

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the celebration of the
thousandth anniversary of the completion of the manuscript
of *The Book of Kings*

Tehran, 22 December 1990

Mr President of the Republic,
Distinguished Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

'Be Name Khodavande Jano Kherad' ('In the name of the Lord of the soul and of wisdom'). These majestic words open the **Shahnameh**, 'The Book of Kings', that monument of universal literature. And as I read on I discover, immediately after the glorification of the Creator, a passage on this second page that forces me to stop, taken aback with amazement, wonder and near disbelief: the words before me sing the praises of intelligence! Can it really be that a thousand years ago, long before the Western Renaissance and longer still before the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, before Voltaire and before Descartes, an Iranian poet was exalting above all else the process of thought based on knowledge? And he did it with such conviction and felicitous expression that he cannot fail to convince: 'The intellect is the greatest of all the gifts of God... It is the source of your joys and your sorrows, of your profits and your losses... It is the guardian of the soul, and to it is thanksgiving due'. At that instant I knew I had come across a work and a man of exceptional qualities. This 'intellect', which Ferdowsi calls **Kherad**, demands more than 'intelligence' in the common meaning of the term: it includes the ability to perceive good, a deep-seated and generous wisdom and a serenity that comes from balance and self-control. The concept of **Kherad** runs through the entire book, being at one and the same time its dominant theme, the spirit that animates it and the good it extols.

There are few books in the world and in history that have become, like **The Book of Kings**, an expression of national identity. Ferdowsi's poem is both the reflection and the leaven of a culture that is in many respects reconciled with itself. In terms of language, it forms - and this is something you know far better than I do - a reservoir, an encyclopaedia of inexhaustible wealth. In terms of historical perspective, it reconciles past and present, integrating in a unified culture the pre-Islamic tradition and the contributions of Islam; that is an achievement whose importance is not perhaps sufficiently appreciated, for the resulting fusion, with its creative repercussions, was to prove most prolific. Lastly, in terms of literary genre, it is an epic that blends in a single creation the true and the legendary, the observable and the imaginary. Ferdowsi reconciles history and myth, resembling at one moment Herodotus and at the next Homer. As a historian, he relates an episode with the same fervour and magical inspiration as if it were a tale; as a mythologist, he describes an adventure with the same precision and concern for details as if it were drawn from real life.

Ferdowsi thus bequeathed to his country a heritage that has been transmitted from one generation to the next in all its vitality. There are few civilizations in which a poetic work has become so 'popular', that is to say both widely known and deeply loved. Let me say once again how much I regret that my ignorance of your language prevents me from savouring in full the subtlety of these lines, their majesty and their secret music.

But even when translated Ferdowsi's poetry preserves an inimitable charm. **The Book of Kings**, which was translated into Arabic in the twelfth century

of the Christian Era, has been avidly read, studied and commented on. Historians, linguists, poets, writers, painters and miniaturists have used it as the source material for the work of several lifetimes. Jules Mohl translated it in its entirety into French in the nineteenth century, and thanks should be rendered to him for devoting 30 years of his life to the translation of the 60,000 verses that Ferdowsi had spent 30 years perfecting 800 years before. The task was so tremendous that not all the volumes were published until two years after the translator's death. Mohl, who closely followed the text of the great poet and took care to re-create as faithfully as possible the shimmering universe of the book, has been the benefactor of countless scholars in Western Europe - he has enabled them to discover one of the summits of world literature.

On 11 February 1850 the French writer, Sainte-Beuve, in one of his *Causeries du lundi* (Monday conversations), urged the resumption of publication by the *Imprimerie nationale* (national publishing house) of what he called 'the magnificent book'. Stressing the popularity of the work in Iran, he enthusiastically presented the author, his themes and a few episodes, based on his reading of Jules Mohl. His enthusiasm proved to be contagious: the English poet, critic and essayist, Matthew Arnold, became immersed in all the available historical and geographical works on Persia, reread the Iliad, and in 1853 published a splendid poem entitled *Sohrab and Rustum*, relating the tragic episode of the hero's killing of his son on the field of battle. A complete translation into English of *The Book of Kings* was published in 1925; the translation was an enormous task that had been carried out by two brothers, Arthur and Edmund Warner.

