate World Poetry Day.¹²

aurait favorisé un tel rapprochement. L'incompréhension et la méfiance semblent plutôt s'être accrues comme si cette proximité des cultures avait engendré un sentiment d'inquiétude, allant du repli sur soi-même au rejet de l'autre.

¹¹ C'est dans ce contexte international mouvant que s'inscrit pleinement l'objectif de cette Année 2010 : célébrer la richesse et le pouvoir unificateur de notre diversité créatrice, d'une part, et contribuer à dissiper les amalgames nés des ignorances, des préjugés et des exclusions qui engendrent tensions, insécurité, violence et conflits, d'autre part. Il s'agira, en militant pour le dialogue et la connaissance réciproque, de favoriser le respect pour toutes les cultures, brisant ainsi les barrières qui les séparent.

¹² Ce n'est peut-être pas un hasard si la date du 21 mars, premier jour du printemps pour une grande partie de la planète, a été retenue par la même Assemblée générale des Nations Unies pour célébrer également la Journée internationale pour l'élimination de la discrimination raciale et par l'UNESCO pour célébrer la Journée mondiale de la poésie.

Allow me, today, to content myself with celebrating the promises of “the fecund diversity of cultures” for which UNESCO is the depository within the United Nations and which will not bear fruit unless it engages in intimate dialogue with other cultures, the inexhaustible sources of its perpetual regeneration.¹³

In her message on the occasion of the launch of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures the Director-General, Ms. Irina Bokova, launched an appeal for all the partners of UNESCO to mobilize themselves to “...throw up solid and united bridges between all cultures in order to create a new universal ethics of living together”.¹⁴

I formulate the wish that the events organized on the occasion of Nowrouz contribute to revealing the intimate links woven between and within a great number of societies

¹³ Permettez-moi, aujourd’hui, de me contenter de célébrer les promesses de « la féconde diversité des cultures » dont l’UNESCO est le dépositaire au sein des Nations Unies et qui ne peut porter ses fruits que si elle entretient des dialogues intimes avec les autres cultures, sources inépuisables de sa régénération perpétuelle.

¹⁴ Dans son message à l’occasion du lancement de l’Année internationale du rapprochement des cultures, la Directrice générale, Mme Irina Bokova, a lancé un appel pour que tous les partenaires de l’UNESCO se mobilisent pour « ... jeter des passerelles solides et solidaires entre toutes les cultures afin de créer une nouvelle éthique universelle du vivre ensemble ».

having such a beautiful shared culture, which incontestably contributes to a real rapprochement of peoples.¹⁵

We all know: exchange and dialogue among cultures have a great power to construct peace. This round table without any doubt will be a tremendous example of this and will constitute a precious contribution to this International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures.¹⁶

In the name of the Director-General and in my own name, I wish your work all success.¹⁷

¹⁵ Je formule le vœu que les manifestations organisées à l'occasion du Nowrouz contribuent à révéler les liens intimes tissés entre et au sein d'un grand nombre de sociétés ayant une si belle culture en partage, qui contribue incontestablement à un véritable rapprochement des peuples.

¹⁶ Nous le savons tous : l'échange et le dialogue entre les cultures sont d'une grande puissance pour construire la paix. Cette table ronde en sera sans nul doute un formidable exemple et constituera une précieuse contribution à cette Année internationale du rapprochement des cultures.

¹⁷ Au nom de la Directrice générale et en mon nom propre, je souhaite plein succès à vos travaux.

Ms. Cécile Duvelle

Chief, Section of Intangible Cultural Heritage

*Your Excellency, Mr. Seyed Mehdi Miraboutalebi,
Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to France,*

*Your Excellency, Mr. Mohammad Reza Majidi, Ambassador
and Permanent Delegate of the Islamic Republic of Iran to
UNESCO,*

Excellencies, Permanent Delegates to UNESCO,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here this evening on behalf of the Director-General, Madam Irina Bokova, on the occasion of this concert of traditional music of Iran and the recitation of the Shahnameh, the Book of Kings, offered to us in celebration of Nowrouz.

Nowrouz marks the beginning of the Persian New Year and the arrival of spring, and as we all eagerly await warmer days and the reawakening of nature, we are delighted here at UNESCO to celebrate this event with tonight's performances that will offer a glimpse of the richness of cultural expressions that come to life as millions of people in Iran, but also across Central, South and West Asia, celebrate this shared heritage.

We at UNESCO are proud to be one of those places in the world where we have a myriad of different New Year celebrations, which are opportunities to have a glimpse into the richness of different cultures in the act of bridging the past and the future, tradition and renewal.

Nowrouz illustrates well the importance of intangible cultural heritage that is transmitted from generation to generation, providing its celebrants with a sense of identity and continuity. The songs, dances, recitals of legends, rituals and traditional games, and the gathering around festive meals that accompany Nowrouz are a vivid testimony of the creative diversity that promotes values of peace, solidarity among generations and within families, mutual understanding and good relations between neighbours.

This neighbourly friendship among the countries in which Nowrouz is celebrated has made it possible for it to be inscribed, in 2009, on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, established under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, following its joint nomination by Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. This inscription was the result of long-standing efforts and cooperation between these countries and others that expressed their common desire to see Nowrouz recognized by the international community. I have the hope that those countries that are not yet formally associated with this inscription will have the opportunity to join it in the future as States Parties to the 2003 Convention. These collaborative efforts also resulted in the recent resolution by the General Assembly of the United Nations recognizing 21 March as the International Day of Nowrouz.

This evening's concert also celebrates the thousandth anniversary of the creation of one of the world's greatest literary works, the Shahnameh. UNESCO's 35th General Conference recognized the importance of celebrating this work by the renowned tenth-century poet Ferdowsi, which

established Persian as a significant literary language. It is also in recognition of the work's importance that a particularly splendid copy, the "Bayasanghori Shahnameh", which was made in 1430, was inscribed on the Memory of the World in 2007. Of the great early copies of the work, only the "Bayasanghori Shahnameh" has survived, and it is kept under lock and key in the Imperial Library of the Golestan Palace in Tehran.

It is in this celebratory context that tonight's event is also a tribute to the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. At the dawn of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are frequently asking ourselves how UNESCO can, and should, adapt its action to the changing contexts of globalization. The meaning of many key notions and approaches has changed in recent years. To renew reflection and action towards peace, the United Nations declared 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures and designated UNESCO as the UN system lead agency.

UNESCO's actions for the Year will be guided by the main strategic lines of action that involve promoting reciprocal knowledge of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and

religious diversity; building a framework for commonly shared values; strengthening quality education and intercultural competences; and fostering dialogue for sustainable development.

Nowrouz, in its diversity, complexity and richness, is indeed an opportunity that should bring us closer to achieving these goals, as it unites peoples of different cultures, nationalities, religions, regions and languages who find common ground in their shared celebration of Nowrouz. Nowrouz is a celebration that is open in spirit and embracing of all, providing an entry point for people outside the Nowrouz sphere to enter into contact and communication with its practitioners and communities in a celebratory context. This is the message resonating from Nowrouz: that renewing times are an opportunity to build bridges among peoples.

H.E. Dr. Mohammad Reza Majidi
Associate Professor , University of Tehran
Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of the Islamic
Republic of Iran to UNESCO

Mr. President of the General Conference,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for my Delegation that we are celebrating the Iranian New Year and our common heritage, Nowrouz, during the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. As you are aware, in all societies there is a special day which is considered as the beginning of the New Year, taking into account the history and culture of the country concerned. In Iran and many other

countries, Nowrouz is celebrated as the rebirth of nature. Nowrouz is unique among New Year ceremonies in that it coincides with the Spring Equinox, truly referring to a new birth after the winter, and metaphorically pointing to the birth of a new phase in the lives of the people. This reawakening symbolizes the triumph of bounty. It is not known exactly when and how the festival of Nowrouz emerged in ancient Persia, and historians express different views concerning its historical background, although according to some historical documents it seems that Iranians have celebrated Nowrouz since three thousand years before Christ.

