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# NOWRUZ TRADITIONS ALONG THE SILK ROADS

Sociocultural Significance of Shared Cultural Heritage

unesco Centre Under the auspices of UNESCO
ichcap International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO
IICAS International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS)
국가유산청 Korea Heritage Service

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Countries in the historical Silk Roads network have engaged in various economic, social, and cultural exchanges, which have fostered mutual cultural influence and development. The history of these exchanges can be observed through cultural heritage, with shared traditions that carry similar social contexts and processes playing a significant role in enhancing mutual cultural affinity and connections, as well as in strengthening regional cooperation. Therefore, understanding and sharing the cultural heritage that embodies the cultural commonality among countries along the Silk Roads can serve as an important opportunity to strengthen cultural communication and solidarity between different regions.

This book is devoted to Nowruz – Spring New Year – which is a widely celebrated festival and important example of shared heritage along the Silk Roads. The new year is often a time when people wish for prosperity and new beginnings. March 21st marks the start of the year in regions located along the land routes of the Silk Roads. Referred to as Nowruz ("new day") and various other denominations (including Nawrouz, Nowrouz, Nowruz, Novruz, Nauryz, Nooruz, Navruz, and Nevruz) in each of the Silk Roads countries, it corresponds to a celebration encompassing a variety of rituals, ceremonies and other cultural events that take place over a period of about two weeks. An important tradition practiced during this time is gathering around a festive table – decorated with objects symbolizing purity, brightness, livelihood and wealth – to enjoy a special meal with loved ones. New clothes are worn and visits are made to relatives, particularly the elderly and neighbors. Gifts are exchanged and given, especially to children, and often feature objects made by artisans. There are also street performances of music and dance, public rituals involving water and fire, traditional sports, and the making of handicrafts. These practices support cultural diversity and tolerance and contribute to building community solidarity and peace. They are transmitted from older to younger generations through observation and participation.

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# NOWRUZ TRADITIONS ALONG THE SILK ROADS

Sociocultural Significance of Shared Cultural Heritage

# Contents

# FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that I celebrate the publication of this meaningful book on ‘Nowruz,’ a shared cultural heritage of Eurasia.

‘Nowruz,’ derived from the Persian words for ‘New Day,’ is a spring festival with a history spanning over 3,000 years. Across the Eurasian cultural sphere, families and local communities gather around the time of the spring equinox to welcome the new season through singing, dancing, traditional games, food and rituals, poetry recitations, and the exchange of gifts. This festival serves as a space for participation and solidarity beyond generations, gender, and ethnicities, offering a precious opportunity to reaffirm communal identity and cultural diversity.

Nowruz was first inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. At the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024, Mongolia was added as a co-nominating country, bringing the total number of participating Eurasian nations to 13. This milestone underscores Nowruz’s significance as a transnational cultural heritage that transcends borders.

This book explores the cultural connectivity of the Eurasian region through the symbolic heritage of Nowruz, while also seeking new possibilities for solidarity and cooperation. It provides a comparative analysis of the traditions and practices of the 13 co-nominating countries, offering a multilayered perspective on the sociocultural significance of Nowruz, its modern transformations, and future directions for cultural collaboration.

This publication is the result of joint efforts between UNESCO ICHCAP and the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS) and all the contributors who enriched the content with their valuable insights.

The Korea Heritage Service, in alignment with the current administration's vision of becoming a "cultural powerhouse in partnership with the people," is actively promoting cultural policies that open pathways to the future through traditional heritage. Intangible heritage shared across borders serves as a cornerstone for cultural diplomacy and international cooperation, and stands as a global public good that fosters mutual respect and understanding.

Going forward, the Korea Heritage Service will strengthen collaboration with UNESCO and other international organizations by advancing multilayered international cooperation projects—including joint research, personnel exchanges, policy linkages, and increased youth engagement. Through these initiatives, we aim to build sustainable cultural partnerships with countries around the world, including those in the Eurasian region, and to open new horizons for cultural diplomacy and global contribution through intangible heritage.

I sincerely hope that this book will contribute to a greater understanding of shared Eurasian cultural heritage and play a meaningful role in broadening the horizons of international cooperation through cultural heritage.

**Min HUH**

**Administrator**
**Korea Heritage Service**

# CONGRATULATORY REMARKS

It is a great honor to extend greetings for this special publication on Nowruz. It is impossible to find a more ancient holiday in the history of mankind. It has accompanied humanity on the challenging path of life for time immemorial. Over the centuries, Nowruz has absorbed the best ideas, views, philosophies, and values of our ancestors, and has become the core of traditional culture in many nations. At its core, the Nowruz festival celebrates the awakening of natural life. This awakening symbolizes the triumph of good, winning against the evil forces of darkness represented by the winter. Nowruz is the point when the oppressive presence of the cold winter finally begins to recede with the commencement of the lively and hopeful spring.

Gradually, the acknowledgement of winter and the welcoming of spring became a special ritual for many communities. Nowruz, as a symbol of nature's renewal and fertility, celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox (21st-22nd March), provides an opportunity not only to enjoy ancient cultural customs, but also to promote peace and solidarity within communities. Social and cultural practices associated with Nowruz have evolved and varied in accordance with local characteristics and climates. Thus, the arrival of spring became a major holiday, serving as the "new year" and also marking the beginning of the new work season.

Today, Nowruz is the shared heritage of all humanity. Following the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Nowruz was inscribed as a multinational element in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The inscription was extended twice in 2016 and 2024, at the joint initiative of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, the 21st of March was proclaimed the International Day of Nowruz by a resolution of the 64th session of the UN General Assembly in 2010.

Nowruz festival is celebrated in different ways by diverse populations, and is an important moment of cultural convergence within the region. IICAS is proud to take part in highlighting it. Projecting its historical interconnectivity and cultural convergence is the foundation of this publication.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deep gratitude to ICHCAP for their support, and my colleagues on the Editorial Board. The book is the result of the achievements of an outstanding pool of individuals across the world whose contributions expanded the horizon of the publication in depth and breath. The book's Editorial Board has also shown great commitment through dedicated hard work. The publication has achieved its aim of presenting the historical and cultural interconnectivity of the Nowruz festival, and its many variations, along the Silk Roads.

**Evren RUTBIL**

**Director**
**International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS)**

# CONGRATULATORY REMARKS

Cultural exchange between Korea and the Eurasian region has been ongoing since the era of the ancient Silk Roads, which served as a crucial trade network connecting early civilizations. Central Asia, located at the heart of this trade network, has once again gained global attention amid rapidly changing international dynamics.

Since its inception in 2017, the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat has played a pivotal role in supporting the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum – a ministerial-level multilateral dialogue platform comprising Korea and the five Central Asian nations: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In addition to facilitating high-level discussions, the Secretariat has spearheaded a range of cooperative initiatives aimed at strengthening bilateral ties and fostering deeper collaboration between Korea and Central Asia.

Of particular importance among these initiatives has been the promotion of cultural cooperation, which serves as a vital bridge between the two regions. In this context, one of the most notable examples of cultural cooperation is the annual Nowruz Festival – inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – which our Secretariat has been proudly hosting in Seoul since 2018. The Nowruz Festival has now become a prominent platform for cultural exchange, introducing Koreans to the diverse cultures and arts of Central Asia and the broader Eurasian region.

Nowruz is a cherished part of the cultural heritage of humanity that has been celebrated for thousands of years across 13 countries in the Eurasian continent, including the five Central Asian nations. This transnational festival marks the arrival of spring, represents universal human values, and symbolizes the renewal of nature, the unity of communities, and the hope of new beginnings. In a time when the world is facing significant cultural, political, and economic uncertainties, it becomes all the more essential to reflect on the cultural significance and shared values embodied by Nowruz.

This book explores international cooperation surrounding shared cultural heritage in Eurasia, shedding light on the commonalities among diverse cultures. Furthermore, just as the Korean diaspora in Central Asia has become a lasting link across regions and generations, the celebration of Nowruz and Korea's own spring customs are examined as potential bridges for deeper cultural cooperation between the two regions.

The global community is confronted with various cultural challenges and conflicts. In such an era, the spirit of "sharing" and "harmony," as reflected in Nowruz, as well as the cultural communication and solidarity between Korea and Eurasia, hold even greater significance.

We hope this book will serve as another cultural bridge connecting Korea with the five Central Asian countries and the broader Eurasian region. The Secretariat remains committed to further expanding cultural exchange between Korea and Eurasia.

Finally, we also extend our warmest wishes that all readers of this book may feel the vibrant energy of Nowruz in their own lives.

**Jong Kook RHEE**

**Executive Director**
**Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat**

General Assembly

Distr.: General
10 May 2010

**Sixty-fourth session**
Agenda item 49

# Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 February 2010

[*without reference to a Main Committee (A/64/L.30/Rev.2 and Add.1)*]

## 64/253. International Day of Nowruz[1]

*The General Assembly*,

*Reaffirming* the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, in particular the achievement of international cooperation in the economic, social and cultural fields,

*Recalling* its resolution 56/6 of 9 November 2001 on the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations,

*Recalling also* the Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation, adopted on 4 November 1966 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,[2]

*Affirming* the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted on 2 November 2001 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,[3] including its appeal for greater solidarity on the basis of recognition of cultural diversity, of awareness of the unity of humankind and of the development of intercultural exchanges,

*Taking into consideration* the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted on 17 October 2003 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, [4] and recognizing the importance of safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage, inter alia, social practices, rituals and festive events, at both the national and international levels,

*Considering* the interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage,

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[1] Nowruz (Novruz, Navruz, Nooruz, Nevruz, Nauryz) means new day and is celebrated on 21 March of each year; its spelling and pronunciation may vary according to country.

[2] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Records of the General Conference, Fourteenth Session, Paris, 1966, Resolutions*, chap. IV, resolution 8.

[3] Ibid., *Thirty-first Session, Paris, 15 October–3 November 2001*, vol. 1 and corrigendum, *Resolutions*, chap. V, resolution 25, annex I.

[4] United Nations, *Treaty Series,* vol. 2368, No. 42671.

*Welcoming* the inclusion of Nowruz in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 30 September 2009,

*Recalling* the 2005 World Summit Outcome, adopted at the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on 16 September 2005,[5] which recognizes, inter alia, that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind,

*Stressing* the importance of raising public awareness through education, media and cultural activities in order to foster knowledge of national cultures, world cultural heritage and cultural diversity, which are essential for strengthening global peace and implementing international cooperation,

*Reaffirming* that civilizational achievements constitute the collective heritage of mankind, providing a source of inspiration and progress for humanity at large,

*Emphasizing* the need to achieve an objective understanding of all civilizations and to enhance constructive interaction and cooperative engagement among civilizations,

*Noting* that Nowruz, the day of vernal equinox, is celebrated as the beginning of the new year by more than 300 million people all around the world and has been celebrated for over 3,000 years in the Balkans, the Black Sea Basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and other regions,

*Stressing* the importance of processes of mutual cultural enrichment and the necessity of promoting civilizational exchanges, which facilitate the development of international cooperation,

*Mindful* of the ever-increasing significance and relevance of a culture of living in harmony with nature, which is inherent in all civilizations in today's world,

*Mindful also* that Nowruz, as the embodiment of the unity of cultural heritage and centuries-long traditions, plays a significant role in strengthening the ties among peoples based on mutual respect and the ideals of peace and good-neighbourliness,

*Bearing in mind* that the foundations of the traditions and rituals of Nowruz reflect features of the cultural and ancient customs of the civilizations of East and West, which influenced those civilizations through the interchange of human values,

*Noting* the orientation of Nowruz towards the affirmation of life in harmony with nature, the awareness of the inseparable link between constructive labour and natural cycles of renewal and the solicitous and respectful attitude towards natural sources of life,

1. *Recognizes* 21 March as the International Day of Nowruz;

2. *Welcomes* the efforts of Member States where Nowruz is celebrated to preserve and develop the culture and traditions related to Nowruz;

3. *Encourages* Member States to make efforts to raise awareness about Nowruz and to organize annual events in commemoration of this festivity, as appropriate;

[5] See resolution 60/1.

4. *Calls upon* Member States where Nowruz is celebrated to study the origins and traditions of this festivity with a view to disseminating knowledge about the Nowruz heritage among the international community;

5. *Invites* interested Member States, the United Nations, in particular its relevant specialized agencies, funds and programmes, mainly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and interested international and regional organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, to participate in events organized by States where Nowruz is celebrated.

*71st plenary meeting*
*23 February 2010*

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Intangible Cultural Heritage

# Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has inscribed

*Novruz, Nowrouz, Nooruz, Navruz, Nauroz, Nevruz*

on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity upon the proposal of Azerbaijan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan

*Inscription on this List contributes to ensuring better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encouraging dialogue which respects cultural diversity*

Date of inscription
*30 September 2009*

Director-General of UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Intangible Cultural Heritage

# Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has inscribed

*Nawrouz, Novruz, Nowrouz, Nowrouz, Nawrouz, Nauryz, Nooruz, Nowruz, Navruz, Nevruz, Nowruz, Navruz*

on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity upon the proposal of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

*Inscription on this List contributes to ensuring better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encouraging dialogue which respects cultural diversity*

Date of inscription
*30 November 2016*

Director-General of UNESCO
Irina Bokova

unesco
Intangible Cultural Heritage

# CONVENTION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has inscribed

**Nawrouz, Novruz, Nowrouz, Nowrouz, Nawrouz, Nauryz, Nooruz, Nowruz, Navruz, Nevruz, Nowruz, Navruz**

on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity upon the proposal of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Mongolia

**Nineteenth session**
**Asunción, Republic of Paraguay**
**December 2024**

Audrey Azoulay
**Audrey Azoulay**
**Director-General of UNESCO**

# 1

# Eurasian Shared Cultural Heritage and Multilateral International Cooperation

# SOCIOCULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY ALONG THE SILK ROADS

Hee Soo LEE

## Introduction

When cultural heritage within a nation or community exerts influence on neighboring countries and interweaves with culture in those territories, we call it shared heritage. Cultural identity, on the other hand, is the sense of sharing, continuity, and common understanding that individuals and groups derive from their cultural heritage. These two concepts are inextricably linked, each shaping and reinforcing the other. Shared cultural heritage and cultural identity are essential and valuable assets that sustain the existence and pride of human society. They foster a sense of belonging, unity, cooperation, and further reconciliation between individuals and communities.

This article explores the sociocultural significance of shared cultural heritage and cultural identity, emphasizing their roles in shaping societies, promoting solidarity, and preserving traditions. Cultural heritage, encompassing tangible and intangible expressions of a community's history, traditions, and values, forms the bedrock of cultural identity. It is the repository of collective memory, a living testament to the experiences, achievements, and struggles of past generations. By sharing collective memories, a community forms its cultural identity and also expands empathy with other communities based on their shared cultural heritage.

As shared cultural heritage and cultural identity passed through cultural spheres along the Silk Roads, it facilitated cultural confluence and supported peace and mutual prosperity through fostering holistic understanding. Over a long history, the Eurasian continent has developed a culture of peace through the sharing of cultural heritage between nations along the Silk Roads, the lifelines of civilization. It is truly meaningful that IICAS and ICHCAP are focusing on the sociocultural significance of Nowruz as an excellent example of how shared cultural heritage has been preserved and expanded among the Silk Road countries.

Cultural heritage is classified as tangible, intangible, and natural. Broadly, cultural heritage includes not only visible material expressions, but also intangible assets such as oral tradition,

music, stories, law, customs, and lifestyle. In this sense, it can serve as a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion and integration. By celebrating shared traditions and values, communities can bridge differences and foster a sense of unity. The Nowruz festival, celebrated in the Silk Roads countries and beyond, is a good example of shared heritage that builds stronger bonds and promotes friendly cooperation among larger communities through collective identity. As a powerful mirror, the festival promotes shared narratives, myths, and legends which shape the ways individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world. Heritage sites and artifacts act as tangible reminders of past achievements and struggles, reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared destiny.

However, cultural heritage can also be a source of conflict and tension, particularly when it is used to reinforce exclusionary identities or to justify historical injustices. While shared heritage unites communities, it can also lead to conflicts over ownership or interpretation. Balancing local nationalism with regional solidarity is crucial for fostering harmony. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to inclusive and participatory approaches to heritage management, ensuring that all voices are heard and that diverse perspectives are respected. In this sense, sharing cultural heritage, culinary traditions, festivals, rituals and religion can help build mutual respect and understanding between communities. Herewith we would like to put more attention on the importance of protecting the heritage of marginalized or minority communities who are trying to preserve their cultural traditions and historical memory in the face of urbanization and unexpected cultural decline. Supporting them to reclaim their narratives and challenge dominant perspectives can provide a feeling of empowerment and agency.