In Germany, the great lyrical poet and orientalist Friedrich Rückert translated the tragedy of Rustum and Sohrab, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, into language of great beauty, respecting the music and rhythm of the original. His translation was received with great interest in his country and throughout Europe. Another German poet, Schack, translated the entire epic part of the work, the translation being published in 1853.

Complete translations of *The Book of Kings* exist today in all the widely spoken languages, and numerous translations of extracts exist in some 40 languages. UNESCO has published extracts from the French translation by Jules Mohl, selected and edited by Mr Gilbert Lazard, and extracts from the English translation by Reuben Levy, edited by Mr Amin Banani, in the Collection of Representative Works.

It was last year that the UNESCO General Conference decided to associate the Organization with the celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the completion of the manuscript. This continues a long-standing tradition whereby, ever since the death of the poet, scholars have attempted to make amends for the ingratitude of the Sultan to whom Ferdowsi offered this treasure and who failed to appreciate its true value. Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers from one generation to another, people have come together to study, comment upon, delve into and compare the many different facets of this inexhaustible work. And today here, in this hall that bears the poet's name, we ourselves have now come together from the four corners of the world, to carry on and give new impetus to that tradition. But what is it in *The Book of Kings* that draws us together, captivates our hearts and enables its author to triumph over both time and place?

Of many outstanding passages in the work one might mention the meeting of the hero Rustum and his son Sohrab, a beautiful and poignant story of two beings related by blood and brought by destiny to a fatal confrontation. Following in the footsteps of Sophocles, who gave voice to the sufferings experienced by Oedipus when he had murdered his father and then married his

mother, Ferdowsi paints the picture of Rostum discovering that he has just killed his own son. This is a perfect example of what Aristotle meant by 'tragedy': it is a story that arouses in us feelings of both pity and horror, for Rostum, during the three days of the duel between them, has come to admire the qualities of his adversary - agility, intelligence in combat, nobility and chivalry. On several occasions father and son are on the point of recognizing one another; their speeches are tinged with admiration and tenderness; but Fate will not be cheated. When Sohrab dies under Rostum's blows and Rostum discovers the identity of his victim all Ferdowsi's readers shudder; all are fathers who have just killed their sons. We can see why this great tragic theme has attracted the attention of poets of all periods and civilizations: the feelings to which it gives rise are common to all times and all countries.

In celebration of the millennium of Ferdowsi's birth a solemn tribute was paid to him at the Sorbonne, where French poets emphasized the lesson of wisdom he dispensed: 'This poet is not only an enchanter: he is a scholar; he is not only a scholar: he is a sage. While our heads are still humming with all the wonders he has filled them with our spirits retain the lessons he has given us. Even when the enchantment of his tale fades and we fall back into the normal world from the fairyland into which he had carried us we are not disoriented: on the contrary, the poet deposits us on a well-marked road with a sturdy staff in our hand. Ferdowsi is everything we expect of a great poet..., for he teaches us both what people are and what they should become'. **The Book of Kings** is indeed studded with precepts, and it is not uncommon for an episode to be accompanied, in the same enchanting style, by a moral for the reader's edification. Princes, for example, are exhorted to be humble, in a concept of power in which the notion of 'service' predominates. 'When you become a sovereign' says Ferdowsi 'behave as a humble servant'. Addressing the mighty, the poet reminds them of the ephemeral nature of all things, like the slave who, in ancient Rome, had to accompany the victor on his triumphal chariot and whisper to him from time to time: Memento quia pulvis es ('Remember that thou art but dust'). Nevertheless, the characteristic of Ferdowsi by which he appears eminently modern to us is without doubt, first of all, his faith in the ability of people to rise above hostility, contempt, suspicion and hatred by an impulse of fellow feeling and compassion. The French poet Lamartine, moved by the moral qualities with which Ferdowsi endows his heroes, wrote of them: 'They are more than kings, for kings reign only for a time - and these heroes reign over the future'.