The great Iranian epic poet Abulqasem Ferdowsi (940-1020) in his masterpiece the *Shahnameh*, the millennium of whose composition we are celebrating this year, as well as Abu Raihan Biruni and the well-known Persian poet Hakim Omar Khayyam in his book *Nowrouznameh*, along with many other classical scholars and Iranian poets, have attributed the festival of Nowrouz to the Iranian king Jamshid. The oldest archaeological record for the celebration of Nowrouz comes from the Achaemenid period over 2500 years ago. The Achaemenids used Takht-e Jamshid, a sacred place especially for adoration, as a site for the celebration of

Nowrouz and the beginning of the New Year. Every year, the representatives of different nations under his control, with their own ethnic customs, gathered in this place and presented the king with gifts while celebrating Nowrouz in the Apadana palace.

As an ancient Iranian tradition which existed in Iran before Islam, Nowrouz was enriched with the adoration of and appeal to Allah after the advent of Islam. Islam and its holy Prophet (PBUH) have always considered two important preconditions to confirm or reject the religious, national or ethnic customs and traditions of different societies. The first condition is that the accepted traditions should not be based on superstition, idolatry and non-divine values. The second one is that the traditions should not bring dependency on aliens or distort the independence of Muslims in different aspects. After Islam, many of the traditions celebrated in Nowrouz were combined with those of the Islamic traditions and were accepted by Islam. Among the Iranian traditions confirmed by Islam we can refer to the younger generations paying visits to the older ones, giving gifts to children, ending animosities, and so on. In the Islamic narrations, making someone happy is considered as equivalent to praying and giving service to God. Since the Nowrouz

celebration is aimed at making other people happy, it is of great spiritual value.

One of the spiritual manifestations of Nowrouz is the prayer for the beginning of the New Year, which is very meaningful and conceptual and in which we request our God who changes the hearts and souls of human beings to change our mood to the best one. If we consider the feasts which are celebrated in Islam, such as Eid al Fitr and Eid al Adha, we will realize that the spiritual aspects of celebrations are more important than superficial or materialistic ones. There is a narration from Imam Ali (PBUH) that every day in which you have not committed a sin is your feast day. Nowrouz is confirmed by Islam because its spiritual aspects are greater than its materialistic ones, and in some holy narrations it is said that you have to keep yourself clean on that day, and it is better to fast and worship God.

Modern Iranians still perform the traditional Nowrouz spring-cleaning; spread the traditional table-cloth with seven elements on it all beginning with the letter S, hence its name *haft-sin*, meaning the seven Ss; sit around the table-cloth to read through the Holy Quran; and recite poetry, while consuming the food. Naturally some changes have occurred

between the celebrations of the past and what we witness in Iranian celebrations today; it is to be noted that no cultural phenomena remains unchanged and most of them become modified over the course of time. Nowrouz has other joyful and interesting traditions that are still celebrated by Iranians; for example, once the New Year is announced on the television or radio, the younger members of the family will pay their respects to their elders by wishing them a happy New Year and kissing their faces and sometimes their hands (a sign of ultimate respect). Relatives kiss and embrace, and presents, traditionally cash or coins, are exchanged. Sweets are offered to all to symbolically sweeten their lives for the rest of the year. A small mirror is passed around, rose water is sprinkled into the air and *espan*, a popular type of incense, is burnt to keep the evil eye away. The first few days are spent visiting older members of the family, relatives, and friends. Children receive presents; sweets and special meals are consumed.

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of Nowrouz and its main difference with other celebrations is that Nowrouz is the celebration of coordination and harmony between man and nature; it possesses many values which provide us with the commonalities between man and nature.

The message of Nowrouz is social interaction, solidarity, unity, social justice, joy, companionship, happiness, freedom, peace and prosperity for all mankind. The Nowrouz festival is the most popular celebration in the history and the life of the people of Iran. Nowrouz is also widely commemorated in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics, as well as in the Balkans, the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. Nowrouz is the manifestation of unity among the people of our region because it is not only considered as a spiritual feeling, but also as a common custom.

As a term referring to a whole collection of ritualistic proceedings at the time of the transition of the New Year, Nowrouz manifests itself as a unifying cultural element in its basics, with rich diversities in different regions respecting it. Nowrouz enjoys a number of characteristics which make it distinct as an element of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing all of the latter's manifestations, as defined in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Specific oral traditions and expressions; various manifestations of performing arts; a rich collection of social practices, rituals and festive events; unique instances of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the

universe; as well as traditional craftsmanship are observed during Nowrouz, each with specific regional diversities. Its unifying nature was among the major criteria encouraging the selection of the element as the title for the first multinational nomination for inscription in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Nowrouz invites all members of the community to collaborate with each other. There are ritualistic tasks performed specifically by women, youngsters, men or the elders, as well as other rituals in which the whole community can take part. Nowrouz's rituals encourage peace, respect for the rights of others, respect for the elders, respect for the dead and respect for nature, among their other humanitarian characteristics, which makes Nowrouz outstanding as a means to facilitate the rapprochement of cultures. Its rituals point to fundamental unity while presenting superficial diversity, emphasizing the fact that humanitarian principles remain unique throughout the cultural territory in which Nowrouz lives. Once the above-mentioned fundamental diversity is discovered, the principle of the rapprochement of cultures is achieved.

Culture represents the principal aspect of human life; that which gives significance to the humanity of human beings is their cultural characteristics. Ethics, dignity, affection, devotion, sacrifice, indulgence and freedom are all cultural concepts, and human beings have no significance without them. I think that today we need culture more than in the past because the other activities and progress of human beings have not succeeded in bringing about tranquillity, well-being and prosperity; in other words, our need for culture is greater than our need for technology and arms. Our belief is that diverse cultures are like all the beautiful flowers found in one garden. Everywhere, cultural values manifest themselves from the hearts of nations and human beings, and the diversity of human beings leads to communication and knowing one another, which is in itself a very beautiful scene. In my view the time has arrived for us to place all our own cultural achievements on the table and prepare for exchange, which is the best work that can be done: the cooperation and exchange of cultures in the service of perfection, and perfection in the service of cooperation. Our belief is that the essence and reality of all cultures is the same, as cultures have been reflected from the depths of the nature of nations. Cultural heritage belongs to all humanity, even if it is born within a particular geographical area; the product of humans

belongs to all human beings. Essentially, the human being is universal, trans-boundary and trans-geographical; the human being cannot be confined within the framework of geography, race or national borders.

The goals of the Year of Rapprochement of Cultures shall be fulfilled once effective, live manifestations of collaborations of communities are invited to play a real role on the scene. Nowrouz is such a manifestation; and it is believed that it has played the role of a unifying element during its long history. We hope that the role shall continue more effectively, especially now that it has been internationally recognized.

Nowrouz incorporates the message of peace, friendship and justice, and this provides a great opportunity for all the countries of all regions to use this custom and heritage for the reinforcement of peace and brotherhood, and pave the way for friendly and constructive interaction, sustainable friendship and expanded relations between themselves. Nowrouz represents the reinforcement of sympathy and friendship, and from this point of view can contribute to the interaction of cultures, as the culture of the East has much to exchange with and contribute to the culture of the West, and

to the world as a whole. It represents the fact that the rapprochement of cultures should not be unilateral, but rather mutual. Thus, the cultural heritage of regions do not stand in contradiction to one another, but can have a synergistic impact on the rapprochement of states and nations, and also promote the common culture based on the promotion of human dignity and the reinforcement of constructive cooperation. Today we witness the universalization and globalization of Nowrouz in the world, which demonstrates that it contributes to the humanization of globalization. Culture is at the origin of communication and connection. We should understand each other more than ever; our common language is the language of culture, the language of beauty and the language of human beings. We should serve it and establish a prosperous life on our planet earth.