In short, shared cultural heritage is a powerful force that shapes our identities, strengthens our communities, and enriches our lives. Furthermore, it can play a pivotal role in reconciliation and conflict resolution through fostering the utilization of already firmly established channels of communication and cooperation in bilateral or international issues. By exploring the cultural heritage of different communities, we promote mutual respect, contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive world.

## Multifaceted Sociocultural Significance of Shared Heritage along the Silk Roads

The Silk Road, often envisioned as a singular path, was actually a network of interconnected routes that served as much more than a mere conduit for trade – it fostered a remarkable degree of cultural exchange. For centuries, it facilitated the unprecedented exchange of culture, ideas, technologies, and beliefs between the East and West, fostering the development of a rich tapestry of shared heritage and profoundly shaping the cultural identities of the diverse populations it connected. Merchants played the most important role in spreading culture along the Silk Roads. Indeed, the most basic and essential function of the Silk Roads was to serve as a trade network. However it was used not only by merchants, but also by soldiers, missionaries, pilgrims, craftsmen, and artists who spread various cultural ideas, practices, and technologies, and thus overall fostering forms of multifaceted sociocultural influence.

One of the most important gifts of the Silk Roads was the exchange of ideas and religions, including from Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, and thus the spreading of these influences across the spiritual landscapes of the world. Under acculturation and accommodation processes, religious tenets and practices intermingled widely, and were positively received by communities along the Silk Roads, creating unique and localized cultural expressions. At the same time, it is worth noting the role of the Maritime Silk Roads in the dissemination of early Islam to China. Most Tashi people (Arab-Persian) who came and did business in China returned home during the winter season. However, not a few Arabs and Persians remained

in China, forming the earliest group of Chinese Muslims (Fan-fang). They married in China and rose in officialdom to become palace guards or high-ranking officials. Several generations later, the living habits and customs of these Arab descendants would become almost identical to those of their Chinese contemporaries, except for their faith and food (no alcohol or pork). It can be safely said that the amalgamation of Chinese and Islamic culture enabled Chinese Muslims to emerge as a distinct community, intensively aware of divine laws and human sentiments of life. More interestingly, we can find more than 20 manuscripts from Arabic and Persian sources showing direct contact between Muslims and Korean peoples from the 9th century along the Maritime Silk Road. Since the 13th century, many Central Asians have settled on the Korean Peninsula along the Silk Roads, with some having made significant contributions to the local communities where they live, including in association with prestigious Korean families.

Along with religious and philosophical ideas, astronomical data, scientific knowledge, and governance innovations were also exchanged, contributing to intellectual growth and social development. The cultural exchange along the Silk Roads was always two-way. There were cultures and technologies that spread from the West through Central Asia to East Asia, but there were also many technologies and scientific instruments that spread from East Asia to Europe. The metal movable type printing technology that originated in Korea is a representative example. The earliest recorded use of metal movable type in the world was in Korea in 1234 CE. Its invention is usually dated to the Sung period in China, but it is doubtful that any examples from the period have survived. In Korea, however, metal movable type printing was strongly favored by the early Joseon rulers. After the first font was cast in 1403 CE, many beautiful printed texts were produced using the technology, which was gradually refined in appearance and composition throughout the 15th century. The technology might have been transferred to the Islamic world and Europe along the Silk Roads in the late 12th to the 14th centuries.

Another contribution of the Silk Roads was the sharing and blending of artistic styles, motifs, and ways of thinking and techniques of daily life, resulting in hybrid art forms. For example, the influence of Buddhist art from India can be seen in murals and sculptures in caves along the Silk Roads in Central Asia and China, and even reaching as far as the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Artistic exchange along the Silk Roads was multi-directional, with influences flowing from East to West and vice versa, and was closely intertwined with the exchange of beliefs, ideas, and technology. Buddhist devotional art, with its thousands of statues, murals, and illustrated texts, and the glazed tilework of Islamic mosques, featuring calligraphic and geometric motifs, are prominent examples. Greco-Buddhist art stands as a particularly vivid illustration of the interaction between Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese artistic influences. The image of the Buddha, originating in Gandhara and Mathura, was progressively transmitted through Central Asia and China to Korea and Japan, with iconographic details like the Hercules inspiration. The aureole in Christian art may have been adopted from earlier non-Christian traditions in the East along the Silk Roads. Chinese landscape painting has roots in Buddhist pictorial art, and its motifs traveled westward to Persia, becoming prominent features in Persian miniatures. The typical Persian roundel figure, found on textiles, was adopted by Chinese weavers during the T'ang period. Many gold and silver artifacts excavated from Chinese tombs are decorated with Middle Eastern motifs, which influenced later indigenous Chinese metalwork.

Blue-and-white porcelain, produced in China and Korea in the 13th and 15th centuries respectively, was inspired by Islamic cobalt-decorated ware and became a popular export, inspiring imitations in the Islamic world. Under Yuan dominance, Muslim art, medicine and literature were introduced into Korea too. One such element was Muslim Blue, a kind of porcelain dye. The dye, called Hoe-ch'ong in Korea, was widely used in the production of the blue-and-white porcelain in the early Joseon Dynasty. The dye was first produced in Samarkand and brought

to China by Muslim traders, who then took it to Korea. It was the main factor in the development of the unique blue-and-white porcelain of China and Korea. Moreover, for the purpose of export, Muslim artisans produced blue-and-white porcelain inlaid with Arabic and Persian calligraphy. The production of blue-and-white porcelain was at its peak during the reigns of Ming emperors, Tcheng-tu (c. 1506 – 1521 CE) and Kia-tsing (c. 1522 – 1566 CE). Later on, the porcelain was exported to Europe through Portuguese and Spanish merchants.

At the same time, literature, oral tradition, folklore, myth, music, and dance traditions were also exchanged and transformed locally, deepening the cultural integration of the regions. Shared stories spread via monks, scholars, pilgrims, travelers, diplomats, and traders moving across these extensive routes, and the translation of different literary works by scholars further aided their diffusion. Murals uncovered in the ancient Sogdian city of Panjikent in modern Tajikistan depict illustrations of well-known fables and stories originating in other parts of the world, such as *Aesop's Fables* from Greece and the Indian *Panchatantra*. These murals, painted between the 6th and early 8th centuries CE, illustrate the interconnections between the literary traditions of Greece, the Iranian Plateau, China, and the Indian Subcontinent. Epic works like *Gesar* of the Tibetan people, *Jangar* of the Mongolian people, and *Manas* of the Kirgiz people also spread and varied along the Silk Road.

Different forms of music and various instruments spread beyond their regions of origin, accompanying people as they moved along the Silk Roads. The adoption of different instruments, for example, harps, reveal complex musical interactions between Central Asia, China, India, and regions to the West, with distinct geographic patterns of Persian and Indian musical influences. Flexible and portable instruments such as the *sheng* (a free-reed mouth organ), the *erhu* (a two-stringed fiddle), and the *zheng* (a table-top zither) were commonly played along the Silk Roads. The Central Asian short-necked lute, the barbat, is considered the ancestor of the Middle Eastern oud and European lute, as well as the Korean bipa and Chinese pipa, an instrument of nomadic origin. Loud oboes known as surnai in Central Asia evolved into the shahnai in India, suona in China, and zurna in Anatolia. In cities like Xi'an, the music of the region blended rhythms and melodies from both East and West. Religion played a significant role in the dissemination of music along the Silk Roads, with religious chants and songs traveling alongside pilgrims and missionaries. Music, being both portable and adaptable, readily crossed cultural boundaries, leading to the adoption, adaptation, and blending of musical instruments and styles that enriched the sonic landscape of Eurasia.

The spread of technologies like papermaking, gunpowder, and advanced metal printing through the Silk Roads network also brought revolutionary change and progress to human life. This exchange of technological knowledge led to advancements in various fields, including medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and agriculture. Decorative features such as colored glazed brick and carved inlaid mosaic became popular. Later, the influence of Chinese porcelain, a highly valued trade item, can be seen in the dark blue linear painting on a white background that became fashionable in interior decoration. Even Buddhist cave murals provide valuable insights into ancient clothing and architectural styles, showcasing the interconnectedness of artistic and material culture. The Temurid style in ceramics, characterized by a blue palette on a white background, originated in China during the Yuan dynasty and subsequently spread widely across Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia, further illustrating the dissemination of artistic trends. Architectural and decorative styles along the Silk Roads evolved through processes of mutual influence and adaptation, creating unique regional expressions that bore the hallmarks of diverse cultural interactions.

## The Shared Cultural Heritage and Formation of Cultural Identities in the Silk Roads Network

Shared cultural heritage influenced the formation and evolution of cultural identities in different regions connected by the Silk Roads, resulting in both unifying and differentiating features. Merchants, scholars, and travelers on the Silk Roads carried with them their native tongues, leading to linguistic amalgamations and the emergence of pidgin languages, or lingua francas, which blended elements of various languages to facilitate communication. Cosmopolitan Silk Road hubs like Istanbul, Baghdad, Kashgar, Samarkand, Xi'an, and Gyeong-ju became vibrant centers where cultures, goods, and ideas converged, reflected in their diverse populations and religious traditions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Shamanism, and local practices). Even production centers became intermediary points of cultural exchange. Chinese porcelain makers incorporated Persian designs, and Persian carpet weavers adapted Central Asian motifs, creating hybrid styles that reflected the interconnected nature of Eurasian transnational commerce. The movement of religions, languages, and knowledge alongside physical goods was a defining characteristic of the Silk Roads network, enriching the cultural landscape of the nations they passed through and uniting them with a common thread of cultural heritage and pluralistic identities. During periods of relative tolerance, peace and security, cultural confluence was extensive and rich. Newcomers settled in foreign lands, mixed with local residents, and often absorbed other groups who followed, leading to the planting of cultures like seeds in distant lands. The wide range of interactions and encounters along the Silk Roads led to the formation of hybrid cultural identities that incorporated elements from various cultures, creating a complex and dynamic cultural mosaic across Eurasia.

In this way, cultural identity went through continuous transformation via processes of adaptation, assimilation, accommodation, and the creation of hybrid shared cultural heritage. Fashion and artistic styles, once grounded in a new ethno-cultural environment, became widespread. Religious syncretism, the blending of different religious beliefs and practices, was a common phenomenon as various faiths interacted and sometimes merged along the Silk Roads. Ethnic blending, resulting from migration and intermarriage, further contributed to cultural integration and the formation of new cultural identities. Mutual learning between different ethnic groups extended to living habits and customs, enriching cultural life.

Specific cities and regions in the Silk Roads network developed unique cultural identities due to their particular geographical locations and the specific mix of cultures that interacted within them. Dunhuang, located in the northwest of Gansu Province, served as a crucial node of cultural exchange and integration, playing a key role in the construction of Chinese cultural identity through the blending of Han, Tibet, Uighur, Turkic, and Sogdian cultures. This is evident in linguistic integration, the blending and sharing of religious beliefs (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism), mutual learning of ways of life, and the integration of legal systems and forms of social management in the region. Ladakh, often referred to as the "Land of High Passes," occupied a strategic location that made it a critical juncture in the Silk Roads network, facilitating trade and cultural exchange between India, Tibet, and Central Asia for centuries. The influence of these interactions is evident in Ladakh's architecture, cuisine (incorporating Central Asian dried fruits and nuts), and religious practices, particularly the spread of Buddhism. Central Asia, with its strategic position between East and West, became a melting pot of cultures, religions, and languages, fostering exchanges in commerce, technology, and knowledge, and leading to a multifaceted regional identity. The broader trend of cultural exchange gave rise to unique and distinct regional identities shaped by local contexts and the specific cultural interactions that took place within them.

## Transmission and Preservation of Shared Cultural Heritage

The constant movement of goods, concepts,and individuals along the Silk Roads laid the foundation for the interconnectedness that characterizes our modern globalized world. In this respect, the significance of the Silk Roads for the transmission of cultural heritage cannot be overemphasized. The various forms of human mobility were fundamental catalysts for cultural exchange. The constant movement and mixing of populations facilitated the widespread transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures, and beliefs, and had a profound impact on the history and civilizations of Eurasian peoples. Refugees fleeing conflict, artists seeking patronage, skilled craftsmen looking for opportunity, dedicated missionaries spreading their faith, and the emissaries traversing these routes, contributed to the dynamic cultural landscape. Waves of immigrants brought skills and techniques from their homelands, and introduced new crafts and motifs to their new cities. In this way, the movement and migration of diverse peoples along the Silk Roads reinforced shared cultural heritage and became catalysts for the transmission of shared cultural heritage to their neighbors.

In terms of fostering social cohesion, shared cultural heritage can bring communities together, promoting a sense of collective identity and pride. It can also facilitate dialogue and reconciliation, helping to heal past wounds and build bridges between different groups. Cultural heritage is a dynamic and evolving entity, passed down from generation to generation through various mechanisms. Oral traditions, rituals, ceremonies, artistic expressions, and apprenticeship systems play a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge and practices. These mechanisms ensure that the values, beliefs, and skills of a community are preserved and adapted to changing circumstances.

The next step is the preservation of cultural heritage that has been transmitted and shared, either through popular mobilization, or at the formal level of nations or international organizations. The preservation of shared cultural heritage is an investment in our collective memory, identity, and future. For these purposes, institutions such as museums, archives, libraries, and universities play important roles in documenting, preserving, and disseminating cultural heritage. UNESCO's efforts to safeguard cultural heritage through conventions and programs highlight the international recognition of its importance. However, the preservation of cultural heritage faces numerous challenges in a globalized world. Rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, armed conflicts, and the homogenization of culture threaten the survival of many heritage sites and traditions. Historical sites, artifacts, and intangible cultural heritage serve as valuable educational resources that offer tangible connections to the past, enabling people to learn about history, art, and traditions in meaningful ways. It is important we have as a clear goal and task to preserve and develop shared cultural heritage as it provides our societies with opportunities for positive engagement and cultural development. Cultural heritage can be a valuable resource for economic and sustainable development.

This requires investing in education, training, and capacity building, and ensuring that local communities have a voice in decision-making processes. Cultural heritage education is crucial for transmitting cultural knowledge and values to future generations. It can help to foster a sense of pride and belonging, and to promote civic engagement and social justice. Empowering marginalized communities through heritage revitalization can help them to reclaim their cultural identities and challenge dominant narratives.

## The Contemporary Significance, Challenges, and Interpretation of the Shared Cultural Heritage of the Silk Roads

The rich cultural exchanges that occurred along the Silk Roads have left an enduring legacy

that continues to influence contemporary societies in the regions once connected by this network. The Nowruz festival is one of best examples of the peaceful cohesion of shared cultural heritage in the Silk Roads network, evident through consideration of its meaning and historical context in modern cultural identity. Nowruz embodies the values of hope, optimism, and regional unity, while at the same time promoting peace, solidarity, reconciliation, understanding, and cooperation between different cultures. This is why in 2009, UNESCO recognized Nowruz as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, acknowledging its shared cultural significance and its role in peace. In modern times, Nowruz remains a timeless tradition that has transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, uniting people across the Silk Roads network and beyond. Its enduring popularity is a valuable heritage achievement and testament to its deep cultural significance and ability to resonate with people of diverse backgrounds across Central Asia, West Asia, East Asia, the Caucasus, and beyond.

Elements of this shared cultural heritage are evident in various aspects of modern life, from artistic expressions to culinary traditions. The architectural syncretism fostered by the Silk Roads has had lasting impacts on modern design, with contemporary architects still drawing inspiration from the fusion of Eastern and Western styles. This cultural fusion is reflected in architectural designs and decorative stonework found worldwide today. At the same time, the variety of music performed today, using ancient and modern, indigenous and imported instruments, serves as a testament to the enduring musical heritage of the Silk Roads. The Silk Roads network is often cited as a historical precedent for international trade and cultural exchange, and its enduring legacy continues to shape our understanding of the interconnectedness of cultures in an increasingly globalized world.

The interpretation of shared cultural heritage in the Silk Roads network in its modern context remains the subject of ongoing debate and discussion. While consideration of this shared cultural heritage can evoke a forgotten history of peaceful trade and cultural exchange for many, the potential for its modern revival to be driven by nationalist or geopolitical ambitions raises concerns among some stakeholders. Moreover, the impact of globalization and modernization can lead to the erosion of traditional customs and practices, posing a threat to the long-term survival of intangible cultural heritage.

The vast geographical span and multitude of cultures involved mean that different nations and groups often emphasize different aspects of this history, sometimes using the narrative for nationalist purposes. Ethnocentric cultural heritage promotion policies of ruling ethnic groups can be perceived by ethnic minorities as attempts to undermine their distinct identities. In some instances, the pursuit of modernization and development has led to the suppression of religious practices, raising ethical questions about the prioritization of certain aspects of heritage over others. In addition, political turmoil and instability in some regions can disrupt the celebration of festivals and undermine their cultural significance.

