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Address by  
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Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the celebration of the  
1300th Anniversary of Kitab-i Dede Qorqud

Baku, 9 April 2000

Mr President,  
Distinguished Heads of State,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a very great pleasure indeed for me to be here in Baku, to take part in this anniversary celebration of the epic poem Kitab-i Dede Qorqud.

Let me first express my deep gratitude to President Aliiev for his warm and generous hospitality. On this occasion, I would like to pay special tribute to him for his remarkable efforts to promote political unity and the economic and social development of his country. Allow me also to extend cordial greetings to the Heads of State gathered here: President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, President Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan, President Nursultant Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and also to the Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Speakers of Parliament, Mr Khalilov and Mr Muradov. I am impressed by the very real interest in the cultural heritage that your presence at this ceremony shows. You are united not only in your common linguistic and cultural heritage, but in a shared sense of leadership in the important area of cultural identity.

Many people now recognise the literary and historic importance of Kitab-i Dede Qorqud. Oral traditions are the wealth of the world and the precious inheritance of generations, nations, peoples and regions. This is not just a matter of literary tradition. Great epics like the Iliad, the Mahabharata and Dede Qorqud offer a set of historical, social, political, ethical and geographical references through which the identity of the individual and the community is affirmed. In their written form -- and then through translation and wider dissemination -- they become the inheritance of all humanity. In addition to its English-language version, the recent publication of the Dede Qorqud epic in Azerbaijan, Turkey, France and Germany, based on the 15th century manuscripts, attests to this process of dissemination.

Following the decision taken by UNESCO in 1997 to celebrate the epic's one thousand-three-hundredth anniversary, two days of special commemorative events were organised at UNESCO Headquarters last June with the active involvement of senior Azerbaijan officials and artists. The audience was completely charmed by the rich programme which included film, dance, song, music, an exhibition and a scientific colloquium. In this way, UNESCO introduced the unique cultural heritage of the Dede Qorqud epic to the international public. This type of event,

bringing the oral and intangible heritage of one culture to people from many other cultures, plays an extremely important role in promoting international understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Mr President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We readily “share” the monuments of the tangible heritage. When I say “share”, I mean that we are all able to look on the pyramids, for example, as our common heritage. We are all able to enjoy the beauty of such outstanding architectural remains. But we must also be able to share and enjoy more intangible treasures, such as this great epic poem that was first handed down by oral tradition for centuries before finally being written down and published in the 15th century. Kitab-i Dede Qorqud was the creation of a nomadic people. This saga was their outstanding and most enduring monument. It has survived the passing centuries, just as the stone monuments of sedentary peoples have survived the centuries. We are not talking about the preservation of something marginal: this legendary epic is full of the wisdom of the ages. It is a philosophy in itself, and cannot therefore be seen merely as an optional aspect of life.

As you know, before becoming Director-General of UNESCO, I chaired the World Heritage Committee. And before that, I represented my country, Japan, on the same Committee. So I have seen from various perspectives how national and international approaches to, and responsibilities for, world heritage interlink. Over the years, UNESCO’s efforts to preserve heritage have evolved in line with changing perceptions. While first concentrating on the cultural heritage, they have since striven to take in the natural dimensions of our heritage and, more recently, begun to include oral and intangible heritage. These shifts in emphasis are something to which UNESCO must constantly remain alert, and I personally attach great importance to seeing to it that our programmes reflect these evolving priorities.

In this regard, UNESCO’s Member States will soon be invited to submit candidacies for the new title “masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity”. The first award of this prestigious title will be made in just over one year’s time. This title - or label, if you like - will, I feel sure, help promote respect and understanding of the very notion of intangible heritage. In this way, it will contribute to the promotion of cultural diversity and give us new arms to resist the trend towards uniformity which globalisation so often triggers. The celebration of

cultural diversity is also fundamental to the promotion of tolerance, harmony and understanding. So the issue of safeguarding and revitalising the intangible heritage means much more than promoting folklore: it goes to the heart of human existence.

Its enduring importance to communities across the entire region derives from its role in establishing and maintaining cultural identity.

Mr President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The rich heritage of the past in your region is not only significant as a contribution to world civilisation; it is also a resource which can help you to rise to the challenges of the present and can help you to build the future.

This summit meeting of TÜRKSOY attests to your forward-looking approach to cultural cooperation. UNESCO and TÜRKSOY share the same vision of culture and development. The preservation, revitalisation and promotion of the Turkic languages, cultures and traditions open the way to a dynamic, creative and proactive engagement with the world of the twenty-first century. And as in the past with the Silk Roads, which remain an extraordinary example of mutual cultural enrichment through the contacts they stimulated between the regions they traversed, development is rooted in the strong expression of cultural identities that remain open and responsive to dialogue, change and pluralism.

The on-going dialogue and cooperation through which you pursue these goals will open the way to closer links, greater understanding and a better appreciation of diversity. This approach to cultural cooperation unlocks the potential of individuals and of the community. Regional cooperation in this part of Europe and Asia holds the promise of flourishing economic, social and human development.

UNESCO's fields of competence - education, science, culture and communication - offer particularly fertile ground for this effort. I am very pleased to see how well advanced our joint efforts are in the scientific programmes for the Caspian Sea and Aral Sea. I believe that the recently published Aral Sea Basin Vision document, can be seen as a model for integrated and inter-disciplinary efforts to achieve sustainable development. It is a model which seeks to work **with**, and not only **for**, the communities concerned.

Having been for so long a cross-roads between civilisations, religions and

cultures, your region can, I am convinced, build on its wealth of experience to promote international dialogue and understanding. UNESCO is most ready to build an ever-stronger partnership with you in working towards the goals of peaceful international cooperation. We are already actively preparing UNESCO's contribution to the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations which the UN General Assembly has proclaimed for 2001.

I thank you once again for inviting me to be part of this celebration of a cultural masterpiece that, even today, remains a source of inspiration to us all.