Mr. Rafael Hüseyinov
*Member of the Milli Mejlis (National Assembly) of
the Republic of Azerbaijan*

Among the remarkable days and holidays of the calendars of the world there is a day which can be considered as the one having the right to belong to every nation. Nowrouz is the most unpoliticized, and yet the most political joint holiday of all nations and times. Notwithstanding that certain nations of the world celebrate this holiday as a popular festival and traditional ceremony, certain nations have not yet accepted it as a holiday; yet Nowrouz actually belongs to everybody and I believe that we will not have to wait long for the day when it is celebrated by every person.

The official declaration of 21 March as International Day of Nowrouz by the UN General Assembly on 23 February 2010 can actually be considered to be a preface to the near future when Nowrouz will be celebrated as a holiday bringing the world together. Nowrouz means the new day, the first day of the year. Astronomically the New Year and its first day strictly arrive on 20-21 March, regardless of the calendar used by any nation.

Nowrouz is the most unpoliticized holiday as it is not a product of human will. It is a holiday of nature, a holiday of the happy moment of the circulation of the sun and the earth in the universe. However, Nowrouz is also a political holiday, as Nowrouz encompasses all great ideals strived for by great policies. Nowrouz is a holiday of equality, solidarity, amity, tolerance, peace and welfare. Today Nowrouz is dear to dozens of nations and over 300 million persons are included in the celebration of this holiday. The most favourite aspect of this holiday is that no people can present it as something belonging solely to themselves; when talking about Nowrouz, everyone can say together that it is our holiday, and this is another confirmation of the major philosophy and uniting mission of Nowrouz, its essence as a power directed to create a dialogue among nations and cultures. The distinction arises

from the different times of the celebration of this holiday by nations.

One of the proofs for the celebration of Nowrouz in Azerbaijan is an ancient settlement called Gobustan at a distance of 60 kilometres from the Azerbaijani capital, Baku. The rock drawings of that rare place are 10-20 thousand years old. It is to be rejoiced that UNESCO included this historically rare relic, which is at the same time an open-air museum, in the World Heritage List. According to one of the customs of Nowrouz preserved until today fires are made and people jump over them, as well as perform the dance called “Yalli”; the drawings depicting “Yalli” remain on the rocks of Gobustan.

There are many musical instruments in the world whose dates of creation are different. Nevertheless, the most ancient musical instruments are percussive ones; today also drums are played at the arrival of Nowrouz. An ancient Azerbaijani epos, “Book of my Father Gorgud” relates that drums are played on holidays. An ancient musical instrument, that is to say the most ancient drum, called “tambourine of stone”, exists in Gobustan and it is in action today as it was 10-20 thousand years ago; this instrument can be played today as

well and call the people to the holiday of Nowrouz. Today also Azerbaijanis residing in the villages near Gobustan, which is situated on the Caspian shore, and who are dictated to by the old memory, visit those rocks and hold ceremonies there on the days of Nowrouz.

The holiday of Nowrouz is celebrated every year from 20-21 March, from the moment when night and day become equal. However, in line with tradition, people start their celebration arrangements in the last month of winter and the holiday continues for several days after the arrival of festive Nowrouz, as well as the start of the new solar year. It is not by chance that due to being the most brilliant indicator of the national spirit, the celebration of Nowrouz was banned by the state in the period during which Azerbaijan had to exist within the Soviet regime. The reason for such love for Nowrouz in Azerbaijan is related to its democratic essence; this is a holiday not only of the balance of nature, but also of equality and the lack of distinction among human beings. This holiday brings together and makes friends of people from the most various strata of society, and increases mutual respect in society. On festive days it is as if the whole country turns into the arena of carnival and the entire people become the voluntary participants of that carnival.

One of the customs related to the celebration of Nowrouz is jumping over bonfires, and this tradition exists today as it did millennia ago. Being historically the country of oil, gas, mud volcanoes and moreover the natural eruption of fire from the earth's surface in Absheron and most other places of the country, drew to Azerbaijan the fire-venerators inhabiting the huge territory from the Near and Middle East to India, and these people found the above-mentioned sites sacred, thus visiting them; the founder of fire-veneration was Zoroaster. Today on Nowrouz torches are lit on the ancient monument called Maiden Tower which is situated in the very centre of the Azerbaijani capital Baku. Actually, this monument is also another witness of the celebration of Nowrouz in Azerbaijan during several millennia. A few millennia ago a flame also rose high on the top of the Maiden Tower, to a height of 28 metres, namely the height required for the transformation of gas into a blue flame. Natural gas entering the Maiden Tower was lit by ancient Azerbaijanis on festive days and the blue flame rising high from this peak gathered the people around the main Nowrouz fire.

In olden times Nowrouz was called the holiday of Turan in Azerbaijan and was celebrated for seven days. Due to the impact of this custom, in former times wedding parties

continued for seven nights in Azerbaijan, and a tradition of placing seven kinds of holiday meals on the table-cloth emerged, a tradition which continues to exist today as well.

The centuries-old history of the celebration of Nowrouz in Azerbaijan reflects its traces in the heritage of our poetry of the past millennium. Innumerable verses were dedicated to Nowrouz, beginning from the classics up until the modern poets and songs of Nowrouz; both folkloric examples as well as poems composed by professional poets became very popular among the people. Nizami Ganjavi, the great poet and a genius humanist of the 12th century, in his chain of poems entitled “Khamsa”, informs us of the celebrations of Nowrouz in 350 BC, that is to say, 24 centuries ago. Every year the Azerbaijani people celebrate the last four Wednesdays of the year, as they did on the eve of Nowrouz many centuries ago. Special verses, songs, games and beliefs are related to each of these days, called the Wednesdays of soil, water, fire and wind, signifying the four elements which form in essence the basis of life, and are widespread among the people.

Every year on the threshold of spring special sweets are cooked which belong to Azerbaijani cuisine and are related

to Nowrouz. *Shakarbura*, *shorchorayi*, *bishi*, *fasali*, the *pakhlava* of Guba, Ganja and Baku, *kulcha*, *samani halvasi* and others are purely Nowrouz sweets usually cooked during the days of Nowrouz. *Samanis*, as the major symbols of Nowrouz, are sprouted in the houses. In order to sprout *samani* a handful of wheat as a symbol of fertility and abundance is soaked and a prayer is said: “*Samani*, keep me and I will sprout you within a year”, as if a man makes an agreement with a handful of wheat to protect and keep each other alive.

At Nowrouz planting trees is a tradition but cutting them down is a sin. Planting mulberry, fig and chestnut trees is considered to be a good sign according to popular belief. As a continuation of this tradition parks, gardens and forest strips are created in the whole country in modern Azerbaijan. In line with the custom of the past, Nowrouz trays are presented to those engaged in cultivation and sowing activities on festive days. Those intending to build a house find it relevant to lay the foundations of the house at Nowrouz as well, as folk belief promises a permanent benefit to such a house.

According to the golden rules drawn by Nowrouz in the mind of the Azerbaijanis no one would curse, lie, swear, gossip or generally do bad things, as doing any of the above during Nowrouz is considered to be a grave sin. The calculations conducted by Azerbaijani law enforcement agencies indicate zero or the lowest levels of criminality on the days of Nowrouz throughout the entire country; the reason for this is the moral admonition given by Nowrouz throughout time. Slovenliness and inaccuracy are considered to be faults at Nowrouz, so that at Nowrouz houses are cleaned and tidied and people put on new clothes. It is an unwritten rule that during the days of Nowrouz people who are at odds with each other make it up on their own initiative without any mediation. During the days of Nowrouz not to forgive those who confess their faults is considered to be a sin. Azerbaijanis consider the second day of Nowrouz as a day of ancestors and visit the graves of their relatives.

According to folk belief everybody, as far as possible, should celebrate Nowrouz in their house with their family members. Such Azerbaijani customs as making a bonfire and jumping over it, lighting torches and placing candles on the table-cloths on the last Wednesday have been preserved from their foundation by Zoroaster up to today. On the last

Wednesday and on the day of Nowrouz one candle is lit for each family member, and usually the candle is not blown out unfinished. In line with one of the centuries-old Nowrouz beliefs the plant rue, which is believed by people to have the capability to protect from the evil eye and negative energy, is burned and children, the house, cattle and domestic animals are smoked by it. Particular Nowrouz prayers are said when jumping over the bonfire and lighting torches, and it is wished that pain, sorrow and misfortune burn in this fire and not be transmitted to the New Year.