## Shared Cultural Heritage as Common Property for Tourism and Cultural Diplomacy

In this regard, a key task in interpreting Silk Roads heritage lies in balancing its universal appeal as a story of global interconnectedness with the need to acknowledge and respect the diverse local histories and cultural specificities of different regions. Based on mutual respect, the historical and cultural richness of the Silk Roads network has to lead to a renewed interest in leveraging its shared cultural heritage for contemporary purposes, including tourism, cultural and artistic fields, and cultural diplomacy. Recognizing the potential for cultural exchange, trade, and tourism, organizations like UN Tourism have actively worked to revive the ancient routes of connection

as a modern tourism concept, aiming to unite the vast Eurasia. Certainly, sustainable tourism along the Silk Roads offers significant opportunities for local economic development, poverty alleviation, and the conservation of cultural and natural heritage. In recognizing and aiming to promote these positive effects for local peoples, UNESCO has launched initiatives like the World Heritage Journeys Silk Road project to promote sustainable tourism in Central Asia. It focuses on capacity building for local stakeholders and the development of engaging online platforms to highlight the region's heritage sites. However, a tension lies between presenting the Silk Roads as universally appealing attractions for tourism and recognizing them as culturally specific places with unique histories. Ensuring the equitable promotion of tourism while preserving the diversity of heritage remains a significant challenge. Reintegrating local narratives with broader inter-regional trends is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of this history.

The concept of a shared heritage is also being utilized as a tool for cultural diplomacy, aiming to foster intercultural understanding and build trust between nations. UNESCO's Silk Roads Program plays a crucial role in this regard, promoting research, knowledge sharing, building partnerships, and empowering youth to engage with the shared heritage of the Silk Roads. The program emphasizes the interconnectedness of cultures along these routes and aims to foster greater inclusion and peace through a deeper understanding of their shared legacy. Programs drawing on cultural heritage to promote civic engagement and social justice can leverage many forms, including storytelling, performance art, and community-based research. These initiatives can help to raise awareness of social issues, promote dialogue, and inspire action.

A good example of how shared cultural heritage in the Silk Roads network has contributed to public diplomacy and cultural content projects is the case of the Kushnameh studies. The Kushnameh is an ancient Persian epic from the 7th century that contains romantic stories about a Persian royal prince and his family arriving on the Korean Peninsula via China after the fall of the Sassanid Persian Empire. The stories suggest that the prince and his party contributed greatly to the unification struggle of Silla Kingdom, helping the King. For his great contributions and achievements, the Persian prince married a Silla princess as a reward. Based on the romantic love story discovered by the Kushnameh research project supported by IICAS, numerous works of art and cultural content such as plays, novels, dances, animations, documentaries, musicals, and comic books were produced in Korea. In addition, it created a positive atmosphere at the Korea-Iran summit meeting, as it became a friendly topic of conversation. It cemented as a symbol of the historical friendship and long-standing exchange between the two countries, and helped facilitate and achieve an important degree of public diplomacy.

In the contemporary era, digital technologies have transformed the way we access, experience, and interact with cultural heritage. Virtual museums, online archives, and digital storytelling platforms have made heritage more accessible to a wider audience. However, these technologies also pose new challenges, including concerns about digital appropriation, misrepresentation, and the preservation of digital heritage. It is essential to develop ethical guidelines and best practices for the use of digital technologies in heritage management, ensuring that they are used in a responsible and sustainable manner.

## Conclusion

The Silk Roads network stands as a testament to the immense impact that cross-cultural exchange can have on the development of human societies. More than just a network of trade routes, it served as a dynamic web of channels for the movement of ideas, beliefs, artistic styles, and technological innovations across the vast expanse of Eurasia.

The shared cultural heritage that emerged along these routes, evident in architectural marvels, artistic syncretism, literary adaptations, and musical fusions, profoundly shaped the cultural identities of the diverse civilizations it connected. The engines of this exchange – trade, religion, and migration – facilitated a dynamic interplay between East and West, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the regions involved.

Even in the contemporary world, the legacy of the Silk Roads continues to resonate. Its influence can be seen in various aspects of modern culture, and its historical narrative is being actively utilized in tourism and cultural diplomacy. However, the interpretation and ownership of this shared heritage are not without their challenges and debates. Modern political agendas, competing national narratives, and the need to balance universal appeal with local specificities, all contribute to the complexities of understanding and presenting the rich history of the Silk Roads network.

Ultimately, the enduring sociocultural significance of the Silk Roads network lies in its demonstration of humanity's capacity for interconnectedness and cultural exchange. By fostering dialogue and mutual understanding across geographical and cultural boundaries, the Silk Roads created a legacy of shared heritage and pluralistic identities that continues to inspire and inform our globalized world. Recognizing and appreciating the multifaceted nature of this legacy is crucial for fostering intercultural understanding and building a more interconnected and peaceful future. The value of diversity is to prevent the homogenization of cultures and to foster respect for different traditions. It allows for cross-cultural learning, and helps to create a more peaceful and understanding global society.

Shared cultural heritage is a living legacy, a dynamic and evolving entity that shapes our identities, connects us to our past, and guides us towards the future. By embracing our cultural heritage and promoting inclusive and participatory approaches to its management, we can build a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. Shared cultural heritage and cultural identity are vital for societal cohesion. They serve as bridges connecting past generations with the present while inspiring future solidarity. By promoting awareness and preservation efforts, societies can ensure these treasures continue to enrich human experience globally.

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# SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE ALONG THE SILK ROADS AND UNESCO

Alisher IKRAMOV

## Introduction

People's movement and intercultural exchanges have played a crucial role in the evolution and transformation of human civilization. The concepts of "routes" or "roads" as vectors of culture constitute the basis of several research projects undertaken by UNESCO. The concept of heritage routes offers a privileged framework in which mutual understanding, a plural approach to history and a culture of peace can all operate. It is based on human movement, encounters and dialogue, cultural exchanges and cross-fertilization, taking place both in space and time. The nature of the concept is open, dynamic and evocative. It brings together the conclusions of global strategic studies which strive to enhance the recognition of heritage's economic, social, symbolic and philosophical dimensions, as well as constant interactions with the natural environment in all its diversity.

## Origin of the Silk Roads

The Silk Roads were an interconnected web of routes linking the ancient societies of East, South, Central, and Western Asia, and the Mediterranean. They contributed to the development of many of the world's great civilizations and enabled the exchange of technologies and ideas that reshaped the known world. This combination of routes represents one of the world's preeminent long-distance communication networks.

The Silk Roads are routes of integration, exchange and dialogue between East and West that have contributed greatly to the prosperity of humankind for almost 2 millennia. Flourishing in particular between the 2nd century BCE and the end of the 16th century CE, this network of routes, starting initially from Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) and ultimately stretching from East Asia to the Mediterranean in the West, and down onto the Indian subcontinent, facilitated and generated two-way intercontinental trade of a dazzling array of goods. Of these, Chinese silk was among the most valuable, but

also traded were materials such as precious metals and stones, ceramics, perfumes, ornamental woods, and spices, often in return for cotton and wool textiles, glass, wine, amber, carpets and celebrated horses. This trade connected various civilizations, persisted over centuries, and was sustained by a system of caravanserais, commercial settlements, trade cities and forts along its entire length of more than 10,000 km, making it arguably the most extensive cultural route in the history of humanity.

But much more than trading goods was transported through the network of Silk Roads. Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Nestorian, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeanism spread over the region. Scientific and technological developments were also diffused by these routes. From China, for example, this included paper, printing, gunpowder, cast iron, the crossbow, the magnetic compass, and porcelain, whilst engineering developments (particularly bridge building), the cultivation and working of cotton, tapestry weaving, vine cultivation, as well as certain glazing and metal working techniques spread from Central Asia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the West. There was also a substantial two-way exchange of medical knowledge and medicines, as well as fruits which are now universally recognized and other food crops. As such, the Silk Roads generated outstanding manifestations of global significance in the realms of economy, society, culture, and the environment.

There were a number of major impacts from this extensive network of interactions:[1]

- The development of cities along these routes, which gained power and wealth from the trade, providing the infrastructure for production and redistribution, and for policing the routes. Many became major cultural and artistic centers, where peoples of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds intermingled.
- The development of religious centers, which benefitted from the patronage of political systems and wealthy individuals.
- The movement of technologies, artistic styles, languages, social practices and religious beliefs, transmitted by people moving along the Silk Roads.

## UNESCO Projects on the Silk Roads

UNESCO's comprehensive program on the cultural heritage of the Silk Roads began in 1966. The project on the study of the civilization of Central Asia, crossroads of the land routes of the Silk Roads, was launched following the decision of the 14th session of the UNESCO General Conference. It was stated that the goal of the project was to better familiarize the world with the civilizations of the peoples of Central Asia through archaeological research and study of their history, science and literature.:[2] It was considered a pilot, experimental project, designed to take place over a four-year period (1967-1970). It was the first time scientists had been practically convened, through international cooperation, to study the cultures of Central Asia. Furthermore, its application of a broad interdisciplinary approach to study cultures of the peoples of the region was experimental. Work on the main areas of the project facilitated collaboration of many different types of scientists: historians and archaeologists, linguists and literary critics, art historians, ethnographers, sociologists, specialists in numismatics and paleography, etc. In continuing the project, a decision was made at the 19th session of the UNESCO General Conference in 1976 to prepare a multi-volume scientific publication, called the *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*.[3] Between 1992 and 2005, seven volumes (Volume 4 came out in two parts) of the

1 The Silk Roads: an ICOMOS Thematic Study by Tim Williams on behalf of ICOMOS, 2014

2 Records of the 14th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolutions, 1966.

3 Records of the 19th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolutions, 1976.

scientific monograph were published by UNESCO.

UNESCO then launched a ten-year project entitled Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue (1988-1997).[4] As part of the project, several expeditions were organized to retrace, by land and by sea, some of these routes, with the participation of experts from all the countries involved. The purpose of the project, which took a multidisciplinary approach, was to carry out field studies of the scientific, technological and cultural exchanges which took place between the East and the West along these routes with a view to stimulating further research at the international and national levels and promoting the concept of multiple identities and a common heritage. The basic purpose of this project initiated by UNESCO in 1988, as part of the World Decade for Cultural Development, was to highlight the complex cultural interactions arising from the encounters between East and West and helping to shape the rich common heritage of Eurasia.

The implementation of the project provided a platform for both scientific and cultural collaboration between scholars and bearers of traditional cultures. Five international scientific expeditions under the auspices of UNESCO were carried out within the decade of the project. These included tracing the desert route from Xian to Kashgar (July – August 1990); the sea route from Venice to Osaka (October 1990 – March 1991); the steppe route through Central Asia (April – June 1991); the nomadic route in Mongolia (July –August 1992); and the Buddhist route in Nepal (September 1995). UNESCO's project consisted of academic meetings and symposia for researchers from the countries along the Silk Roads. In all, 227 specialists from 47 countries took part in the expeditions, in addition to local scholars, and more than 100 representatives from world media. There were 26 seminars held during the expeditions, and 17 organized either by the project or within the framework of the UNESCO program. UNESCO brought a strong cultural dimension to the international scientific programs under the project, which dealt with the following subjects: Study of the Languages and Scripts of the Silk Roads; Study and Preservation of Caravanserais and Postal Systems; Corpus and Study of the Petroglyphs of Central Asia; Use of Remote Sensing to Study Archaeological Sites; Epics along the Silk Roads. UNESCO's project promoted the establishment of new networking research institutions such as International Institute for Study of Nomadic Civilizations (Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia),[5] the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (Samarkand, Uzbekistan),[6] and International Institute of Comparative Civilization at Takshaschilla (Taxila, Pakistan).[7] Moreover, the Maritime Silk Roads Study Centre (Fuzhou, China), the Buddhist Information and Research Centre (Colombo, Sri Lanka) and the Research Centre for Silk Road Studies (Nara, Japan) were also linked to the implementation of the UNESCO project.

## Silk Roads on UNESCO's World Heritage List

In 2005, the project on the Serial Transnational World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads was launched under the 1972 UNESCO Convention on Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage.[8]

4 Records of the 24th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolutions, 1987.

5 Records of the 27th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolution, 1993.

6 Records of the 28th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolution, 1995.

7 Records of the 29th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Vol.1, Resolutions, 1997.

8 Feng, Jing, *UNESCO's Efforts in Identifying the World Heritage Significance of the Silk Road*, In: 15th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium: 'Monuments and Sites in their Setting – Conserving Cultural Heritage in Changing' Townscapes and Landscapes', 17–21 October 2005, Xi'an, China.

This international cultural undertaking brought together China and countries in Central and elsewhere in Asia to shed new light on the people that connected East and West. More than anything, it stressed the importance of their contribution to the shared heritage of all humanity, and how vital it is to understand the cultural linkages between this history and the contemporary present. A huge variety of sites attest to the historical processes along the Silk Roads. For example, they include cities and fortresses that controlled East-West trade routes, settlements or shelters for caravans and travelers (e.g. caravanserai), archaeological sites, and religious sites representing the diffusion of Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism. In addition, mountain passes and landscapes featuring water management systems (cultivated fields and rangelands), necessary for the development of arid areas, represent the natural settings of the Silk Roads.

As result, serial transboundary nominations, Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor (China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan),[9] and Silk Roads: the Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan),[10] were inscribed to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor was a 5,000 -km section of the extensive Silk Roads network, stretching from Chang'an/Luoyang, the central capital of China during the Han and Tang dynasties, to the Zhetysu region of Central Asia. It took shape between the 2nd century BCE and 1st century CE and remained in use until the 16th century, linking multiple civilizations and facilitating far-reaching exchange of traded goods, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, cultural practices and the arts. The thirty-three components included in the routes network include capital cities and palace complexes of various empires and Khan kingdoms, trading settlements, Buddhist cave temples, ancient paths, posthouses, passes, beacon towers, sections of The Great Wall, fortifications, tombs, and religious buildings.

The Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor is one of the key sections of the Silk Roads in Central Asia that connected other corridors from all directions. Comprising thirty-four component parts located in rugged mountains, fertile river valleys, and uninhabited desert, the 866 km corridor runs from east to west along the Zarafshan River and further southwest following the ancient caravan roads crossing the Karakum Desert to the Merv Oasis. Dotted along the corridor, which passes through varied geographical areas such as highland, piedmont, dry steppe, oases, fertile valleys, and arid-desert zones, the selected components reflect the complexity of landscapes and the adaption of societies to managing Silk Roads movement and trade. The variation in human responses between the fertile valleys and deltas, and the desert and river crossings, are clearly reflected in the selection of small towns, forts, and way stations. Meanwhile, the outcomes of the political and social capital generated by trading contacts are reflected in the range of commercial, elite, and religious buildings included in the nomination. It was where the Sogdians, some of the most international merchants in world history, flourished. The control of these corridors was of vital significance to many of the great Silk Roads empires, such as the Sogdian, Parthian, Sasanian, Temurid and Seljuk empires, which were fundamental to long-distance exchange along the Silk Roads.

In the meantime, the following serial nominations are under the preparatory process: Silk Roads: Volga-Caspian Corridor (Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran), Silk Roads: Fergana-Syrdarya Corridor (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) and Silk Roads in South Asia (China, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and India).

9 Decisions of the 38th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Doha, Qatar, 2014.

10 Decisions of the 45th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2023.

## UNESCO Silk Roads Online Platform for Dialogue

Following the completion of the project Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue, UNESCO launched a second phase in 2013 by establishing the Silk Roads Online Platform for Dialogue, Diversity & Development in order to make accessible for the general public the knowledge produced on the Silk Roads by UNESCO and its partners. Since its launching in 2013,[11] the Silk Roads project created among Member States a common cause around the heritage of the Silk Roads and received great support from them. It undertook various activities in order to respond to the growing interest expressed by Member States for the Silk Roads. Moreover, different initiatives including seminars, conferences, exhibitions and workshops have been organized by Member States under the auspices of UNESCO to promote this heritage. These initiatives culminated particularly in 2018 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of UNESCO's Silk Roads project (1988-2018).

The project is currently implementing the following activities, thanks to the financial and in-kind contributions provided by Member States and private partners including Azerbaijan, China, Germany, Kazakhstan, Oman, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Spain, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan:[12]

- Management of an online platform in English, Russian and Arabic which puts at the disposal of scholars, local communities and general public at large, scientific research, images, iconographies, and maps of the Silk Roads produced over the last three decades. It also provides relevant information on various aspects of the Silk Roads, in particular the tangible and intangible heritage, documentary archives, underwater heritage, and museum collections, creative industries, and festivals.
- Coordination of an international network of Silk Roads focal points to support UNESCO's work, enrich the content of the online platform and to encourage Member States to play an active role in promoting the Silk Roads in their respective countries. Twenty-five Member States have already designated a focal point to participate in the activities of the international network, which has already convened meetings.
- Development of an interactive atlas of cultural interactions along the Silk Roads to illustrate the historical and geographical imprints of the Silk Roads, as well as the mutual influences and the common tangible and intangible heritage on the basis of the knowledge developed by UNESCO and its partners in different regions. These cultural interactions will be mapped through specific themes including: science; know-how and technology; pharmacology and medicine; costumes and clothing; religions, spirituality rituals and celebrations; mythology and fantasy; languages and literature; art, music and musical instruments; and food production and gastronomy.