In **The Book of Kings** there are many colourful battle scenes, but they never glorify vanity nor the thirst for violence. On the contrary, Ferdowsi depicts in them the absurdity of conflict and struggle. We have seen the pain in which the duel between Rostum and Sohrab ends. Elsewhere, Alexander the Great goes to the bedside of his mortally wounded enemy, Darius III. Moved by compassion, he swears to the dying man that he will re-establish peace between the Persians and the Greeks, and when Darius is dead, he organizes his funeral with great ceremonial. In another scene Isfendiyar, mortally wounded by Rostum, sees in a flash that his killer is only the instrument of fate and is not truly responsible for his death. Before dying therefore, he entrusts to him the education of his son, Bahman.

Respect for and appreciation of others, with their different religious, ethnic and social backgrounds. Ten centuries later the same message was delivered by Gandhi. One day a Hindu came and asked Gandhi how he could make reparation for the crime he had committed in killing the child of a Muslim; Gandhi answered 'Adopt a Muslim orphan and raise him in accordance with the rules of his religion'.

Would it not be worth while to relay and amplify this message Asia has passed on to the world down the centuries? I personally think that **The Book**

of Kings should be distributed as widely as possible. UNESCO, for its part, is ready to contribute to that action with all the means at its disposal, for this work is not only part of the human heritage but can also help men and women of the twentieth century - what am I saying, the twenty-first century - to improve and to live in greater peace with themselves and with others. I would in particular want to see it brought to the knowledge of young people throughout the world. The Rector of the University of Tehran and the organizers of this Congress are setting an example. In choosing the university as a forum for these discussions on Ferdowsi, they were no doubt thinking of the aspirations of the young people enrolled here, in one of the world's most renowned centres of learning. And here I wish to pay tribute to the many historians, linguists and scholars who, within these walls, have devoted their lives to the masterpieces of Iranian literature. I am thinking in particular, among those who have recently left us, of Professor Faridani who, despite his advanced age, did not hesitate to join UNESCO in the scientific adventure represented by the 'Silk Roads' project. I am also thinking of Professor Youssefi, whose work on Saadi has been a source of great enlightenment to the young. May I hope then that in your deliberations you will take account of this, which I think essential. By exposing young people to the humanism of Ferdowsi we sow the seeds of wisdom in the minds of those who will forge the future.

'It is through peace that men achieve happiness', said Ferdowsi; 'may those who preach war vanish from our midst'.

Peace, not violence. Temperance, not excess. Mercy, not cruelty. Remember the passage in which the young Iredj sets out in a spirit of peace and wisdom to find his brothers, whose evil designs are known to him. When one of them hits him in anger and is about to kill him Iredj says to him gently 'Have you no fear of God or pity for our father?... What? You are alive and you want to take the life of another? How can you reconcile these two things? Harm not an ant that is dragging a grain of wheat, for it is alive, and life is sweet and good'.

This love of life is love of one's fellow, of all others. Ferdowsi, the Persian national poet, is never a chauvinistic poet. Persia does not oppose its neighbours: it opens its doors to them. That is why the Arabs, the Turks and the Indians have adopted Ferdowsi, translating him into their languages and constantly employing his themes. He is becoming universal, he belongs to everyone. That is what makes Ferdowsi an inspired forerunner of today's world, in which the spirit of war may be vanquished only by the spirit of tolerance and in which it is UNESCO's task to ensure that peoples achieve a better understanding of each other through an ever-deeper knowledge of their respective cultures, which represent their most precious heritage.

Indeed, it was with lines by Ferdowsi that Mr Golan Ali Raadi, the then Chairman of the Executive Board, welcomed the ceremonial inauguration of UNESCO Headquarters on 3 November 1958 in the presence of the President of the French Republic, Mr René Coty, and of the Vice-President of the Republic of India, Mr Sarvepalli Radhadrishman:

'The best-constructed buildings crumble under
the action of the rain and burning sun,
But neither wind nor rain shall have any hold
on the monument my verse has built.'

Just as Ferdowsi's words are in striking accord with the intention of UNESCO's founders, so I hope that the Organization will pursue its action in accordance with the ideals that inspired the poet: a sense of honour and human dignity, a demand for justice in the exercise of power, tolerance, compassion for the weak and the vanquished, serenity and wisdom - in a word, Kherad.