At the moment of the arrival of Nowrouz – the new day and the New Year – going outside or opening the window and wishing something in one’s heart are also popular traditions, which are also performed by everybody today. One of the signs of Nowrouz relating to its connection with farming and cattle-breeding is that on festive days red cloths are fastened to the horns of buffalos, milk cows and sheep kept for wedding parties. In Nowrouz one would not beat horses, dogs or even snakes. One of the customs of beauty founded and improved upon by Nowrouz for ages in Azerbaijan is that of flower worshipping; at Nowrouz people pick primroses, violets and mint as well as make garlands from wild flowers and place flowers in their hair.

Nevertheless, one cannot bring home narcissus at Nowrouz as this flower is a symbol of self-fascination, while Nowrouz teaches modesty and humanism.

On the days of Nowrouz, as was done and reflected in medieval miniatures in olden times all over Azerbaijan, musical assemblies were organized, *ashigs* and singers sang, Nowrouz games were held, role-dancers displayed their skills, athletes competed in wrestling, and pageants were played. One of the wide-spread Nowrouz pageants played all over Azerbaijan is a spectacle called *Koskosa* (meaning beardless man). On the last Wednesday children knock on the doors of the neighbourhood houses, leave their caps and small bags on the threshold and hide. The owner of the house fills those caps with Nowrouz presents and leaves. This also has its own philosophy: people do not do it because of neediness; anyway everyone has a full table-cloth in Nowrouz. The purpose is to voluntarily share abundance, joy and boons.

A meal should be cooked in every house at Nowrouz. The meals can be varied but the cooking of one dish which is obligatory is the *plov* of Nowrouz. Dyeing and cracking eggs on the days of Nowrouz is a custom and it is carried out by

adults and children with the same enthusiasm. Nowrouz makes transparent the distinction between not only the various strata of society, but also the one between the generations; elders also become sincere like children due to the Nowrouz games. One of the years-old customs is related to the horse: during the days of Nowrouz all domestic animals are given special care and fed better than on ordinary days and horses are usually adorned at Nowrouz. In rural areas horse races and games of *chovkan* are held.

During Nowrouz no-one would lend something from their house, as one would beware of the disappearance of fertility and wealth from the household. Nevertheless making a “Nowrouz present” is also a custom in the days of the spring holiday. Nowrouz sweets and meals, *samani* and candles are placed on a Nowrouz tray and delivered to neighbours and friends. However, the filled tray sent as a gift cannot be given back empty, as according to folk belief in this case fertility would abandon the house. So, the house which received the Nowrouz tray would fill that tray with other Nowrouz presents within its material possibilities and taste and thus give it back. Most people would try to send Nowrouz presents to non-Azerbaijanis so that they may taste the sweetness and joy of this holiday.

Azerbaijan is a multinational and multi-religious country. Due to the tradition formed over years this holiday, beside by Azerbaijanis, is already much expected and celebrated as their national festival by other nations residing in the country. Performing acts of goodwill as well as helping poor persons are deeds considered to be particularly meritorious at Nowrouz; this tradition has always existed in Azerbaijan but has also acquired a number of new mass qualities in the Nowrouzes of recent years.

Wedding parties increase in Nowrouz; those intending to marry off their children try to fix the dates of the weddings on the days of Nowrouz, as in line with folk belief families built in Nowrouz live happy lives. The male name “Nowrouz” and the female one “Bahar” (meaning spring) are wide-spread in Azerbaijan; these names are usually given to children born in spring, in Nowrouz. At Nowrouz the biggest *samani* of the country is sprouted on the Maiden Tower in Baku, and the girl of the land chosen as Bahar Khanum (Lady of Spring) lights the biggest torch near the *samani* on the peak of the tower on the occasion of the arrival of Nowrouz.

Nowrouz, as the country's official holiday, is held at the state and national level with the greatest solemnity, and those days are days off in the calendar. Usually the Head of State addresses the people with congratulations on the occasion of Nowrouz, attends mass holiday events together with the country's citizens, and takes measures directed to the improvement of the welfare of the people. The media, radio and television of the country publish writings concerning Nowrouz for a few days as well as formulate concert programmes, entertainment shows and spectacles. Within the last twenty years a range of monumental books and films dedicated to Nowrouz has emerged in Azerbaijan. Nowrouz verses, songs, customs and beliefs, various ceremonies and games existing as examples of folklore for years in oral form have been recorded and published as books as well as released as audio-visual cassettes and discs. At times in one of our UNESCO meetings related to Nowrouz I had stressed the expediency of the establishment of a separate exhibition in the museums of Member States; in the Museum of National Literature in Baku there is such an exhibition dedicated to Nowrouz which operates during the whole year and arouses continuous interest in its viewers.

Nowrouz has always been a holiday of the soil, revival of nature, moral purity and equality in Azerbaijan. However, from the beginning it has above all been a holiday of sun and fire, the likeness of the sun on earth. In Azerbaijan the day of Nowrouz has a centuries-old custom as well: at night the young people light bonfires in the mountains, hills, and heights and stay awake until the morning. The above-mentioned custom is called “sun meeting”. When dawn comes and the sun rises they sing together the song of “Godu Khan”.

Again, as it has been for millennia and centuries, Nowrouz comes to Azerbaijan; again, as it has been for millennia and centuries, Azerbaijani men light bonfires in the mountains; again, when day breaks and the first beams are seen he meets the sun as if doing so for the first time and greets the sun, spring and the New Day. And so it will be for ever!

H.E. Dr. Mohammad Zahir Aziz
*Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Afghanistan to
UNESCO and ISESCO*

The Nowrouz (New Day) festival celebrates the coming of spring and new life (*bahar*) by nations of Aryan heritage who may not have a common language, but certainly have common traditions, values and a long historical common cultural background and heritage.

As the first day of spring and, for a number of countries (Afghanistan and Iran) the first day of the year, Nowrouz has been celebrated for more than 3,000 years by the people and in every corner of their country in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and in many other nations (North-western China, the Crimea and some ethnic groups in Albania, Bosnia, Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia),

with their special local traditional customs and ceremonies that are more or less the same, but certainly with common aims that are in harmony both with nature and human values.

In harmony with the rebirth of nature, Nowrouz buries cold, darkness and the hard times of winter and brings with it light and new life as well as sunshine that melts snow and produces water, water that is also life, life for nature and for the people who live with it. As a messenger of new life, Nowrouz also brings happiness, flowers and greenness and together with them imputes to every single living thing of nature and every being, including the human being, a happy and productive new life.

Nowrouz provides opportunities and important new messages together with love, beauty and the kindness of nature to the human being, who is the most intelligent being of nature, to learn from nature and adapt himself or herself to it in order to renew, upgrade and complete his or her humanity. It also gives important lessons to the human being on how to use nature carefully; one should not make any attempts to destroy it and rather keep it for the generations to come, as the destruction of nature is interrelated to the destruction of humanity.

There are thousands of pages, articles and poems written on Nowrouz and on the beauty of spring, as both come together and have tremendous impact on nature and human life. These writings have been produced for hundreds of years in many countries, in different languages by local common people or by the most well-known writers and poets belonging to different societies and cultures of all the countries that celebrate Nowrouz. The languages of these literary writings are of course different; however, their meaning and the values they refer to are common to all. These are the messages of goodwill that also appreciate nature, which brings beauty, happiness and new life.

No one knows for certain where and how Nowrouz began as every nation, according to their national pride and historical background, believes that Nowrouz belongs to them and takes Nowrouz as their traditional and historical intangible cultural heritage.