The project has put a special emphasis on raising the awareness and interest of youth on the importance of the Silk Roads. To this end, an international photo contest, entitled "Youth Eyes on the Silk Roads," has been organized by UNESCO since 2018. The contest invites young people to express their views of Silk Roads heritage and its relevance in modern times. The outcomes are promoted through the publication of an album and a traveling exhibition of the best photos which has been displayed in China, Oman, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan.

In order to foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding, and raise awareness of the rich history and shared legacy of the Silk Roads, UNESCO supports research and multi-volume publication on Silk Roads heritage through the project Thematic Collection of the Cultural Exchanges along the Silk Roads. The project, which was

11 Records of the 37th session of the UNESCO General Conference. Resolutions, Vol.1, 2013.

12 https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/

started in 2021,[13] focuses on the following subjects: textiles and clothing; architecture and monuments; calligraphy and manuscripts; ceramics and porcelain; folk dances and performance arts; gastronomy and food manufacturing; medicine and pharmacology; traditional painting; carpets and decorative art; religion and spirituality; traditional sports and games; astronomy, navigation, calendars and astrology; agriculture; coins and medals; languages and literature; and musical instruments. The first volume of the publication, titled *Textiles and Clothing*, was released in October 2022. The publication, which was produced with the support of the China National Silk Museum, describes a fascinating history, from the ways in which patterns and dyes developed through cultural imitation, hybridization and exchange, to how particular motifs and symbols were adopted across cultures and used as means to influence. Official presentation of the second volume, entitled *Architecture, Monuments and Urbanism*, was done at a special exhibition at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in December 2024. Both the publication and exhibition are the result of a two-year collaborative effort between UNESCO and the Nanjing Municipal Government (China). The publication provides understanding of architectural exchange, urban typographies and planning, as well as monuments that shaped cities and urban centers along the Silk Roads. It is very important to outline that scholars from Member States of the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS) made substantial contributions to the content of the publications.

## Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Silk Roads

In the field of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the International Information and Networking Centre for ICH in the Asia-Pacific Region, under the auspices of UNESCO in the Republic of Korea (ICHCAP), and with cooperation from the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS), initiated the establishment of the Silk Roads Living Heritage Network (SRLHN) in 2021.[14] The network aims to strengthen the capacity to safeguard ICH and share ICH information along the Silk Roads. SRLHN could explore ICH festivals included to the network membership to showcase the richness and diversity of the Silk Roads ICH. Moreover, SRLHN could further promote regional cooperation for safeguarding of multinational ICH elements. In order to safeguard living heritage along the Silk Roads, there is a need for the joint study of shared ICH elements and for encouraging Member States to develop new multinational nominations.

In relation to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, many Silk Roads festivals were inscribed to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. These include: the Ceremony of Mehregan (Tajikistan and Iran); Yeondeunghoe (Lantern Lighting Festival – Republic of Korea); traditional spring festive rites of horse breeders (Kazakhstan); Yama, Hoko, Yatai (Float Festivals – Japan); Mesir Macunu Festival in Manisa (Turkiye); Nachi Fire Festival (Japan); Naadam Festival (Mongolia); Dragon Boat Festival (China); Ramman (Religious Festival – India); Gangneung Danoje Festival (Republic of Korea); Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival (Turkiye); and others.[15] Moreover, hundreds of festivals under the patronage of UNESCO take place every year along the lengths of the Silk Roads, such as “Sharq Taronalari” International Music Festival in Samarkand (Uzbekistan); the International Büyükçekmece Culture and Art Festival in Istanbul (Turkiye); and the ICH Festival “Respect Cultural Diversity and

13 https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/thematic-collection-cultural-exchanges-along-silk-roads

14 https://www.unesco-ichcap.org/board.es?mid=a10203000000&bid=A103

15 https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists

Activate Human Creativity" in Chengdu (China).[16] From social and cultural rituals and religious ceremonies to sporting events and artistic displays, festivals embody the cultural identity of the people who live along the Silk Roads. Communities are unified at symbolic moments in the year, in celebrations that display traditional clothing, food, music, dance, and crafts of all kinds. They are also opportunities for exchange, as cultural treasures such as craftsmanship, recipes and songs are brought together and shared.

One particularly bright example of a shared festival is Nowruz.[17] This event has brought communities together across countries and regions for more than 3,000 years. Meaning "new day," Nowruz is a symbol of new beginnings, a message of rebirth. But it also brings people of different cultures together, so that they can appreciate their shared values and aspirations. Values of peace and solidarity, reconciliation and neighborliness, cultural diversity and tolerance, healthy life-styles, and the renewal of living environments, have been, and continue to be, promoted and transmitted from generation to generation over the course of millenia through this cultural event. Nowruz as living heritage embodies a sense of continuity and strengthens feelings of belonging. Nowruz festive events are filled with chants, dances, public rituals, traditional games and wonderful meals. One of the major features of the Nowruz is public gatherings – cultural spaces where exchanges and ceremonies take place. All people, regardless of their age, gender, ethnic origin, or religious affiliation, enjoy participating in Nowruz activities and traditions. These range from traditional games, to preparation of traditional dishes, cleaning of houses, buying new traditional clothes, giving gifts or money to children, setting up ceremonial tables, and participating in oral expressions and literature contests. Nowruz enjoys the position of being one of the most important holidays of the year, with a variety of cultural and social meanings. This include: maintaining identity and unity; respect for cultural diversity, human creativity, and nature; promoting tolerance, friendship, and peace; celebrating the victory of good over evil; fostering solidarity and friendship among ethnic groups and minorities; encouraging cheerfulness and participation of people of all ages, especially women. As a shared and common element of cultural heritage of the region, it can play a determining role in the rapprochement of the local cultures, countries, and nations, through bringing regional cultures together. The spirit of the Nowruz is peace and reconciliation[18].

## Conclusion

There are over 40 countries through which the historic land and maritime Silk Roads pass. The potential and role of these routes in building dialogue, particularly in these turbulent times, is increasingly relevant. The role of UNESCO in this regard is crucial, in actively promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, as stated in SDG 16. UNESCO's various activities will continue to benefit stakeholders by further building capacities and reinforcing international coordination mechanisms designed to protect tangible cultural heritage and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of the Silk Roads. At the same time, awareness among local communities, especially young people, about their shared heritage along the Silk Roads, must be enhanced, and dialogue and mutual understanding promoted through education and the media. Cultural heritage can thus become a living legacy every society takes from its past, with each generation preserving and passing it on to future generations.

16 https://ich.unesco.org/en/patronage–reporting–00493

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# INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON SHARED INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CENTRAL ASIA: FOCUSING ON UNESCO ICHCAP'S INITIATIVES

Deoksoon KIM

## Introduction

In the 21st century, the global community has reached a pivotal moment in which the importance of international cooperation to promote cultural diversity and mutual understanding is increasingly emphasized. UNESCO, in particular, has long underscored the protection of cultural heritage and international cultural cooperation as core values for achieving global peace and sustainable development. In this context, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage institutionalized the safeguarding of intangible heritage recognized by communities, groups, and individuals as part of their cultural identity as an issue of international concern. The Convention conceptualizes intangible cultural heritage not merely as a legacy of the past, but as a dynamic asset closely linked to present-day life and community identity. It places significant emphasis on various international cooperation mechanisms – including interstate collaboration, knowledge exchange, and joint nominations – to ensure the effective safeguarding of such heritage across national boundaries. In particular, shared intangible cultural heritage - such as traditional knowledge, arts, lifestyles, games, and rituals that transcend national borders and are practiced across multiple communities – necessitates active international cooperation. Article 19 of the Convention and its Operational Directives (OD) explicitly encourage joint nominations, information sharing, and collaboration among specialized institutions. Shared heritage provides a platform for understanding and respecting cultural differences, and it holds potential for transforming conflicts surrounding cultural ownership into opportunities for intercultural dialogue.

Within this context, Central Asia has emerged as a noteworthy regional case. Rooted in a complex historical and cultural landscape shaped by the Silk Roads and nomadic traditions, the region is home to numerous forms of intangible heritage – including the Nowruz festival, traditional sports and games, traditional archery, and so on – that are transmitted transnationally. In fact, over half (55%) of the elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity from the five Central Asian countries have been

jointly nominated, a rate significantly higher than that of other regions. This trend indicates that Central Asian states strategically utilize intangible heritage both as a component of national identity and as a cultural asset to enhance their presence in the international community.

This paper explores how international cooperation centered on shared intangible cultural heritage in Central Asia contributes to sociocultural sustainable development, grounded in the principles and structure of UNESCO's 2003 Convention. By analyzing collaborative cases led by the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP) and examining the joint nominations of Central Asian states, this paper sheds light on the strategic significance and challenges of multilateral cooperation in heritage safeguarding. Ultimately, it aims to propose future directions for international cooperation through intangible cultural heritage and to reframe the role of heritage within the discourse on sustainable development.

## Shared Intangible Cultural Heritage and International Cooperation from the Perspective of UNESCO

### UNESCO 2003 Convention and International Cooperation

Following the two World Wars, UNESCO has consistently emphasized the importance of intellectual and moral solidarity for the achievement of peace. In 1966, the organization adopted the Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation[1] at its 14th General Conference, which laid the foundation for the development of international cultural cooperation policies. This declaration recognized cultural cooperation as both a right and a duty, calling for respect for the characteristics of each culture, the broad dissemination of ideas and knowledge, and the promotion of mutual understanding, friendship, peace, and moral and spiritual education through a spirit of reciprocity. Since then, UNESCO has continued to implement various initiatives to promote international cooperation in the cultural field, including the adoption of international normative instruments and the establishment of specialized institutions. Regardless of the degree, international cooperation has been a consistent component across all UNESCO conventions, including the 1972 and 2005 conventions.[2]

Unlike the 1972 Convention, which treats cultural heritage as the shared property of humankind from a universal perspective, the 2003 Convention defines intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage (Article 2.1). This definition reflects a respect for the specificities and diversity of communities. This does not imply indifference to the heritage of others; rather, as stipulated in Article 19.2, it affirms that safeguarding ICH is a matter of general interest to humanity and thus requires cooperation at bilateral, multilateral, subregional, regional, and international levels.

The 2003 Convention aims to realize the overarching objective of safeguarding ICH "in a spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance" (Preamble), by "providing for international cooperation and assistance" (Article 1.4). International cooperation supports the safeguarding of ICH shared by two or more countries, facilitates the implementation of protective measures by States Parties, and may lead them to recognize and revise national legal and policy frameworks in response to others. Article 19.1 of the Convention specifically outlines the forms of

1 UNESCO. (1966). *Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Co-operation*. Paris: UNESCO. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/57727

2 Blake, J., & Lixinski, L. (Eds.). (2020). *The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention: A Commentary*. Oxford University Press.

international cooperation, including the exchange of information and experience, joint initiatives, and the establishment of assistance mechanisms among States Parties. The Operational Directives for the implementation of the Convention further emphasize the importance of international cooperation through a range of concrete mechanisms: best safeguarding practices (OD 42), requests for international assistance (OD 10(a)), joint nominations (OD 13-15), multinational extension requests (OD 16-17), cooperation with communities, experts, institutions, and research bodies (OD 86), cooperation with UNESCO Category 2 Centres (OD 88), and periodic reporting (OD 156), among others.

In summary, international cooperation under the 2003 Convention can be understood as collaborative processes among States Parties and other stakeholders, operating across national borders at bilateral, multilateral, subregional, regional, and international levels, for the safeguarding of ICH as a matter of common concern to humanity.

## Shared Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Means of International Cooperation

Due to the inherent characteristics of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – which is created, transformed, maintained, and transmitted through people – it often transcends the borders of a single nation and exists across multiple countries. This phenomenon arises as a result of both voluntary and involuntary human mobility, such as migration, displacement, and tourism, which facilitate the transmission and sharing of cultural practices beyond political boundaries. As a result, certain ICH elements are recognized and practiced in multiple countries, regardless of national borders. Nevertheless, in recent years, shared ICH has also become a source of tension, competition, and even discord between countries,[3] particularly in the context of inscriptions on UNESCO's lists. Despite such challenges, there has been a growing international effort to promote intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding through cooperation mechanisms such as joint nominations of shared heritage elements.

A joint nomination refers to a situation where the same ICH element exists within the territories of two or more States Parties, and those countries jointly submit a nomination for inscription on the Representative List, the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, or the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (Operational Directives 13-15). A joint nomination may occur at the initial stage of submission, or it may take the form of an extension, whereby a State Party that also possesses the inscribed element joins an existing listing (OD 16-17). Notably, the 2003 Convention prioritizes joint nominations, assigning them the second-highest order of priority in the evaluation process, thus actively encouraging such collaborative approaches.

As of December 2024, 788 elements from 150 countries have been inscribed on UNESCO's Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage, of which a significant portion – 667 elements (85%) – are on the Representative List. Among these, 92 elements (approximately 14%) have been inscribed through joint nominations.[4] Moreover, recent years have seen an upward trend in both joint nominations and multinational extensions. The growing international interest in joint nominations can be attributed to their potential to reduce excessive competition and political tension associated with list inscriptions.[5] Because joint nominations inherently require cooperation among two or more countries,

3 For example, conflicts over ICH between countries have occurred between Korea and China (e.g., Arirang, Dano Festival, Nongak), Mongolia and China (e.g., Kh拓mei), and Indonesia and Malaysia (e.g., Wayang, Kris, Batik), among others.

4 https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists

5 UNESCO (2007) Summary Report of the expert meeting on the lists established in the 2003 Convention Safeguarding Through International Cooperation. Paris: UNESCO.

they contribute to the promotion of intercultural dialogue and help institutionalize UNESCO's "culture of peace." Additionally, they facilitate comparative understandings of cultural similarities and differences among participating countries, thereby enhancing awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. Joint nominations can also serve as a means to mitigate disputes over the origin or ownership of shared cultural heritage[6]. Furthermore, the lead country in a joint nomination can gain recognition for its expertise and capacity, thereby enhancing its international profile within UNESCO. Despite their potential benefits and prioritization in the inscription process, joint nominations remain a complex undertaking. They require close collaboration among States Parties with potentially differing ICH safeguarding systems, perceptions, and approaches. Furthermore, they demand significant resources, including funding, skilled personnel, and technical expertise.

The process of preparing a joint nomination entails confirming the commitment and capacity of participating states, conducting research and data sharing on the ICH element, ensuring effective communication, and reaching consensus on the content of the nomination file within the prescribed timeframe. Such a process necessitates mutual trust, patience, diplomatic flexibility, and strong leadership. The complexity increases proportionally with the number of participating countries. Cases such as the separate inscriptions of Arirang and Kimchi by the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea illustrate the limitations of the joint nomination strategy under the 2003 Convention.[7] In some instances, States Parties have used joint nominations not as a sincere expression of international cooperation, but as a strategic means to expand the number of elements on the Representative List.

## Safeguarding Activities of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

### Current Status of Joint Inscriptions of Shared Intangible Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

The five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have a total of 66 elements inscribed on UNESCO's Lists of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, of which 64 are included on the Representative List. Notably, 35 of these elements, accounting for 55% of the Representative List inscriptions from the region, are joint nominations involving two or more countries. This joint inscription rate of 55% is significantly higher than those of neighboring subregions such as Northeast Asia (9%), Southeast Asia (18%), and the global average of 14%.

Unlike other regions, Central Asia exhibits a remarkably high level of joint inscription of shared intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through UNESCO mechanisms. This phenomenon can be explained by several key factors.

First, Central Asia has historically served as a major hub of cultural exchange facilitated by the Silk Roads network. Various elements of intangible heritage – languages, religions, folklore, performing arts, and traditional knowledge – have transcended national borders and circulated widely throughout the region. This transnational cultural identity has resulted in heritage elements that are not confined to a single country but are commonly practiced across multiple Central Asian states. For example, the Nowruz festival is a widely shared intangible heritage element celebrated across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

6 Kim, D.H. (2017) A Study on the Task of Joint Nomination of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and Multinational Heritage. *Korean Journal of Intangible Heritage*, Vol 3, pp193–223.