Like many other nations and people around the world, we in Afghanistan also believe that Nowrouz belongs to us and began to be celebrated for the first time thousands of years ago in the northern part of Afghanistan, in an area called Balkh, when the Arians started to settle around the area that

later became the city of Balkh and when they began to choose agriculture and city life. We also believe that Nowrouz was a Zoroastrian festival and the holiest of them. Many scholars in Afghanistan and abroad believe that Nowrouz was invented by Zoroaster himself, and that both the religion and the Nowrouz traditional festivities spread west and south from Balkh and covered a large area where great and advanced new civilizations were born, developed and cherished.

Whatever the historical background and beliefs, in my view Nowrouz belongs to every one of us, to all nations and people who celebrate Nowrouz and to the entire humanity as Nowrouz brings new life, new hope, and new light to nature and to human beings, and has been celebrated by millions of people around the world for thousands of years with a sense of belonging, identity and continuity, and with beautiful cultural traditions and rituals.

In the course of history, the manner in which Nowrouz has been celebrated in Afghanistan by the people and at the highest level of the state has appeared to change in different periods of the history of our country. At the time of the Ghaznavid Empire, which reigned from 962 to 1186 when

the city of Ghazni became the capital of the largest, strongest and richest Islamic empire in Afghanistan, Nowrouz was celebrated by families, by local governors and by the highest authority of the country with the special luxurious ceremonial attendance of the Sultan and his entire court, during which, after special dishes and meals prepared for the day, music, dances, recitals of mainly poetry by the greatest poets of the time, rituals and traditional games were performed. The Sultan used to offer gifts to the legends as well as offer gifts and food to the public.

The greatest poets, historians and scholars of the Ghaznavid period, i.e. Abofazl Beyhaqi, Abu Rayhan Biruni, Abdul Hai Gardizi and others, have written pages on the most luxurious ceremonies that used to take place during the period of the Ghaznavid Empire in celebrating Nowrouz. There are also reports that at the family level, the head of the family used to stand up and put a spoon of honey in the mouth of every member of the family and then all together they used to pray and thank God for the lovely spring and Nowrouz, and go out together to enjoy special food in the open air with family and friends.

Nowrouz festivities at present in Afghanistan

In recent years in Afghanistan the Nowrouz festival is celebrated for two weeks. Preparations for Nowrouz start several days beforehand, at least after Chaharshanbe Suri, the last Wednesday before the New Year. Among several festivities and traditional activities, the most important of them could be described as the following:

Haft mēwa: In Afghanistan, *haft mēwa* (seven fruits) is prepared; this is like a fruit salad made from seven different dried fruits, served in their own syrup. The seven dried fruits are raisins, *senjed* (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree), pistachios, hazelnuts, dried apricots, walnuts and either almonds or a species of plum.

Samanak: This is a special type of sweet dish made from wheat germ. Women hold a special party for the preparation of *samanak* during the night, and cook it from late in the evening until daylight, while singing a special song: “*Samanak dar josh o mā kafcha zanem - Degarān dar khwāb o mā dafcha zanem.*”

Mēla-e gul-e surkh: The *Guli Surkh* (Red Tulip) festival, which literally means Red Flower Festival (referring to the

red tulip flower), is an old festival celebrated only in Mazar Sharif (in northern Afghanistan) during the first forty days of the year when the tulip flowers grow. People travel from different parts of the country to Mazar Sharif in order to attend the festival. It is celebrated along with the *jahenda bālā* ceremony, which is a specific religious ceremony performed in the holy blue mosque of Mazar Sharif that is believed by some to be the site of the tomb of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph of Islam. The ceremony is performed by raising a special banner (whose colour configuration resembles *derafsh kaviani*) in the blue mosque on the first day of year (i.e. Nowrouz). This is the biggest recorded Nowrouz gathering where thousands of people from all over Afghanistan get together in Mazar Sharif's central park, around the blue mosque, to celebrate the banner-raising (*jahenda bālā*) ceremony. The *Guli Surkh* party continues with other special activities among the people in the tulip fields and around the blue mosque for forty days.

Buzkashi: a special horse-goat game performed in a number of central Asian countries. Along with other customs and celebrations, normally a *buzkashi* tournament is held. The *buzkashi* matches take place in the northern cities of Afghanistan and in Kabul.

Special cuisine: People cook special types of dishes for Nowrouz, especially on the eve of Nowrouz. Normally they cook *sabzi chalah*, a dish made from rice and spinach, separately. Moreover, the bakeries prepare special types of cookies, called *kulcha-e Nowrouzī*, which are only baked for Nowrouz. Another dish which is prepared mostly for the days of Nowrouz is *māhī wa jelabī* (fried fish and jelabi), and it is the most usual meal in picnics. In Afghanistan, it is a common custom among families for the fiancé's family give presents to or prepare special dishes for the fiancé's family on special occasions such as in the two Eids, Barā'at and Nowrouz. Hence, the special dish for Nowrouz is *māhī wa jelabī*.

Sightseeing to cercis fields: The citizens of Kabul go to Istalif, Charikar (places and towns near Kabul city) or other green places where cercis flowers grow. They go for picnics with their families during the first two weeks of the New Year.

Jashni dehqān: this is the Festival of Farmers. It is celebrated in the first day of the year, in which the farmers participate as a sign of encouragement for agricultural production and good

wishes for a better harvest. In recent years, this activity has only been performed in Kabul and other major cities, in which the mayor and other high governmental personalities participate as observers.

Baba Kampirak: He is an old bearded man wearing colorful clothes with a tall hat and rosary who symbolizes beneficence and the power of nature yielding to the forces of winter. He and his retinue pass from village to village, distributing charity gathered among the people and perform shows like the recital of poems. This tradition is observed in the central provinces of Afghanistan, especially in Bamyan and Daykundi.

The International Day of Nowrouz

Throughout history, the festivities of Nowrouz - celebrated by millions of people in Asia, the Middle East and Europe for over 3,000 years - have enormously contributed to the advancement, understanding and rapprochement of cultures among the peoples of different societies and countries. In harmony with the rebirth of nature, the message of Nowrouz is unique as it promotes harmony with nature and culture. At the present time, peace and understanding between peoples and nations is a prerequisite to the survival of humanity and

Nowrouz, “as the embodiment of the unity of cultural heritage and centuries-long traditions, plays a significant role in strengthening the ties among people based on mutual respect and the ideals of peace and good neighbourhood.”

In view of the role and importance of Nowrouz as an instrument for peace and as an effective means for rapprochement between people through cultural festivities that are also in harmony with nature, the sixty-fourth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations recognized 21 March (the first day of Nowrouz and New Year) as the International Day of Nowrouz. We, the people of the nations who celebrate Nowrouz, while being proud of our contributions to the advancement of civilizations and the rapprochement of cultures during the past 3,000 years, use every aspect of our common traditional heritage to further contribute to peace and understanding among the people of different nations for only one cause, the cause of our common humanity.

H.E. Mr. Muhyi H. Alkateeb
Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Iraq to
UNESCO

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious holiday of Nowrouz has been celebrated for thousands of years by many groups of people from Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and western China to Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Nowrouz is associated with the New Year, the sun (especially its return), creation, forgiveness and love.

Due to the fact of Iraq's location and its being bordered by countries like Iran to the east and Turkey to the north, in addition to Arab countries to the west and south, the country

is characterized by its diverse customs and traditions. Throughout its history Iraq has been the centre of many empires and continues successive of civilizations. Therefore, Iraqi culture has influenced and was influenced by those civilizations. All Iraqis, Kurds and Arabs, and other ethnicities, regardless of their religion or political views, rejoice the event.

The word “Nowrouz” indicates the celebration of the new day of the year, and the equivalent Arabic words *dort al sanna* are used in central and southern Iraq, while in Iraqi Kurdistan the name *norous* is employed. The event correlates to celebration and festive activities. It is mostly celebrated by everyone and expressed by street dancing, either by going on picnics in the countryside, or by street celebrations. It is customary on this day for families to plan going to parks or fields. There are certain activities which accompany this day such as music, dancing in groups (*dabkeh*) and wearing new clothes. Certain dishes are prepared with all kinds of spring vegetables, in addition to sweets and desserts.

Nowrouz corresponds with many inspirations to bring people of diverse backgrounds together and it is an example of intercommunication in Iraqi society. The Kurds and Arabs

celebrate this event together through feasting, sharing and family reunion. I still have very vivid and happy memories of this day which we used to look forward to spending outdoors with family and friends.

Nowrouz is celebrated by a vast geographical area and it promotes the values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families, as well as reconciliation and neighbourliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and various communities; therefore it has been inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This inscription will encourage intercultural dialogue and mutual respect among cultures, while strengthening the transmission of the element to future generations.

H.E. Mr. Saymumin Yatimov
Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of the Republic of
Tajikistan to UNESCO

Mr. Chairman,
Dear colleges,

First of all I would like to express my deep appreciation to my dear colleges from the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, especially, and to UNESCO for its contribution to the organization of this round table dedicated to Nowrouz, and congratulate all of you on the New Year.

Nowrouz - whose Tajik etymology is *now* (new) *rouz*

(day) - began to be celebrated by the Iranian people in most ancient times, from the period of Zarathustra three thousand years ago, and further spread to many Asian countries. Today it has become an international celebration.

History knows many great events, customs and traditions, most of which have a special reflection and relevant significance, that is to say, a positive impact on the life of humankind. However, Nowrouz occupies a special place among them. It is difficult to find any other ancient celebration comparable to Nowrouz in terms of its increasing comprehensiveness and influence at the international level.

What is the cause of this success which has occupied the minds of hundreds of millions of people? There is no doubt that Nowrouz's ideas and aspirations are the essentially close to the whole of humankind, irrespective of their nationality, race, religion, social and political orientation and other qualities.

Nowrouz is a special phenomenon when day and night, light and dark, at last reach an equal position. It is more correct to say that after a long period of time when

darkness led in the world, from the date of Nowrouz, light gradually takes a leading position in comparison to darkness. Nature will quicken. Nowrouz is not only a celebration, it is phenomenon which includes scientific, philosophical and existential content. In every nation's mythology, as well as in reality, there is a continuous struggle between light and dark.

Darkness is the symbol of illiteracy, deficit of knowledge, deficit of positive imagination, and negative world view points. As a consequence it is the main cause of intolerance, lack of devotion, tension created inside concrete countries, regions and at the world wide level, and at last it is the real precondition for conflict among peoples, nations and states.

Instead of darkness, many of humankind's good expectations are closely interconnected to the definition of light. It is more frequently identified with life, the best condition of the human being, with knowledge, intellectual capacity, and progress in pursuing goals to improve the condition of humankind. Light means and is interpreted as being synonymous with democracy, tolerance, peace, security and stability.

Tajikistan is the native land of fresh water. Nature created the country especially in order to produce light, and to provide more opportunities for the people in the interests of their development. It is clear that illiteracy, poverty and underdevelopment are sources of social injustice and instability. Under the leadership of H.E. President Emomaly Rahmon, Tajikistan continues its tireless efforts to create favourable conditions for the lives of its own people, as well as for regional development. The realization of hydro-energy projects in Tajikistan aims to assist other nations, to construct a deserved life through progress, a life which is without violence for them and for the world and to contribute to the ideals of progress and positive evolution.

The word Nowrouz - new day – is the bearer of deep humanitarian philosophical contents. It is the deepening and continuation all of good traditions, which have been developed by people. At the same time it underscores the necessity of overcoming all kinds of negative elements which have existed during certain periods, and starting a new page of life.

It is remarkable that all of groups of the population

participate in the celebration of Nowrouz. Involvement in this process, especially of children and the young generation, means to teach and to implement in their consciousness the ideology of peace, tolerance and friendship. During the last decade the celebration of Nowrouz has obtained a political color, and we take the position that this is a good and extremely positive phenomenon.

The ideology of Nowrouz, the essence of which is tolerance, the mutual respect of nations, cooperation and progress, should be recognized as great part of policy and the special psychology of the policymaker.

Professor Metin Ekici

*Ege University, the Research Institute for the Turkic
World, Izmir, Turkey*

Nowrouz: the Celebration of Nature, Peace and Prosperity

Since the beginning of human beings on earth, humanity has been trying to understand the meanings and different aspects of the beings in the surrounding area, and the interactions between the natural occurrences on the earth and in the sky. As a result of those efforts, human beings have succeeded in understanding most of the aspects of many natural beings, and have named and classified them in accordance to the relations between them. Humanity has

observed nature carefully, and perceived that special times exist for certain occurrences. According to the human observation of certain changes on the earth, different communities developed their own calendars or used a calendar developed by some other communities in other parts of the world.

In my speech, I would like to talk about the following subjects. First of all I would like to provide information about the word Nowrouz, the time and the natural changes on which it depends. Secondly, I would like to provide some information on how Turkish people have celebrated Nowrouz in Turkey. Thirdly, I would like to talk about why and how Turkish people have needed to celebrate Nowrouz. Fourthly, I will try to classify holidays and festivities in accordance with their originations. My final points will be upon the ideas behind these kinds of celebrations.

As is known, Nowrouz is related to the change in nature and the seasons in some parts of the world. Nowrouz marks the first day of spring and the beginning of the New Year in the “Twelve Animals Turkic Calendar” and the Iranian calendar.

Nowrouz, as a word in Turkish, is borrowed from Persian, meaning “new day” or “new light”. Besides the word Nowrouz, Turkish people have used the words, “Sultan Nowrouz”, “New Day”, “the Great Day of the Nation”, “Baba Marta” and “Ninth Day of March”.

It is celebrated on the day of the astronomical vernal equinox, which usually occurs on March 21 or the previous or following day, depending on where it is observed. The same time is celebrated in Central Asia, the Turkic and Persian societies in Asia, and also in the Indian sub-continent. Nowrouz is recognized as the New Year.

The moment the sun crosses the celestial equator and equalizes night and day is calculated exactly every year and Turkic and Iranian families gather together to observe rituals. Nowrouz is observed and celebrated by Turkic people in Central Asia, in Iran, Turkey, Crimea, and most of the Balkan countries on 21 March. There is no place or need to discuss where and when it originated. Nowrouz, or whatever the people might call it, is a shared cultural heritage of humanity. It should be noted that wherever such human creations originated, they have become shared human heritage over time.

Nowrouz was observed in the past by Turkish people. Nowrouz was celebrated during the Seljukid Dynasty and the Ottoman State very colourfully so that we have so many poems left from those periods. I would like share some of the examples. Kaygusuz Abdal, a famous folk poet from the 14th century, sang many songs about Nowrouz and spring around Antalya. Kadi Burhaneddin, another poet from 14th century, describes Nowrouz with the lines:

Once again it has become Nowrouz in the world,
Whatever the wish will become true in the world.

The poems about Nowrouz were called “Nowrouziye” during the Ottoman period. One of the great Ottoman poets, Ahmed Paşa, from the 15th century, wrote a poem about Nowrouz and handed it to Sultan Mehmet the Second. The great folk poet Pir Sultan Abdal, from the 16th century, wrote a poem where he suggests unity and wishes prosperity. Nefi and Baki, the poets from the 17th century, also wrote poems about Nowrouz. Fuzuli, who lived in the same century, another great poet of the region, also wrote Nowrouziye. A poem written about Nowrouz by Namık Kemal, a famous poet and thinker of the 19th century in the Ottoman period, provided the information that Ramazan and Nowrouz were celebrated at the same time.

Although it was not recognized as a holiday by the governments, Nowrouz has also been celebrated since the establishment of Republic of Turkey. In almost every city and region of Turkey so many different events take place during the celebrations of Nowrouz. I would like to share some of the examples by citing the activities take place during the Nowrouz celebrations in Turkey.