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**Table 1.** Current status of UNESCO joint inscriptions in Central Asia

| Category | | Representative List | | | Urgent Safeguarding List | Best Practice | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No | Joint Nomination | | | | |
| | | | No | % | | | |
| Central Asia (5 States) | Kazakhstan | 14 | 8 | 57 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| | Kyrgyzstan | 14 | 8 | 57 | 1 | 0 | 15 |
| | Tajikistan | 12 | 7 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| | Turkmenistan | 9 | 4 | 44 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| | Uzbekistan | 15 | 8 | 53 | 0 | 1 | 16 |
| | Sub-total | 64 | 35 | 55 | 1 | 1 | 66 |
| North East Asia (5 States) | | 100 | 9 | 9 | 11 | 1 | 112 |
| Southeast Asia (10 States) | | 55 | 10 | 18 | 9 | 2 | 66 |

Second, most Central Asian countries gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, after which the reconstruction of national identity became a critical priority. ICH has since been perceived as a symbolic asset of nationalism, and joint inscription with UNESCO has been strategically utilized as a means of gaining international recognition. In this context, joint nominations serve as a tool that allows states to simultaneously emphasize both cultural commonality and distinctiveness.

Third, ICH in Central Asia is deeply embedded in traditional community-based lifestyles, particularly those associated with nomadic culture. Elements such as yurt-making techniques, oral traditions, falconry, music, and craftsmanship, have naturally spread across national boundaries and are transmitted in a manner that reflects shared cultural ownership.

## ICHCAP's Cooperative Activities for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Central Asia (2010–2024)

The International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (ICHCAP) is a UNESCO Category 2 Centre in the field of culture, established in July 2011 through an agreement between the Republic of Korea and UNESCO. The ICHCAP was created to support the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the 48 UNESCO Member States of the Asia-Pacific region. ICHCAP focuses particularly on functions related to information and networking, through which it implements a range of heritage safeguarding activities.

In its early years, ICHCAP categorized the Asia-Pacific region into five subregions based on sociocultural characteristics and tailored its support strategies according to the specific conditions and shared challenges of each. Among them, Central Asia emerged as a particularly proactive region in terms of willingness to engage in ICH cooperation. Accordingly, ICHCAP has carried out a variety of collaborative activities with the National Commissions for UNESCO in Central Asian countries.

To begin with, ICHCAP conducted field research on the ICH safeguarding systems of four Central Asian countries in 2012 and 2013. This included analysis of national laws, policies, institutions, national ICH inventories, and key safeguarding challenges. The results provided both ICHCAP and the countries involved with a comprehensive understanding of the region's ICH landscape, laying the groundwork for identifying future cooperation agendas and setting priorities. For the Central Asian countries, the research served as an important self-assessment, revealing areas that required development or reform. In a related effort, three countries – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan – published national books introducing and describing elements

of their ICH. These publications were the result of in-depth surveys and research into their respective ICH elements and functioned as foundational resources for future UNESCO nomination dossiers.

Between 2015 and 2017, four Central Asian countries collaborated on the production of documentary films covering ten selected ICH elements from each country, resulting in a total of 40 documentaries. ICHCAP developed production guidelines, conducted training programs, and hosted expert workshops to build local capacity. National focal points and video documentation teams were formed, followed by filming, editing, dubbing, and subtitling. To further support the project and enhance its impact, ICHCAP formed a consortium with EBS (Educational Broadcasting System) and the Asia Culture Center (ACC) of Korea in 2016. This partnership integrated expertise in archiving, media production, and network building, and enabled broader dissemination and public engagement through film festivals, exhibitions, and publications. In addition, ICHCAP has worked to enhance the production, management, and sharing of ICH-related data by launching IchLinks, a digital information-sharing platform, in 2021. As of now, 14 countries, including the four Central Asian states, are participating in this initiative, which is designed to improve accessibility and promote regional cooperation through open data systems.

Beyond information-sharing, ICHCAP has also facilitated network-based activities with Central Asian countries. One key example is the Central Asia Subregional Network Meetings, which serve as a platform for identifying and responding to shared ICH challenges and developing joint projects. Between 2010 and 2021, a total of eight subregional meetings were held, addressing themes such as national inventory development, visibility enhancement strategies, and ICH education. To promote broader regional cooperation, ICHCAP also initiated the Silk Roads Living Heritage Network (SRLHN) in 2021, recognizing the extended cultural connectivity of Eurasia. The SRLHN brings together ICH experts from Central Asia, Korea, Mongolia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Iran, and other countries, aiming to strengthen exchange and cooperation on shared heritage, promote ICH-related festivals and tourism, and enhance community-based cultural economies along the Silk Roads.

Between 2010 and 2022, ICHCAP's work in Central Asia primarily focused on basic capacity-building, such as assessing national ICH systems, developing inventories, and producing foundational documentation. However, since 2023, the Centre has shifted its focus toward leveraging ICH for sociocultural sustainable development, emphasizing cooperative exchange activities that support not only heritage preservation but also long-term community resilience, inclusion, and cultural vitality.

## Sociocultural Sustainable Development through Shared Intangible Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

### Shared Heritage and Sociocultural Sustainability

The Central Asian region, shaped over millennia by the Silk Roads and nomadic cultures, represents a unique crossroads of civilizations, traditions, and cultural exchanges. Although each country within the region maintains an independent political system, their intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – including language, religion, traditional knowledge, oral narratives, performing arts, and artisanal skills – reveals a high degree of similarity and continuity, clearly demonstrating the characteristics of shared ICH. This shared heritage not only serves as a foundation for regional cooperation but also functions as a dynamic driver for sociocultural sustainable development.

First, shared ICH contributes to strengthening community identity and cultural solidarity. Traditional rituals and folk arts that transcend national borders foster mutual understanding and a

sense of belonging, particularly in the post-Soviet context where countries have had to reestablish their national identities. Shared heritage offers a framework for a pluralistic understanding of history and plays a vital role in promoting social cohesion within multiethnic and multireligious societies, laying the groundwork for intercultural coexistence.

Second, shared heritage facilitates intergenerational knowledge transmission and cultural education. As traditional knowledge and artistic practices are primarily passed down through oral transmission and hands-on learning, integrating them into educational systems and community-based programs can enhance youth engagement and foster a sense of cultural pride. In particular, the use of digital technologies to document and present ICH makes heritage more accessible and relatable to younger generations, thereby contributing to cultural sustainability.

Third, shared ICH promotes social inclusion and cultural diversity. In Central Asia, traditional knowledge held by marginalized groups – including ethnic minorities, women, and rural communities – has often been overlooked. Revalorizing and safeguarding such heritage helps ensure cultural rights and supports social justice by enhancing the visibility of underrepresented cultural practices. International and regional cooperation in heritage safeguarding thus has the potential to expand inclusive cultural policies and foster mutual respect across communities.

Fourth, heritage-based cooperation fosters regional peacebuilding and sustainable diplomatic relations. Joint projects in the field of heritage preservation – such as collaborative research, academic exchange, traveling exhibitions, and artist residencies – can transform rigid political relationships into opportunities for cultural diplomacy and trust-building. Through linkages with international organizations like UNESCO, such efforts can generate new frameworks for multilateral cooperation and the co-creation of shared cultural values.

In this context, shared ICH in Central Asia should be recognized not merely as a resource for preserving the past, but as a dynamic asset that actively contributes to the present and future of sociocultural sustainable development. Regional cooperation built on shared heritage can meaningfully address multiple dimensions – identity building, social integration, cultural education, inclusive society-building, and peace promotion – and thus emerge as a strategic foundation for sustainable development.

## Collaborative Activities on Shared Intangible Cultural Heritage in Central Asia for Sociocultural Sustainable Development

Since 2023, ICHCAP has been actively engaging in cooperative initiatives with various Central Asian countries to promote the exchange and safeguarding of shared cultural heritage. Focusing on shared intangible heritage such as Nowruz, traditional sports and games, and traditional archery, the Centre aims to contribute meaningfully to the sociocultural sustainable development of communities in the region.

First, Nowruz serves as a central element in strengthening regional identity and promoting the values of cultural diversity. As a traditional festival marking the beginning of spring, Nowruz is commonly celebrated not only in the five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – but also in Iran, Afghanistan, and other neighboring states. It has been jointly inscribed by 13 countries on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. ICHCAP has supported the publication of books, expert meetings, and forums on Nowruz, fostering cultural ties and mutual understanding among nations. Furthermore, the Centre has been involved in the Nowruz Festival in Korea, which is held annually and organized by the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat. These events offer

diasporic communities from Central Asia living in Korea opportunities to reconnect with their cultural roots, reinforce their sense of identity and belonging, and promote transnational solidarity. In turn, such initiatives contribute to enhancing cultural diversity and intercultural understanding between Korea and Central Asian societies. By reaffirming the symbolic meanings of Nowruz – renewal, peace, and community – these activities not only strengthen cultural pride among Central Asian peoples but also promote the universal values of respect and inclusion.

Second, ICHCAP is working to enhance intergenerational connection and community integration through traditional sports and games such as Kok-boru and Alchiki. These traditional sports and games embody more than physical activity; they represent the history, values, worldview, and communal spirit of the Central Asian peoples. Developed in the context of nomadic life, these cultural expressions reflect deep relationships with nature and traditional social organization. Through joint research, expert workshops, and international exchange programs, the Centre promotes understanding and appreciation of these traditions among participating communities and institutions. Youth engagement is a key focus, with efforts to ensure the continuity and modern adaptation of traditional sports and games. These activities aim to reinforce community cohesion and sustainable cultural identity. In particular, continued support for international traditional festivals is vital. A prime example is the World Nomad Games, an international platform showcasing a variety of traditional sports and games (e.g., Kok-boru, archery, traditional wrestling, and intellectual games) as well as arts and crafts from across Eurasia. ICHCAP co-organized an international symposium on traditional sports and games during the 5th World Nomad Games in 2024 and plans to collaborate with Kyrgyzstan to support global promotion efforts at the 6th World Nomad Games in 2026.

Third, ICHCAP aims to expand Eurasian cultural exchange through international cooperation on traditional archery. As a composite intangible heritage that encompasses lifestyle, martial skills, spirituality, and artistry, traditional archery has developed across the Eurasian continent – especially in Korea, Central Asia, Mongolia, Türkiye, and Hungary – where nomadic and equestrian cultures are deeply rooted. Although each country retains unique practices, a shared cultural foundation links them, offering immense potential for international exchange and cooperation. Cooperation centered on traditional archery can support not only heritage safeguarding, but also the promotion of cultural diversity, cultural diplomacy, and mutual understanding among communities. In June 2025, ICHCAP will host an international symposium on the social and cultural significance of traditional archery, its contemporary relevance, and the development of international networks. Traditional archery – balancing both shared characteristics and regional specificities – represents a strong candidate for joint nomination to UNESCO's Representative List. Türkiye inscribed traditional Turkish archery in 2019, but a multinational joint nomination involving other countries that share this tradition would enhance global recognition and provide a foundation for intergenerational engagement and co-ownership, particularly among youth.

In order to transform these initiatives into sustainable frameworks rather than one-off events, ICHCAP is committed to expanding access and participation through the development of information platforms, digital content production, and ICH databases. These efforts are expected to strengthen the heritage safeguarding capacities of Central Asian countries, support community-led transmission systems, and function as infrastructure for sociocultural sustainable development throughout the region.

## Conclusion

This study examined how shared intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can serve as a catalyst for international cooperation and sociocultural

sustainable development, based on the principles and implementation mechanisms of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In particular, the case of Central Asia was analyzed as a region with a historically interconnected cultural context shaped by the Silk Roads and nomadic traditions, where numerous intangible heritage elements are transmitted transnationally. The region's exceptionally high rate of joint inscriptions compared to other parts of the world demonstrates its strong potential for meaningful international collaboration.

The activities of ICHCAP have laid a structural foundation for the safeguarding of ICH and the promotion of international cooperation in Central Asia. More recently, the Centre has expanded its focus to include shared heritage such as Nowruz, traditional sports and games, and traditional archery, facilitating cross-border exchanges and joint initiatives. These efforts have made tangible contributions to sociocultural sustainability by strengthening community identity, fostering intergenerational transmission, promoting cultural diversity, and advancing cultural diplomacy.

Moving forward, it is essential to further promote joint nominations of shared ICH, develop international digital information platforms, and implement education and content initiatives targeting younger generations. Such strategies and activites will be vital for building new models of cultural solidarity and international cooperation across the region. Ultimately, the safeguarding and promotion of shared ICH in Central Asia should be recognized not merely as a matter of national interest, but as a shared asset of humanity. It holds significant strategic value for advancing inclusivity and sustainable development in the global community.

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# 2

# Commonalities and Differences in the Spring Festival to Celebrate the New Year

# NAWROUZ CELEBRATIONS IN ANCIENT ARIANA – AFGHANISTAN

Mohammad Halim TANWIR

## Introduction

Nawrouz, one of the most ancient celebrations, has its origins in the land of Ariana (ancient Afghanistan) and has been celebrated by its people for over 6,000 years. This timeless tradition is observed on the first day of Hamal (March 21st), marking the arrival of spring and the beginning of the solar year.

The exact origins of Nawrouz remain shrouded in mystery. Ancient texts such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Tabari's *History* attribute its foundation to Jamshid/Yama, while other accounts name Kiumars کیومرث as its initiator.

For the Aryans, Nawrouz symbolized a return to purity and the essence of humanity. It was a time to cleanse the heart of grievances, sorrows, and misfortunes. Known as the "Day of Hope," it celebrated renewal and was considered a divine affirmation as nature blossomed anew. Aryan customs included tasting sugar before speaking and anointing the body with olive oil to ward off misfortune. Additionally, planting wheat or barley seeds in clay pots – a symbol of fertility and growth – evolved into the enduring tradition of preparing Samanak.

Beyond its nature-focused significance, Nawrouz is a profound social and cultural celebration, highlighting humanity's deep connection with nature. In the book *Al-Tafhim*, التفهيم , Abu Rayhan al-Biruni describes Nawrouz as the first day of Hamal, heralding the new year and a time of joy and festivity. Similarly, the *Nawrouz Nameh*, نوروزنامه attributed to Omar Khayyam, recounts that Jamshid designated this day as the start of a new annual cycle, establishing unique rituals to honor it.

Today, Nawrouz is celebrated in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Iran, Kurdistan, and Armenia. In Afghanistan and Iran, it marks the start of the new year, while in other regions, it signifies the advent of spring. This festival embodies hope, renewal, and peace, demonstrating that despite historical challenges, the people of these lands remain steadfastly connected to their cultural roots.

In Afghanistan, Nawrouz transcends a mere national celebration; it is a shared cultural heritage across the region. This festival not only reflects the grandeur of Aryan civilization but also evokes memories of joy and peaceful coexistence. It underscores the resilience of the Afghan people in preserving this ancient tradition, keeping hope and happiness alive amidst adversity.

## The Word "Nawrouz" / "Nowruz"

The word "Nawrouz," or "Nowruz" as it is more commonly spelled across the region, is a compound term formed from the Dari (Balkhi / Tokharian) and Avestan words *now* (new) and *ruz* (day). Ancient Aryans in Afghanistan historically referred to Nawrouz as "Nawa Sarida," meaning "New Year." Similarly, the Aryans of Central Asia, during the Sogdian and Khwarazmian periods, called it "Nusard" or "Nusargi," also meaning "New Year." However, the Avesta (particularly the Gathas) makes no mention of Nawrouz.

In various Latin texts, the first part of the word "Nawrouz" / "Nowruz" appears with spellings such as *no, now, nov,* and *naw* (as in the commonly used "Nawrouz" in Afghanistan, also adopted in this chapter), while the second part is spelled *ruz, rooz,* or *rouz*. Sometimes these components are written together, and at other times, with a space between. According to phonetic rules, the recommended spelling of the word in the Latin alphabet today is "Nowruz." This standardized spelling is now commonly used in UNESCO documents and numerous political texts, however regional variations – such as "Nawrouz" continue to circulate.

## The Indicators of Nawrouz in Afghanistan

The movement and excitement of the symbol of Nawrouz in Afghanistan are accompanied by various activities that indicate energy and hope for life. People begin to welcome the new year with excitement, which is a sign of renewal and a new beginning. This is an opportunity for family and social gatherings. People visit each other, which strengthens their social solidarity and closeness.

In addition, Nawrouz in Afghanistan emphasizes abundance and prosperity and indicates the wish for a year full of blessings and abundance. It is also an opportunity to adhere to traditions and cultural values, and a reflection of the cultural spirit of the people, making it a unique occassion.

## Nawrouz after Islam

An illustration of Chaharshanbe Suri ceremonies in the Chehel Sotoun Palace suggests that there are no records of Nawrouz celebrations during the Umayyad era. During the Abbasid period, it appears that caliphs occasionally welcomed Nawrouz gifts from the populace. However, with the rise of the Samanid dynasty in Balkh, Nawrouz was celebrated with greater splendor, reminiscent of its ancient pre-Islamic origins.