In many cities of Turkey making a Nowrouz fire on 21 March and jumping over it is very common. In some cities and towns, embers taken from the Nowrouz fire to houses are believed to bring prosperity and abundance for that year. In some cities, like the city of Kars, children visit every house in town to collect painted eggs and dried fruits. In some other cities all the cups are filled with water which are also believed to bring wealth and richness, while in others, horse races and wrestling take place. Gathering in the large squares of towns and cities and playing music and dancing are practiced almost everywhere in Turkey. Another important practice is the preparation of special food and eating together near a water source, which can be seen in many places in Turkey.

Now I would like to provide information on how and why Turkish people came to celebrate Nowrouz on 21 March. What we call our own culture has been developed by our ancestors who named every existing being on the earth and explained the nature and relations between them. They were among those who had organized a lifestyle suitable for the place in which they lived. It should be kept in mind that what we have as a culture today is a structure that carries elements from both the material and spiritual parts of human perception, one within another.

One can find the material and spiritual elements have become complex and inseparable from each another in contemporary Turkish culture. Behind this complex structure one should think of the human mind that has integrated with nature over time. Nature and humanity are inseparable; to the extent that a society understands, perceives and values nature, so much does a society becomes rich with cultural creations. How soon a society values every plant, every animal and every passing instant on the earth, so fast a society develops a civilization. Turkish society is one of the societies in the world which has very early understood the meaning and importance of the earth and every creature on it.

The early stages of the Turkish lifestyle were based upon animal husbandry, which can also be observed in many contemporary Turkish traditions. Turkish people not only developed ideas about domestic animals, but they also observed and learned about wild animals. Besides animals, Turkish people had to also learn the aspects of plants and the water sources that are needed by both humans and animals. Daily and seasonal life was also arranged according to the daily and seasonal demands of livestock. In order to find better sources for their livestock, migration from a place to another became inevitable for the Turkish people, and this was later called the nomadic lifestyle. All of these necessities have forced Turkish people to develop a special relationship with nature and a culture wherever they had to migrate.

The nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle of Turkish people has let them meet many other societies throughout the centuries. As a result of their lifestyle, from early times to present, Turkish people have played a considerable role between the East and the West. Turkish people not only brought many societies together, but they had also merged many cultural elements in a vast area. Turkish people had carried many cultural elements from Asia to the Middle East and Europe, and it should also be noted that the Turkish

people have taken many cultural elements from those societies as well. Nowrouz is one of the early creations of Turkish and Iranian people together. It is the festival for nature, it is the celebration of the upcoming spring, and it is shared by both Turkish and Iranian societies in the Middle East and beyond.

I would also talk a little about the types of holidays and festivals. There are times for the human being when the material side becomes closer and is guided by moral values. Those are the times accepted as very important not only for a particular person, but also for the whole society, and even for many societies in general. Such special times are called holidays, festivals and “days”, or in Turkish *bayram*, or the Islamic term *eid*. I would like to provide a classification of the holidays according to their origins:

Holidays or festivals which originated from the changes in the nature. Examples of this group are Nowrouz and Hıdırellez.

Holidays originating from religious occurrences or religious orders. Examples of this group are Ramazan Bayramı and Kurban Bayramı.

Holidays or festivals originating from historical occurrences. Examples of this group are Republic Day and National Assembly and Children's Day.

Holidays or festivals originating from a special importance given to a plant or animal in a region. Examples of this group are the Cherry Festival and Grape Festival.

Holidays or festivals originating from a special working or social group. Examples of this group are Medicine Day and Teachers' Day.

Holidays or festivals originating from social and moral values. Examples of this group are Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Valentine Day, etc.

Nowrouz as a holiday falls into the first group. There are many, but two very special holidays or festivals originating from the changes in nature are Nowrouz and Hıdırellez in Turkish culture. When examined the practices in both holidays appear to be the same in many ways.

As a final point, I would like to discuss the idea behind making celebrations during those holidays. The words *kutsanmak* (to be blessed) and *kutlamak* (to celebrate) must be paid special attention to while talking about holidays. In Turkish the stem of both words is *kut*, which can be

translated into English as holy or sacred and whose meaning is good luck, fortune and chance.

It should not be forgotten that even in the early ages humanity had the idea of a creator who had the power of creation, and every creature on earth was somehow tied to the creator. Humanity also developed the idea of “good occurrences” and “bad occurrences”.

In order to protect human life from bad occurrences, human beings have needed to be blessed by the creator. In order to be blessed, the human being has to perform certain acts which were later called celebrations. In order to be under the protection of the creator, the human has to fulfil certain things at certain times. What has been prepared by many societies and what is found in different cultures during the Nowrouz celebrations and while celebrating other holidays and festivals arises from this very same idea or belief.

Under the deeper meaning of the practices in many celebrations the two “laws” or principles of magic operate. The former principle may be called “the Law of Similarity”, and the latter “the Law of Contact” or “Contagion”. The first principle explains the practices of imitation, while the second

explains the practices of contact. The first principle applies for many practices before and during Nowrouz celebrations, such as making specially selected plants sprout, cleaning the house before Nowrouz, jumping over a fire, eating certain foods, etc. The second principle applies also for some practices during the celebration of Nowrouz, such as visiting certain places and leaving an item taken from their belongings; bringing certain things home from some sacred or holy places or carrying them in the pocket or a bag.

As explained above, all those practices are left to us from our ancestors as part of the rituals and cultural heritage, which has now been called the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. I believe these kinds of celebrations and festivities will bring neighbours closer to each other and celebrate those special times all together as brothers and sisters. I also believe that all the elements of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity will help to build a better world for us and for our children.

Nowrouz is one of the creations of intangible cultural and our heritage that we share in a vast area, from the heart of Asia to Middle East and to the heart of Europe. I wish that

the Nowrouz of 2010 may bring good health, prosperity, wealth and peace for the world.

Ms Assel Aubakirova
*Expert Attaché to the Department of Multilateral
Cooperation of the
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Kazakhstan*

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the Permanent Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the organization this round table.

Indeed, the rapprochement of cultures in the modern world is considered as a very important issue. Kazakhstan, a home for 130 ethnic groups representing 45 confessions, has set an example of tolerance between different peoples, and in this regard the celebration of Nowrouz has become the most

popular holiday in our country, during which all the people enjoy themselves and have fun together.

As has been said, Nowrouz is one of the oldest festivals in the world. In the territory of Kazakhstan, this holiday has been celebrated for more than five thousand years as the holiday of spring and the renewal of nature. From ancient times the form of the celebration of Nowrouz embodied the principles of love for nature. Despite the limitations, this festival has been preserved in the memory of the people, and now has acquired a new spiritual and ethical meaning.

According to ancient chronology, this day coincided with 22 March – the day of the vernal equinox, and therefore Kazakhs named the month of March Nowrouz. It was believed that on this date nature reawakens, the first spring thunder roars, there is a swelling of the buds on the trees, and leaves sprout. Nowrouz, as a non-religious holiday of spring and renewal, has common roots and is parallel to many other significant moments in the lives of all the peoples of Kazakhstan.

In the past Kazakhs called Nowrouz “Ulus Kuni”, or the Great Day of the People. There was a tradition: the more

generously one celebrated Nowrouz, the better the year would be, hence the abundance of traditions and attributes of Nowrouz. On the eve of the celebration of the vernal equinox people pay off debts and bring together those who are at odds because, as old people claimed, when Nowrouz enters the home, all diseases and failures will be evaded. On the night before the celebration, as a sign of the abundance of milk, crops and rain, people filled all containers with milk, *ayran*, corn and spring water. During the day of Nowrouz all people tried to be in good spirits, concluded meetings with an embrace and expressed their best wishes to each other.

On the morning of Nowrouz, at dawn, residents of the village tried to meet together. Women made a bow to the rising sun. This was the time of people's work that symbolized taking care of nature. All the following steps - cleaning wells, irrigation ditches and the origins of springs - were aimed at the liberation of passageways for water, the source of life on the earth. In addition, new trees were planted. The Kazakhs say: "Бір тал кескен, он тал ет" – if one tree falls down, instead plant ten more of the same.

After the ritual activities three people in the image of *zhyrshy* – a herald – in bright, festive dresses walked round

the streets, plazas and courtyards and called everyone for Nowrouz. Then a festive presentation began. People had fun, congratulated each other on the New Year, and sang the songs of *Nowrouz zhyr*, which had been composed specially for this holiday.

During Nowrouz people prepared a lot of food that symbolized prosperity and abundance in the coming year. In the afternoon at the appointed place in the village, the men of the village slaughtered a bull and cooked meat *bel-koterer*, which means "righting the camp" (because the bull was considered one of the most powerful animals and food from it gave people strength and endurance).

The holiday table - *dastarkhan* - was laid in each family; the *mullah* said grace in honour of ancestors, and at the end of the meal the eldest gave *bata* (blessings) for the welfare of the family. During the celebration of Nowrouz the Kazakhs tried to bind the presence of the number seven everywhere, which represents the seven days of the week - time units of universal eternity: in front of elders were placed seven bowls with the drink *Nowrouz koje*, which is made from seven species of grass. The structure of the seven components usually included meat, salt, fat, onion, wheat, *kurt* (salt

cheese) and *irimshik* (cottage cheese). After the meal national games were begun, which were attended by young and old.

The interesting fact is that on this day it was permitted to violate etiquette. Young people could simply tease the elderly, and this was not an offence. Even daughters-in-law, who usually are not allowed to communicate directly with their fathers-in-law or the elder brothers of their husbands, could even joke with them on this day. At the same time young people tried to get blessings from the elderly – *aksakals* - for the promotion of the longevity and wisdom of their children.

In the evening musical and poetic contests (*aytys*) started. *Aytys* was usually between boys and girls, who symbolically embodied the struggle between spring and winter. Then people made a bonfire, and with torches lit from it walked around the village, and sang and danced, thus completing the celebration of renewal and the spring equinox.

The history of the Nowrouz holiday in Kazkahstan has had a difficult fate. During the period from 1926 to 1988 Nowrouz fell into oblivion. The official recognition of the

holiday Nowrouz was dated March 15 after the edict of the president “on the national holiday of spring” – Nowrouz. Since that time, the wide celebration of Nowrouz has been revived throughout the country.

Certainly, the modern form of the festival is very different from its original content. There are not only theatrical performances and a richly decorated tent, and the cooking of a delicious Nowrouz meal, but also charity events, folk sports, gardening, planting trees, and cleaning parks and other recreation areas, streets and squares.

Nowadays, Nowrouz has become a national holiday of spring, labour and unity. Today this holiday is equally dear to all peoples living in multicultural Kazakhstan. Preserving the continuity of the traditions of antiquity, the ancient festival of Nowrouz has harmoniously evolved into the modern life of our country.

Final Remarks

Mr. Mohammad Reza Dehshiri

*Moderator of the Round Table on the Role of
Nowrouz in the Rapprochement of Cultures and the
Promotion of the Culture of Peace
Deputy Permanent Delegate of the Islamic Republic
of Iran to UNESCO*

We have witnessed the great quality and richness of the debate, and the viewpoints expressed here were of great importance and interest because of the diversity of the speakers and the variety of their approaches. Based on whatever has been expressed, we have understood that

Nowrouz has diverse dimensions and can be looked at from several perspectives and approaches, which are historical, natural, literary, political and sociological.

From the historical point of view Nowrouz, which represents the linkage of the present with the past, has always contributed to the rapprochement of the countries of the region and, despite many external constraints for its dilution, it was sustained throughout several centuries; it represents good neighbourliness as it brings neighbours closer to each other. Iran is the country that prepared the multinational file of Nowrouz for inscription in the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Nowrouz has served as a means of national expression and identity, as can be seen during the Soviet period, when countries such as the Central Asian states' attachment to their historical and cultural origins meant that the customs and rituals of the celebration of Nowrouz were not forgotten, so that this festival continued to be celebrated even during the seventy years of the Soviet regime.

From the natural viewpoint Nowrouz is the manifestation of harmony between man and nature, and an event that transcends time and space. One of the aspects of the natural

perspective is astronomical, and from an astronomical viewpoint, as the beginning of the astronomical New Year it is the only year which is based on precise mathematical calculations of the position of the planets in the galaxy. Nowrouz, as the beginning of spring, is simultaneous with the equilibrium of nature as night and day have the same length, and the resurrection and awakening of nature which was dormant during the cold of winter with its long nights. It marks the return of the heat of the sun and the coming of rain, when mountains and plains become covered by plants and flowers. It is simultaneous with the wishes of nature, at which time the human being is also affected and learns to evolve its spirit and soul. The reason for which Nowrouz has remained celebrated for such a long time is this linkage to nature, whose renewed flourishing we celebrate. It is one of the ancient festivals of Iranians because spring was the most desirable season for the Iranian people as it represents the renaissance of the world, provides happiness and gives the one impression of being renewed with the newness of nature, and as the first day of spring signifies the beginning of cultivation. This year also marks the celebration of the International Year of Biodiversity, and we think that Nowrouz represents the linkage and reconciliation of human beings with nature. The coincidence of this year with the

International Year of Youth can signify the rejuvenation of nature evident in spring, which can lead to the revitalization of the spirit of the human being.

From a literary point of view, despite the diverse pronunciation that exists in the languages of the people of the region and the different words and works of poets and writers for expressing Nowrouz and its rituals as the beginning of joyfulness and new time for better action, perception and speech, the essence of Nowrouz is praised by them as the manifestation of the resurrection of nature. Poets such as Saadi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, Mawlana, Omar Khayyam and Iqbal Lahori - whose poems have always appreciated by Iranians - have greatly contributed to revitalizing spring and its importance in the minds of men. The conceptual interaction and mutual impact of the poets of the region with other poets of different regions, an example of which is the German poet Goethe who was impressed by Hafez, or the role that Sibuyeh has played in Iran and Oman for the interaction between the Persian and Arabic languages, and the message these poets have disseminated, demonstrates the role that literature, language and poetry can play in delivering the message of peace, as well as consolidating the

solidarity not only of the nations of the region, but also of the Orient and the Occident.

From a political viewpoint Nowrouz can be considered as the manifestation of the influence of culture over politics, and demonstrates how politicians have been impressed by the power of culture; the Tehran summit, in which the presidents of Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, the Republic of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, as well as the deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and authorities of other countries, demonstrates the political dimension of Nowrouz and the role it can play in the rapprochement of cultures. Based on the synergy that Nowrouz can promote, it can serve to reinforce cooperation and constructive relations among the peoples of the region and develop their common linkage and interaction. In this regard the multi-lateral and public diplomacy of Nowrouz can be of great importance; it can form a basis for the development of relations and mutual interest and create new opportunities for acting more efficiently and constructively in the era of globalization.

From a sociological perspective, Nowrouz represents unity in diversity; that is to say, while the rituals and festivals

are different they have the same meaning and disseminate the same values, which demonstrates plurality in unity, and Nowrouz has the unifying elements for the harmonization of nations in the current era of globalization. Nowrouz is considered as one of the elements of cultural identity. From the perspective of the promotion of the culture of peace, the fruitful diversity and exchange encountered in the context of this intangible cultural heritage of humanity demonstrates that it can contribute both conceptually and practically to the rapprochement of cultures, not only between countries, but also within the multi-ethnic communities. It also conveys messages of harmony, dialogue, peace, solidarity, mutual respect, mutual understanding, love, tolerance, and the balance of nature; its philosophy is that of gaiety and festivity. Nowrouz is considered as the festival of purity and represents friendship and righteousness, and also forms an appropriate ground for the reinforcement of cultural relations with other nations. Nowrouz constitutes a social capital of the people of the region, which can serve in the global environment, and this is why we think that it can transcend the national level to the trans-national level to play a strategic role in the development of the region, and for this reason the nations of this region should do their best to present the values and the message of Nowrouz to the world.



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