During the Seljuk period, Sultan Jalal al-Din Malikshah Seljuk gathered a group of Aryan astronomers to reform the calendar. This group established Nawrouz as the first day of spring and fixed its position, creating what became known as the Jalali Calendar.

"From that time onward, Nowruz gradually shifted backward by one day every four years until the year 467 AH, when it fell on the 13th of Esfand (17 days before the end of winter). At this

point, Sultan Malikshah Seljuk restructured the Jalali calendar, fixing Nowruz on the first day of spring. Since then, the celebration has marked the beginning of the spring season."

The reason Aryans historically added a leap month every 120 years instead of a leap day every four years has cultural and historical justifications. Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, the renowned scholar, astronomer, and philosopher of the Ghaznavid Empire, explained that Aryans associated specific rituals with each day, including a dedication of each to a deity. Adding additional days would disrupt this order. Moreover, they considered certain days auspicious (*sa'd* سعد) or inauspicious (*nahs* نحس), and wanted to avoid shifting auspicious days to inauspicious ones.

Omar Khayyam's reforms in the 4th century AH (11th century CE) made the calendar more precise, aligning it closely with the natural solar calendar. His corrections ensured that Nawrouz and other annual festivals were celebrated on their exact dates.

Ferdowsi, the celebrated Persian poet and a court poet of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, wrote:

"To Jamshid they scattered gems,
And called that day Nawrouz.
The year's head on Farvardin's Hormuz day,
He rested his soul from sorrow and vengeance.
Nobles adorned themselves in joy,
With wine, music, and entertainment sought delight.
Such a blessed festival from that age,
Remains a legacy from those kings."

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni also wrote: "On this day, the Lord rested after creating the world. On this day, the Lord created Jupiter..."

Zoroastrians believe that on this day, Zoroaster attained the privilege of communion with God. According to Athar al-Baqiyah, Jamshid ordered the destruction of old cemeteries and the construction of new ones on this day. As a divine reward, God granted humanity protection from aging, disease, envy, mortality, and sorrow. During Jamshid's reign, it is said that no creature died.

## Origins of the Nawrouz Festival

According to Aryan myths and legends, the origins of the Nawrouz festival are attributed to Jamshid, the fourth king of the Pishdadian dynasty. These legends trace back to the Indo-Aryan era. In the Avesta, the oldest Aryan scripture, Jamshid (Yama) is described as possessing divine glory (*farra Izadi* فره ایزدی). He was commanded by Ahura Mazda to battle Angra Mainyu (Ahriman اهریمن) whose actions had caused droughts, famine, and destruction of blessings.

Upon defeating Ahriman, Jamshid restored joy, prosperity, and abundance to the people. Trees that had withered bloomed again, and the people celebrated this day as Nawrouz or "New Day." They planted barley in trays to mark this joyful occasion, a tradition that endured among Aryans in ancient Afghanistan.

It is said that Jamshid, also known as Manuskh منشخ in Arabic, traveled the world. When he arrived in Azerbaijan, he ascended a jewel-encrusted throne on a high point in the east. The brilliance of his throne dazzled the people at sunrise, and they called the day "New Day," and celebrated it as a festival. The term *shid* شید (meaning "ray" in the Avesta) was added to his name, and he became known as Jamshid. This event immortalized the tradition of Nawrouz.

Zoroastrians believe that on the first day of Hamal (Aries), God completed the creation of humanity and other beings. In gratitude, people engaged in prayers and celebrations. Another belief associated with Nawrouz is the descent of Faravahar فروهر (souls of the righteous deceased) to Earth during this time.

According to the Avesta, on the first day of Farvardin, the Faravahars visit their families, and

upon witnessing their joy and festivity, they pray to Ahura Mazda for blessings and mercy on their loved ones. To honor these souls, people clean their homes and prepare to welcome them. This is why the month of Farvardin is considered dedicated to the Faravahars.

Even before Zoroastrianism, the new year was celebrated as a time of joy and festivities without religious connotations. After Zoroaster's teachings, this day was considered sacred, and his doctrines were spread during Nawrouz. During the Buddhist period, the traditional celebrations of Nawrouz also found acceptance.

Now that Islam has spread across Ariana (Afghanistan) and beyond, Nawrouz is celebrated as a cherished cultural tradition.

## Nawrouz During Historical Dynasties

Although the Parthians (Ars acids) were of Aryan origin, they were not Zoroastrians, and the influence of Greek culture led to some neglect of Aryan traditions. However, towards the end of their 476-year reign, Aryan customs regained strength.

During the Sassanid era, Nawrouz ceremonies were imbued with religious significance. The festival lasted from 6 to 30 days, and the 6th day of Hamal (called "Great Nawrouz" or Khordad) was considered especially sacred, and was associated with the angelic being of the same name.

Followers of Mazdeism also believed that Zoroaster was born on this day (650 years before Christ) and that he engaged in divine communion with God on this sacred day. Nawrouz was revered across Ariana as a holy occasion.

## Nawrouz and Omar Khayyam

Omar Khayyam, a wise and intelligent figure of his era, preserved his autonomy and unique intellectual authenticity despite external pressures. He boldly expressed his criticisms, embracing free thought, unrestrained by superstitions and outdated traditions, and actively opposed futile traditionalism. His poetry vividly captures the tangible realities of society and the inner sentiments of individuals.

*Nowruz-Nama*, a treatise attributed to Omar Khayyam, delves into the origins and significance of Nawrouz. It explores its establishment by kings and their reverence for the occasion. Khayyam begins by recounting the origins of Nawrouz in response to a friend's query about the name's origin and founders. He wrote:

On the face of the flower,
the breeze of Nawrouz feels delightful;
In the garden's courtyard,
the cheerful view is heartwarming.
Speak not of yesterday, for it is not pleasant;
Enjoy the moment, for today is delightful.
Ruba'i 19

بر چهره گل، نسیم نوروز خوش است
در صحن چمن، روی دل‌افروز خوش است
از دی که گذشت هر چه گویی خوش نیست
خوش باش و ز دی مگو که امروز خوش است
رباعی: ۱۹

As clouds cleanse the tulip's face at Nawrouz,
Rise and take the goblet with firm resolve.
This greenery, which today is your sight's delight,
Tomorrow shall rise from your dust.
Ruba'i 24

چون ابر به نوروز رخ لاله بشست
برخیز و بجام باده کن، عزم درست
کاین سبزه که امروز تماشاگه توست
فردا همه از خاک تو برخواهد رست
رباعی: ۲۴

Like the tulip, seize the goblet in your hand at Nawrouz;
If you have a chance with a tulip-cheeked one, grasp it.
Drink merrily, for this ancient sphere,
Will one day turn you to dust without care.
Ruba'i 27

حون لاله به نوروز قدح گیر بدست
با لاله‌رخی اگر تو را فرصت هست
می نوش به خرمی که این حرخ کهن
ناگاه تو را حو خاک گرداند پست
رباعی: ۲۷

## Two of Omar Khayyam's Spring Quatrains

These fleeting days of life swiftly passed,
Like water in a stream, like wind in a meadow.
Never did I dwell on the sorrow of two days:
The day that has not come and the day that is past.

این یک دو سه روز نوبت عمر گذشت
حون آب به حویبار و حون باد به دشت
هرگز غم این دو روز مرا یاد نگشت
روزی که نیامده‌ست و روزی که گذشت

The clouds came and wept over the green field;
Without the ruby-hued wine, life cannot be endured
This greenery, which today is our sight's delight,
Will someday grow from the soil of our remains.

ابر آمد و زار بر سرِ سبزه گریست،
بی بادهٔ گُلرنگ نمی‌شاید زیست؛
این سبزه که امروز تماشاگه ماست،
تا سبزهٔ خاک ما تماشاگه کیست!

Khayyam continues to detail the calendar's establishment by Jamshid, who divided the year into 12 months, each governed by an angel. Jamshid's reforms marked the beginning of the solar calendar, celebrated with feasts and joy, laying the groundwork for what we now recognize as Nawrouz. The treatise further describes contributions by other kings, including Kayu Marth, Hushang, and Tahmuras, who enriched traditions and governance with innovations like ironworking and silk weaving.

The document also highlights the astronomical expertise of Khayyam, who, drawing on knowledge from luminaries like Al-Biruni and Avicenna, refined the Aryans (Ariana) calendar. This meticulous work ensured alignment with celestial phenomena, enhancing its precision and cultural significance.

## Traditional Symbols of Nawrouz

During Nawrouz celebrations, people would engage in rituals like sprinkling water on one another and exchanging sugar as a gift. The profound connection of Aryan societies to their past traditions ensured the enduring grandeur of Nawrouz, even during Islamic eras. Despite the indifference of some Caliphates, the celebration persisted due to the rulers' familiarity with Arians customs. This resilience was further bolstered by the rise of independent dynasties like the Taharids, Saffarids, and Samanids, whose dedication to Aryan heritage revitalized and enriched the festivities of Nawrouz.

## Nawrouz: A Philosophical and Historical Perspective

Nawrouz, and its philosophy, origins, and ceremonies in Ariana – ancient Afghanistan – are themes referenced by numerous historians, including Abu'l-Fazl Baihaqi, the chronicler of the Ghaznavid Empire. Baihaqi mentions the tradition of gift-giving during Nawrouz in various parts of his work, reflecting the continuation of Nawrouz customs during the Ghaznavid era.

## Nawrouz Traditions of Ariana – Afghanistan

Nawrouz customs and traditions in the ancient country of Ariana – Afghanistan, have been celebrated for thousands of years as a cultural tradition from ancient Balkh to all the villages and hamlets of the land, preserving social traditions, and marking the beginning of the solar new year. The beginning of spring, when the greens of the season and fragrant air bring happiness and the beginning of another year, invites all people to love and to experience joy.

Nawrouz has had wide-ranging impacts on the culture and art of Afghanistan, and is reflected in various fields from literature to visual arts and social rituals. These impacts not only reflect the historical roots of Nawrouz, but also demonstrate the creativity of people of this land in matters of fine arts.

Literature and poetry in Nawrouz have always inspired Afghan poets and writers. In classical and contemporary poetry, spring and Nawrouz have been described as symbols of renewal, love, and hope for the future. Poets such as Rumi and Bedil Dehlavi have praised Nawrouz in their works and have linked and expressed it with mystical and social concepts (see the role of the greats of knowledge and literature below).

Nawrouz is accompanied by local music and traditional Afghan dances, especially in public celebrations. Instruments such as the *rabab, damburah, dahl* and *serna* are played on this occasion and, along with group dances such as *atan*, fill the atmosphere of Nawrouz with enthusiasm and joy. In Afghanistan, there are still traditions in the field of theater and allegorical performances. During Nawrouz, traditional and ritual shows with happy and cultural themes are performed. These performances, which are often accompanied by humor, play an important role in promoting happiness and the retelling of folk stories. With respect to visual arts, images of Nawrouz celebrations, social scenes, and spring landscapes are reflected in Afghan miniatures and paintings, and in styles inspired by the Temurid and Boburid art of Kamoliddin Behzad in Herat, Kabul and Balkh.

The Nawrouz ceremony in Afghanistan is accompanied by special dishes from different regions of the country, along with peasant products, which themselves symbolize the culture and creativity of the people of this land. Haft Miweh and Samanak, as well as local Nawrouz dishes such as Kabuli-Palo and Bolani, represent the culinary art of the Afghan people. The folk ceremonies and celebrations of Nawrouz are also worth mentioning, as they provide space for unity and creativity between the men and women of Afghanistan and contribute to the richness of the cultural heritage of this land (see the description of this in the second part of this article).

Nawrouz in the land of Ariana (present-day Afghanistan), has its roots in a history of several thousand years and has been celebrated as a cultural and social tradition since ancient times. This celebration, with the beginning of the solar new year and the beginning of spring, when nature becomes new, has always been an opportunity for unity, happiness, and renewal of social relations. Here we mention some of the Nawrouz customs and traditions in Afghanistan.

Firstly, the practice of housewarming and the wearing of new clothes is common in all families. Like many other Nawrouz cultures, in Afghanistan, people clean and tidy their homes before Nawrouz. Wearing new clothes for children and young people is a symbol of renewal and a new beginning. During Nawrouz, families gather together to celebrate and prepare special dishes such as Sabzi Polo with white chicken, local sweets, and a variety of traditional foods. These gatherings help strengthen family and social ties.

Visiting elders and distributing gifts is also an important Nawrouz tradition in Afghanistan. Visiting elders in the family and relatives is a sign of kindness and love, and during these visits, the younger family members respectfully visit their

elders and give small gifts as a symbols of love and respect.

Nawrouz poetry and music are one of the best things about this holiday – Nawrouz has a special place in Afghan literature and local music. Local poets and artists compose poems and songs about spring and Nawrouz, recalling the beauty and hope of the new season. Despite the passage of time and social change, these traditions are still preserved in many parts of Afghanistan, reflecting the cultural and historical richness of this land.

## Bonfire Lighting آتش افروختن

Lighting bonfires in the villages of Afghanistan and the ancient land of Ariana remains a part of the tradition. Young people express their joy on the eve of Nawrouz and continue until the 13th of Hamal by gathering together, lighting bonfires, and sitting around them to bring warmth and light to everyone. However, this custom has become less common in Afghanistan in recent times.

## Ritual of Breaking Pots (Bala Gardani) بلا گردانی

The ritual of Bala Gardani (the return and removal of evil from human existence), or breaking a water pot, is particularly common among women, especially unmarried girls. People believed that young women, until they were married and went to their husband's home, could be afflicted by misfortunes that could block their prospects for marriage. Thus, the women of the household would give empty pots to the young girls to fetch water from springs or streams. Upon their return, they would break the pots in public to drive away misfortunes and pave the way for happiness and good fortune.

## Burning *Espand* (Harmal) اسپند دود کردن

The act of burning *espand* (wild rue) on hot coals or fire is an ancient Aryan tradition. In Afghanistan's past, the ritual of burning espand was regarded as sacred, believed to ward off misfortunes and calamities. This tradition remains prevalent today. People burn espand in their homes during various occasions such as the arrival or departure of travelers, the entrance of a newlywed bride into her husband's home, or the birth of a child. On the first day of the year, espand is also used as one of the elements of the Haft Sin table, symbolically referred to as "the incense of love's brazier." Songs and rhymes have also been composed about this practice. One of the popular ones goes as follows:

"Espand, ward off calamities,
By the truth of Shah Naqshband.
The evil eye of the self, the sheep,
And the envious neighbor.
The eyes of both friend and foe,
Espand, break the gaze of the jealous and hostile."

*اسپند...بلا بند... به حق شاه نقشبند*
*،حشم خویش،...حشم میش... حشم همسایهء بند اندیش*
*حشم از خود و بیگانه*
*اسپند حشم حسود و دشمن را بترکانه ....*

## Venturing to the Fields and Plains (Trampling the Grass) صحرا گشت

With the arrival of the new year and the celebration of Nawrouz, the tradition of venturing to the fields, known as Sahra Gash (excursion to the plains), has long been a cherished custom among the Aryans, and is still widely observed in Afghanistan today. This ancient ritual involves people from both villages and cities adorning themselves in vibrant, elegant spring attire and taking to the hills and plains. They stroll upon the tender, newly-sprouted grass, basking in the fresh

beauty of nature, which heralds the arrival of a new spring.

After Islam became the predominant faith of the Afghan people, the tradition of Nawrouz evolved. Alongside the customary Sahra Gash and festive gatherings, many now visit cemeteries to offer prayers and charity in memory of their departed loved ones and elders. Additionally, Afghans often pay homage to their revered religious, literary, and mystical figures by visiting their shrines, which are seen as sacred spaces. It is important to note that these visits are not acts of worship, but rather expressions of respect and remembrance, accompanied by prayers and occasional acts of charity.

In ancient Kabul, popular gathering spots for thousands of city residents included the slopes of Ashaqan wa Arefan (the Lovers and Mystics), Shah-e-Do Shamshira, Shah Shaheed, Shuhada-e-Salehin, and Mazar-e-Sakhi. The latter, initially a temporary resting place for the Prophet's relic – a strand of his blessed hair – brought to Afghanistan as a gift from the rulers of Samarkand and Bukhara, later became a site of great reverence. After some time in Kabul, the relic was transferred to Kandahar by Ahmad Shah Durrani, but the site retains its fame as Mazar-e-Sakhi.

Other celebrated spots for excursions include the slopes of Koh-e-Khairkhana, Maranjan Hill, Qargha, Rishkhor Hills, the shrine and hill of Shaheed Mohammad Daoud Khan, Koh-e-Chelsitoon, and the hills of Badam Bagh.

This tradition of walking on hills and plains is not confined to Kabul but is also practiced across the provinces of Afghanistan. Areas such as Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Laghman, Logar, Maidan Wardak, Parwan, and Kohistan all partake in this age-old custom, where families and communities come together to celebrate the vitality of spring amidst the natural beauty of their surroundings.

## The Red Flower Festival in Afghanistan (Jahenda Bala) جهنده بالا

In Balkh, one of the most ancient cities of Ariana, Nawrouz is celebrated with the vibrant Red Flower Festival (Jashn-e-Gul-e-Surkh). This festival honors nature and marks the beginning of the agricultural season with music, traditional dances, and cultural performances. People gather in gardens blooming with red flowers to celebrate and prepare for the planting season.

The Red Flower Festival in the northern provinces of Afghanistan has a history spanning over 5,000 years. With the arrival of the new year and the coming of spring, the first day of the year – Nawrouz – is celebrated. During this time, the foothills, plains, and valleys are blanketed with lush greenery and vibrant red tulips. People participate in traditional outings and festive gatherings, embracing ancient customs.

One significant aspect of this celebration is visiting the shrine of Shah Wali Mataab (Imam Ali), where worshippers pray to God for blessings. This day reflects harmony between humanity and nature, as people step out into the fresh spring air to enjoy the beauty of their surroundings. The tradition of celebrating the arrival of spring with nature outings and communal festivities is widespread across all provinces of Afghanistan, uniting communities in joy and gratitude for the new season.

## Flag Hoisting Ceremony (Jahenda Bala) in Mazar-e-Sharif جهنده بالا

In Mazar-e-Sharif, a special and official state ceremony is held at the shrine of Hazrat Ali (AS). This event, known as Jahenda Bala, involves the raising of a special flag to mark the beginning of Nawrouz. People from all over the country gather to participate in this significant occasion, and the city is filled with widespread joy and celebration.

The ceremony in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, especially in the ancient province of Balkh, lasts for up to a week. The markets are adorned with offerings of food and sweets, and the streets are beautifully decorated, while music fills the air. The entire city of Mazar-e-Sharif, as well as the surrounding areas of Balkh, embrace the festive spirit, celebrating the arrival of spring and honoring this important cultural and religious occasion.

## Cutting Hair (Kakol Giri) کاکل گیری

The practice of cutting the hair of children, known as Kakol Giri, was once a prominent Nawrouz tradition. Today, it is primarily observed within Afghan households and families. In the past, this ritual was believed to protect children from misfortune and harm, as a gesture of invoking divine protection.

In contemporary times, when a child is born, the cutting of their hair is celebrated similarly to a circumcision party (Khatna Suri). The ceremony often involves trimming both the hair and nails of the child simultaneously. However, it is important to note that this practice does not hold any religious or spiritual significance; it remains a cultural tradition in certain regions of Afghanistan.

## Chaharshanbe Suri حهارشنبه‌سوری

The tradition of Chaharshanbe Suri (celebrating the last Wednesday of the year) originates from the Zoroastrians and is still practiced by this group as a religious ritual. However, this tradition does not exist in Afghanistan today, as followers of Zoroastrianism are no longer present in the country. In Afghanistan, the celebration of Chaharshanbe Suri is considered heresy by some, as it is not aligned with Islamic customs.

## Egg Fighting (Tokhm Jangi) تخم‌جنگی

Egg fighting, or Tokhm Jangi, is a popular game in Afghanistan, enjoyed by people in both cities and villages as a common form of entertainment. This tradition has ancient roots in Aryana (the ancient land of Iran), dating back to times long past. On Nawrouz, it is customary for people to dye eggs and engage in egg fighting as a celebratory activity. The game brings joy, and the day is marked with festive cheer.

Additionally, eating eggs on the first day of Nawrouz is considered a blessed act, and many people take this opportunity to offer gratitude and express thanks for the new year.

## Custom of Fiancées (Shal Andazi) شال اندازی

Shal Andazi is a traditional practice among Afghan girls, where large, colorful, and sometimes golden scarves are thrown during celebrations. This custom is still practiced, especially by those with good intentions for their future or those making vows to achieve their wishes. On this day, girls gather in a circle, playing the *daf* (a type of drum) and singing songs. They then throw the scarf into the circle, and with joy, they sing in celebration, considering the act a positive omen for the future.This tradition is most commonly observed in the rural areas of Afghanistan, where it remains a cherished part of the culture.

## Braised Wheat Sprinkling حراغ گندم بریان پاشیدن

The custom of sprinkling wheat into a lamp (also known as Erikin ارکین) is still practiced by women on the eve of Nawrouz. In this ritual, each

young person, and sometimes even older women, holds a silent intention in their hearts without expressing it to anyone. They then sprinkle a handful of wheat onto the flame of a lamp while silently wishing for their desires. This tradition, however, has largely faded in Afghanistan and is no longer commonly practiced. Yet, it continues in countries such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kurdistan, and the northern parts of Iraq and Iran.

In Afghanistan, instead of sprinkling wheat, women prepare braised wheat (known as Gandom Beryan) and dates (referred to as Roghan Joshi). These are then wrapped in a silk handkerchief and gifted to those who have recently become engaged. The practice of Gandom Beryan dates back to the ancient Aryans, and it is said that when King Yama first taught the people how to cultivate wheat, they began braising it as part of the tradition. This custom remains particularly prevalent among the mountain communities of Logar and Maidan Wardak.

## Applying Kohl (Surma) سرمه کردن

The tradition of applying kohl (Surma) to family members on the night of Nawrouz is considered a sacred practice in Afghanistan. Both men and women regard this act as a virtuous and pleasing custom. On Nawrouz, mothers often view applying kohl as a symbol of dignity and refinement, making it a cherished ritual.

On this day, everyone enjoys the practice of applying kohl, which enhances their beauty and is a source of delight. This tradition remains deeply rooted and widely observed throughout Afghanistan to this day.

## Unlocking Fortunes (Bakht Goshayi) بخت‌گشایی

The tradition of Bakht Goshayi (unlocking fortunes) is an ancient cultural custom practiced among women in Afghanistan. While this practice is considered superstitious, many women are drawn to it, seeing it as a way to address the challenges they face in life. Through rituals aimed at “opening their destiny,” they hope to change their fortunes.

Women often perform Bakht Goshayi by tying colorful pieces of cloth to sacred trees or structures at shrines, covering themselves with the Holy Quran, making vows, or undergoing periods of fasting and reflection. Unfortunately, this practice has also fueled the rise of exploitative individuals, such as amulet-makers and those who claim to remove curses or cast spells. They prey on people’s beliefs, offering dubious solutions to life’s challenges.

This custom persists among some people in Afghanistan, primarily due to a lack of education and the continuation of superstitious beliefs. However, from the perspective of Islam, such practices are deemed impermissible and are not encouraged.

## Fortune-telling (Fal Giri) فال دیدن یا فالگیری نمودن

Fortune-telling or Fal Giri involves individuals, often referred to as “fortune-tellers,” predicting a person’s future and offering solutions to their problems. The roots of fortune-telling can be traced back to ancient times in the East, where astrologers would interpret celestial movements to predict someone’s fate. In reality, the future is an unknown matter that lies solely with Allah Almighty. No other power has the ability to foresee what is destined for individuals. Despite this, fortune-telling has been a longstanding tradition in Afghanistan, and many

women remain fascinated by it. If fortune-telling is pursued merely as a form of entertainment, it might be seen as a harmless cultural pastime. However, when it begins to influence lives, creating divisions and conflicts, it becomes a harmful practice. During Nawrouz, many fortune-tellers use vague and ambiguous language, combined with methods such as reading palms, casting pebbles (Raml), and other means, to attract clients and profit from their predictions. From an Islamic perspective, fortune-telling is strictly prohibited, as the knowledge of the unseen is solely reserved for Allah.

## Cooking the Soup of Wishes and Girls' Spoon Tapping آش مراد پختن

On the day of Nawrouz, it is common for women to prepare the Soup of Wishes (Ash-e-Morad). Those who have unfulfilled desires or face challenges in their lives believe that by cooking this soup on Nawrouz, they can make their wishes materialize. During the preparation, intentions are made as young girls gather in a circle around a pot. Each girl silently makes her wish and stirs a large spoon in the pot. Once the soup is fully cooked, everyone enjoys a bowl, believing it to align with their desires.

This cultural tradition is now mostly practiced in a few villages in northern Afghanistan, while in other areas, it has largely disappeared and is no longer observed.

## Tying Knots in Grass by Girls سبزه گره زدن

During Nawrouz, when the fields and valleys are adorned with fresh greenery and vibrant nature, Aryan girls traditionally tied knots in young grass to determine their fate and fortunes, considering this act a good omen. In these times, groups of girls gather in the meadows and, with specific intentions in their hearts, tie knots in the grass. This practice is now rare and mostly observed in northern Afghanistan. However, with the spread of Islam, this tradition has largely fallen out of favor and is no longer widely practiced due to its conflict with Islamic beliefs

## Eidi for Children and Girls هدیه یی عیدی به اطفال و دختران

The custom of giving Eidi (gifts or money) to children during Nawrouz remains popular in Afghanistan. Elders often present children with Eidi as a token of joy and celebration. Girls, in particular, receive a significant share of gifts within families. This tradition brings immense happiness to children, who spend the day playing various games and enjoying the festivities.

## Throwing Grass into Water سبزه را به آب انداختن

As people gather in the meadows and fields to celebrate Nawrouz, they pick fresh grass, tie knots with personal intentions, and eventually throw them into flowing water. This act is a symbolic gesture associated with hopes and wishes and is an integral part of Afghanistan's traditional culture. Although rooted in ancient customs, this practice continues to be observed across the country, preserving its cultural significance.

## Haft Sin and Haft Mewa هفت میوه و هفت سین

In Afghanistan, particularly in regions like Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Balkh, Parwan, Logar, and

Wardak, the tradition of preparing Haft Mewa (a mix of seven dried and fresh fruits) holds a special significance. This sweet drink, made from fruit juice and dried fruits, symbolizes unity and blessings.

Haft Sin, an ancient Aryan tradition, involves arranging seven symbolic items whose names start with the Persian letter "s" on a table: apple (*sib*), oleaster (*senjed*), garlic (*sir*), vinegar (*serkeh*), mushroom (*samaraq*), *samanu* (a wheat-based pudding), and fresh sprouts (*sabzeh*). These items represent spring and abundance, laid out as a gesture of gratitude to God. While Haft Sin is less common in Afghanistan today, it remains a prominent tradition in modern-day Iran. The tradition of the Haft Sin table likely persisted after the spread of Islam across Afghanistan and neighboring regions and is still celebrated in some areas. In parts of Afghanistan, especially Kabul and the southern provinces, instead of the Haft Sin table, families prepare rice with herbs and white chicken on Nawrouz as a symbol of prosperity and joy for the year ahead.

## Preparation of Sweets and Sherbets

On Nawrouz, many Afghan families prepare an array of sweets and beverages, a tradition deeply rooted in history. These treats are not only enjoyed at home but also exchanged as gifts to symbolize love and goodwill. This custom of sharing sweets and sherbets continues to thrive in markets and homes, marking the joy of the new year.

## Haft Mewa: A Unique Afghan tradition هفت میوه

Families also prepare Haft Mewa by soaking seven dried fruits, typically raisins, sultanas, candied almonds, dried apricots, walnuts, pistachios, and oleaster (*senjed*). This delightful dish is served alongside basil sherbet as part of Nawrouz festivities.

## Traditional Games and Sports in Afghanistan

The land of Afghanistan has a rich historical and cultural history, and is the place of origin and expansion of several traditional games and sports. These sports were a part of the cultural and collective identity of the people of this land and were often played alongside or during ceremonies and celebrations, especially Nawrouz. Traditional sports such as wrestling, javelin, and *buzkashi* have played an important role in creating collective identity, strengthening community ties, and promoting cultural cooperation and healthy competition among the people of Ariana. These sports were not only a means of entertainment, but also a means of preparing men for war and the defense of their country. Below, we introduce these and other prominent traditional sports and games of Afghanistan.

### Wrestling کشتی‌گیری

Wrestling is one of the oldest and most common sports of ancient Ariana. This sport symbolizes physical strength, skill, and bravery. In the past, wrestling was considered not only a hobby, but a way to prepare men for fighting and protecting the tribe. Wrestling was usually held in open fields or on mountain slopes. Competitions were often organized on the occasion of celebrations and ceremonies such as Nawrouz. Wrestlers would wear local clothes and compete. Victory in wrestling would give the individual a special status and gain him respect among people and society. This sport continues to this day in many parts of Afghanistan, especially in villages.

### Javelin (Spear or Jagari) نیزه‌سواری

Spear-mining is another traditional sport of Afghanistan, which was performed with the aim of showing skill in using a spear and preparing for battle. This sport demonstrated the art of warfare and the military abilities of Mardan Ariana. In this game, competitors would ride at speed on thunderous horses, aiming with long spears at specific targets such as wooden rings or moving objects, and attempting to pick them up. Sometimes the competition was held in the form of a duel between two people. Javelin was not only a sport, but also a part of military training for young men. This art emphasized bravery, precision, and coordination between rider and horse.

### Buzkashi بزکشی

Buzkashi is one of the national, symbolic and unique sports of Afghanistan, with its roots in the nomadic culture and life of the people of Afghanistan. This game symbolizes strength, harmony, and group competition. In Buzkashi, skilled horsemen, or "whippers," vie for the carcass of a goat or calf from the middle of the field, and attempt to carry it to a certain point, such as a circle on the ground, or another designated place. Other players seek to prevent the individual from reaching the goal. Buzkashi is often held at events such as weddings, social gatherings, and Nawrouz celebrations. This sport is a symbol of cooperation, competition, and collective bonds. The sport requires physical strength, skill in riding, and coordination between the rider and the horse. The horses used for Buzkashi are of special breeds and have special training. In Afghanistan, in addition to competitions, Nawrouz is held every year in the northern provinces of Afghanistan and every Friday (holiday) in northern villages.

### Top Danda (Stick and Ball Game) توپ‌دنده

This unique Afghan game is played with a stick and a ball between two teams, where players compete to score points. Although it bears some similarities to cricket, it has distinct rules and gameplay. Young boys show great enthusiasm for this sport. However, in recent years, top danda has gradually been replaced by cricket in many parts of the country.

### Spear Throwing and Horse Riding نیزه اندازی با اسپ سواری

This sport is especially popular in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, where participants compete individually to score points by demonstrating their precision and agility in spear-throwing while riding horses. It is a traditional activity that appeals primarily to young men.

### Ghursai and Rope Pulling غرسی

Ghursai is a physically demanding game played by boys in two teams. The players hop on one foot while trying to outmaneuver their opponents. Unlike team-focused sports, this game emphasizes the strength and skill of individual players. It is popular across Afghan villages and is commonly played during Nawrouz celebrations. Rope pulling, another traditional sport, tests collective strength and coordination between teams.

### Attan Milli (National Dance) اتن‌ملی

Attan Milli is both a dance and a traditional performance deeply rooted in Afghan culture. It

is widespread across Afghanistan and involves participation from men and women alike. Originally popularized by Afghanistan's nomadic communities, this energetic dance continues to be passed down through generations. During Attan Milli, participants express their joy by forming circles and dancing to the rhythmic beats of the *dohol* (drum) and *sorna* (flute). This cultural practice is most often performed during joyous occasions such as weddings, religious festivals, and, of course, Nawrouz. These activities not only bring joy and festivity but also strengthen communal bonds and reflect the rich cultural heritage of Afghanistan.

## Traditional Games Played by Girls in Afghanistan

Afghan girls, particularly young ones, enjoy a variety of traditional games that reflect creativity, agility, and social interaction. Below are some of the most popular games among Afghan girls.

### Blindfolded Hide-and-Seek (Chashm Patkan) چشم‌پتکان

This game is exclusive to girls and involves all participants blindfolding themselves while one of them hides. The others then search for the hidden player to catch her. Once caught, the game restarts, keeping the players engaged in a fun and dynamic cycle.

### Hopscotch (Jozbazi) جزبازی

Jozbazi is a classic game for girls, played by drawing rectangular grids side by side on the ground. The player hops on one foot across the grids while pushing a stone from one square to the next. The goal is to complete the sequence without making a mistake, and the first to finish is declared the winner.

### Five-Stone Game (Panjak Bazi) پنجاق‌بازی

This is a well-loved pastime where each girl uses five small stones. Tossing them into the air, players catch the stones with one hand in a specific sequence. The game progresses through increasingly challenging levels, starting with one stone and advancing up to five. The player with the best coordination and dexterity wins.

### Swinging (Gaz Khordan)

A large rope is tied to the branch of a tree, creating a swing. Girls sit on the swing and perform gentle bending movements as they go up and down. This game is both enjoyable and exhilarating, providing a simple but cherished form of entertainment.

### Rope Jumping (Resman Bazi)

In this rhythmic game, girls use a rope held at both ends, either jumping over it as it swings under their feet or passing it below and above their bodies in coordinated movements. This game is a mix of fun and rhythmic exercise.

These traditional games not only bring joy and excitement but also serve as a medium for fostering social bonds, physical fitness, and cultural identity among Afghan girls. They remain an integral part of the cultural fabric, particularly in rural areas, and are often played during festive occasions like Nawrouz.

## Reflection on Nawrouz Games and Activities in Afghanistan

Nawrouz games in Afghanistan, for both girls and boys, symbolize the country's rich and diverse culture. These games go beyond mere entertainment, carrying messages of joy, solidarity, and social connection. Each activity is deeply rooted in Afghanistan's history and traditions, reflecting values such as collaboration, skill, and respect for nature and collective culture.

Passed down through generations, these games serve as an opportunity to keep national and local traditions alive, especially during Nawrouz. Activities such as the Attan Milli and cooking Samanak, which have a communal essence, foster a sense of unity and participation, bringing communities together in a friendly and joyous atmosphere.

Games like Panjak Bazi (Five-Stone Game) and Javelin, as described above, develop focus, coordination, and agility, contributing to both physical and mental growth. The inclusion of games specific to girls and boys demonstrates that every age and gender group has a role in these traditions, helping to promote fairness and mutual respect.

With the advent of modern lifestyles and technology, some of these traditional games risk fading into obscurity. It is essential for cultural and educational institutions to create programs that preserve and promote these traditions. If managed and introduced appropriately, these games can serve as an attraction for domestic and international tourists during Nawrouz and other cultural events. Afghanistan's Nawrouz games, with all their charm, provide an opportunity to understand and strengthen national and human values. They illustrate how joy and social connection can be simple yet profound. Preserving this cultural heritage while adapting it to the modern world can enrich Afghanistan's cultural and national identity, creating a bridge between tradition and contemporary society.

A number of other activities have also been historically associated with Nawrouz, including animal fights such as between dogs, roosters, and quails. However, these activities are now banned by the government due to their cruelty. Kite flying, on the other hand, remains a beloved tradition. Below, we discuss this and a number of other Nawrouz traditions.

## Kite flying (Gudi Paran)
## گدی پران بازی در ایام نوروز

Kite flying, locally known as Gudi Paran, is one of the most cherished traditional games in Afghanistan, especially popular during Nawrouz celebrations. Representing joy and freedom, this pastime has been passed down through generations, forming an integral part of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. Kites are typically crafted from lightweight and colorful paper, supported by wooden or bamboo frames. The string used to control the kites is made from durable thread, often coated with crushed glass to add a competitive edge. This game is played in open spaces such as plains, hills, and rooftops, and sometimes even involves friendly wagers.

The springtime winds of Nawrouz provide the perfect conditions for kites to soar high into the sky. Participants launch their kites and skillfully maneuver them using the string. In competitive matches, the goal is to cut the string of the opponent's kite, causing it to fall to the ground. With their vibrant colors and cheerful designs, kites symbolize new beginnings, happiness, and the vitality of spring. Kite flying is often a communal activity, drawing people together during the Nawrouz holidays to watch and participate in competitions. This shared experience fosters stronger social bonds and a sense of community. Competitions and games encourage a spirit of friendly rivalry among participants. The winner is the one who skillfully maneuvers their kite to outplay and cut the strings of others. Kites are

designed with bright, joyous colors and often feature intricate patterns or Nawrouz greetings, adding a festive touch to the skies. In some regions of Afghanistan, Nawrouz kite-flying competitions are organized, and winners are awarded prizes. Kite flying remains a significant part of Afghanistan's cultural identity, celebrated not just during Nawrouz but throughout the year. This simple yet exhilarating activity continues to bring joy and hope to children, teenagers, and even adults, preserving its place as a timeless tradition in Afghan society.

## *Khoncha* of Fish and *Jalebi* خنحه (ماهی و حلبی)

Cooking fish and preparing *jalebi* (a traditional Afghan sweet) are unique customs in Afghanistan, particularly observed among families with engaged couples. The groom is traditionally responsible for arranging a *khoncha* – a decorative basket of foods and gifts – which is sent to the bride's home on Nawrouz. The khoncha typically includes a variety of sweets, fruits, fried fish, and jalebi. This basket is meant to be shared among the bride's family and symbolizes respect, appreciation, gratitude and goodwill for the bride's household before the marriage. It is also an expression of joy and celebration for Nawrouz. In recent times, this tradition has taken on a more competitive nature, with families including expensive gifts alongside the traditional foods. This has, in some cases, placed financial strain on grooms, leading to disagreements and social pressures. Despite these challenges, the custom of presenting fish and jalebi remains an enduring tradition, reflecting the rich cultural heritage and festive spirit of Afghan society.

## Samanak: A Timeless Afghan tradition

Cooking Samanak is one of Afghanistan's ancient and cherished traditions, closely associated with the arrival of Nawrouz, the celebration of nature's renewal. Deeply rooted in Aryan culture, this practice symbolizes fertility, abundance, and prosperity. Samanak, a delicacy made from sprouted wheat, is naturally sweet without any added sugar, making it a unique and symbolic treat of the season. Cooking Samanak is a longstanding tradition that dates back to the Aryan era, where fresh spring sprouts were boiled and stirred into a nourishing dish, often with its makers chanting the following melody:

"Samanak is boiling, we stir with joy,
While others sleep, we sing and enjoy!"

This ritual, passed down from ancient times, continues to be practiced in regions such as Kabul, Kohistan, and Herat, where communities gather to honor the blessed occasion of Nawrouz. Samanak originated as a spiritual and cultural practice in the Greater Khorasan region, which included what is present-day Afghanistan. It was not only a means of expressing gratitude for nature's blessings but also a way to strengthen social ties within the community. In the past, the ceremony carried both symbolic and social significance, fostering unity among participants.

Cooking Samanak is a collective effort, often led by women in families or neighborhoods. The process begins two weeks before Nawrouz when wheat grains are washed, soaked, and left to sprout. The sprouted wheat is then ground to extract its liquid, which serves as the base of Samanak.The liquid is poured into large pots, combined with flour, and sometimes nuts like almonds, and cooked over a gentle fire for several hours. Constant stirring (known as *chamcha zadan*) ensures the mixture achieves the perfect consistency.

During the overnight preparation, women gather around the pot, singing traditional songs and sharing laughter, creating an atmosphere of joy and solidarity. The famous chant, "Samanak is boiling, we stir with joy," is an integral part of the ceremony. Once ready, Samanak is distributed as a blessing among families, friends, and neighbors.

Samanak, with its natural sweetness, represents purity and the gifts of nature. The sprouted wheat signifies renewal and abundance, embodying the essence of spring and hope for the year ahead. Samanak remains an integral part of Nawrouz celebrations in cities like Kabul, Balkh, Herat, and Kandahar. In rural areas, the tradition is observed with even greater enthusiasm, reflecting the strong communal bonds of the past. While modern lifestyles have influenced the practice, many Afghan families continue to value its cultural and spiritual importance, ensuring that this tradition is preserved. Samanak is more than a simple dish; it is a bridge connecting humanity to nature and divine blessings. Rooted in Aryan heritage, it endures as a vibrant symbol of Afghanistan's cultural identity and a key element of Nawrouz festivities.

## Sociocultural Interpretations of Nawrouz

Nawrouz holds significant sociocultural importance in modern society at both micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it influences behavior and aspirations in social life, while at the macro level, it provides symbolic integration through distinguishing between good and bad. As a symbol of cultural diversity, Nawrouz connects people's perceptions, reflects their thoughts, expresses their interests and styles, and showcases their cultural life. It represents both tradition and change, facilitating the integration of traditions and customs between countries. In Afghanistan, Nawrouz is primarily viewed within the context of Islamic traditions, while acknowledging its historical connection to fire symbolism. However it is important to know that in Afghanistan, fire is considered a tradition rather than a cult or ritual practice, and fire worship is uncommon. Nawrouz still has a special place in modern Afghan society and, as a national and cultural celebration, reflects numerous concepts at the micro and macro levels. Despite modern changes and developments, this celebration has been able to serve as a symbol of cultural diversity, social solidarity, and the link between tradition and modernity.

Nawrouz has important effects on the behavior and aspirations of the Afghan people. Welcoming spring through Nawrouz is accompanied by housewarming, reconciliation with others, and the restoration of family and friendship relations. These behaviors reflect moral values such as peace, respect, and solidarity.

The common wishes of people on this occasion are wishing each other health, abundance, and happiness, which reflect the culture of hope and the importance of social bonds.

Nawrouz in Afghanistan has cultural and social symbols that help integrate and strengthen national identity, such as the symbol of distinguishing good from evil. Nawrouz as a time for new beginnings is an opportunity to cease negative behaviors and embrace moral, human values.

As a national celebration, Nawrouz integrates the diversity of Afghanistan's different ethnicities, languages, and cultures into a single ceremony, representing national solidarity. As a cross-cultural symbol, Nawrouz creates a connection between different perceptions and cultures, showcasing the thoughts, interests, and lifestyles of diverse peoples. This celebration crosses ethnic and linguistic boundaries and is a symbol of unity in diversity. Through various artistic dimensions such as music, poetry, hospitality, and preparing diverse foods, Nawrouz ceremonies represent the cultural identity and social interests of the people who celebrate it.

Nawrouz has embraced modernity in combining and merging customs and traditions, as evident in the influence of modern celebration styles in cities. Intercultural exchange and experiences of war in the last four decades have also caused Nawrouz in Afghanistan to be influenced by the rituals and customs of other regions, even while people try to preserve their unique identity and original ancient customs.

After the spread of Islam, Nawrouz in Afghanistan has also been harmonized with religious values such as charity, forgiveness, and respect for others. Although the roots of this celebration predate Islam, it has found its place within the framework of Islamic culture. I believe that Nawrouz is a natural gift from God. Throughout history, various religions, especially Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and now Islam, have been able to influence and incorporate Nawrouz, creating distinctive changes and rituals within celebrations. The symbol of fire in Nawrouz in Afghanistan is seen as a symbolic and cultural element and less a sign of fire worship. Lighting a fire is more a symbol of warmth, light, and new beginning than a religious ritual. Nawrouz, as one of the oldest celebrations in this land, has always been a bridge between the past and the future and has been able to maintain its lasting and dynamic values in modern society.

# NOVRUZ IN AZERBAIJAN

Ilhama MAMMADOVA

Novruz is an important public holiday in the Republic of Azerbaijan, celebrated on March 20th or 21st. Novruz, which has been celebrated in spring since ancient times, is considered in popular belief, to be the day on which the earth and sky were created. When Azerbaijanis hear or say the word "holiday," they primarily think of Novruz. Indeed, the terms "holiday" and "Novruz" are almost synonymous. This holiday reflects thoughts about nature and life, philosophical views, as well as the spiritual world and the ethnopsychology of the people.

In the past, since the main activities of society were agriculture and animal husbandry, people were eager for the cold winter, which they felt interfered with agriculture, to end, and for spring and the hot sun to return. When the first spring flowers appeared, everyone rejoiced, joyfully recited poems, and sang songs. In accordance with the astronomical beliefs of farmers, Novruz has undergone changes over the millennia and has been influenced by various religions. A number of studies indicate that despite the fact that the rules and traditions associated with the celebration of Novruz differ among the people's celebration customs, the content of the holiday is the same.

## The History of Novruz

Novruz has an ancient history in Azerbaijan. Information about it can be found in written sources of different periods. The Avesta should be emphasized as the primary source. Zoroastrians celebrated the spring holiday as the victory of Ahuramazda over Ahriman, or in other words, light over darkness.

Under Arab influence and the spread of Islam, which led to the disappearance of a number of local customs, the holiday of Novruz acquired new shades. The 10th century author Abu Rayhan Biruni, in his poem *Asar al-Baqiya* (Remains of the Past) stated that the calendar reform carried out in the Arab Caliphate to regulate tax collection. Initially, these reforms took Novruz into account, but later this approach was abandoned under the

claim that it was "reviving Zoroastrianism."[1] The same source references legends regarding the origin of Novruz. One such legend says that the Iranian King Jamshid was traveling through his country and, trying to go to Azerbaijan, sat on a golden throne that people carried on their shoulders. As people saw how it shone in the sun, they respectfully bowed to it and declared this day the holiday of Novruz.[2]

Written sources reflect the celebration of Novruz at the state level throughout history. The 11th century author and Seljuk statesman Nizam al-Mulk wrote in his *Siyasatnameh* that the rulers of Ajam had a custom that on the days of Mehrigan and Novruz, the shah would hold a reception for the people and would not arrest anyone.[3]

The 11th century Iranian poet Fakhraddin Gorgani tells of Novruz in his "Vis and Ramin" and emphasizes that famous people from Azerbaijan, and from a number of other countries, were invited to the ruler's feast on this holiday.[4]

همیشه روزگارش بود نوروز
به هر کاری همیشه بود پیروز[5]

"All of his days were like Novruz
And in all his attempts he was victorious."

The world-famous Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209) describes Novruz in his poem "Iskandernameh":[6]

به نوروز جمشید و جشن شده
که نو گشتی آیین آتشکده

"On Jamshid's Novruz and Sada's holiday,
The ceremony was renewed in fire-temple."

Historical sources recorded the solemn celebration of Novruz in the palace throughout the Middle Ages. Additional information about spring and Novruz customs in the Safavid state is provided by the 16th century author Iskander-bek Munshi. The author indicates that, in addition to the palace, the Novruz holiday was celebrated by the army during military campaigns: "The noble army stopped near the tomb of Sheikh Nizami (Ganja City - I.M.) and celebrated Novruz right there, and the festivities lasted for several days."[7]

European travelers J. Chardin, A. Olearius, F. Kotov and others traveled around the Safavid state and also told about the customs and traditions of Novruz. They described many rituals and traditions performed on this day marking the changing of the year – such as wearing new clothes, egg beating, and giving gifts, among others – which are still alive today.

In Azerbaijan, during the time of the khanates (from the second half of the 18th century to the early 19th century), Novruz was officially celebrated. A source about the Karabakh Khanate reported: "Every year on the day of Novruz, the late khan presented gifts, horses and swords to outstanding commanders and captains of his army. The provinces, districts and meliks of Azerbaijan

1 Abu Reyhan al–Biruni (2011). Remains of the Past (El–asar al–Bakiye). Translated from Arabic to Turkish by D.Ahsen Batur. Istanbul: Selenge Publications, page.72–73

2 İbidem, page.202

3 Nizam al–Mulk. Siyasat–Nameh (1987). (Translation from Persian to Azerbaijani, notes on the work and author by Rahim Sultanov). Baku, Elm, page.56–67

4 Ibidem

5 فخرالدین اسعد گرگانی. ویس و رامین. با دو گفتار از صادق هدایت و مینورسکی با مقدمه و تصحیح و تحشیه دکتر محمد، چاپ چهارم، تهران، صدای معاصر، ۱۳۸۹ ، ص. ۴۲

6 نظامی گنجه ای. شرفنامه. تصحیح: بهروز ثروتیان، چاپ دوم، تهران، موسسه انتشارات امیر کبیر، ۱۳۹۳ ،ص.۸۲۳

7 Isgandar bey Munshi Turkman (2014). The History of Abbas, Who Dorned the World (Tarixe–alemaraye–Abbasi). (Translated from Persian to Azerbaijani by Shahin Farzaliyev). Baku, East–West,page. 1288

brought gifts to the khan according to their rank."[8]

Turning to these sources, it becomes clear that the current traditions and ceremonies of Novruz in Azerbaijan were shaped many centuries ago. Although some of them have been forgotten or have seen innovations added to them in different periods of history, the main content of this holiday has been preserved. During the Soviet period, Novruz was considered a religious holiday and was banned as a result of the state's atheistic propaganda. Despite political pressure, people celebrated it at home in the traditional way.

## Social and Cultural Impacts of Novruz Holiday

The Novruz holiday, which is valued in common by the peoples of the East, has an ancient history. Novruz, recognized as a national holiday by dozen of nations, transcends borders and unites communities. It achieves peace and solidarity between families and generations, encourages people to reconcile with one another, and to build better neighborhoods. The reconciliation of enemies during the holiday, the mutual assistance of families, and the many other rituals and events held on these days strengthen social ties and direct society towards national unity.

Novruz has a significant role in creating solidarity in society and passing this into memory. This holiday is an essential tool in forming unity, and strengthening sincere relations and friendship between people. In the modern world, amidst conflicts, wars, problems associated with migration, and even deepening racism in some countries, there is a great need for preserving holidays, and principally, carnival-type holidays and performances.

In Azerbaijan, no other holiday can be compared with Novruz by means of its socio-economic and moral impact. This holiday, which lasts for several days, unites traditions. It revives moral unity, ethnopedagogy, folk meteorology, music, folk theater, beliefs and convictions, games and entertainment, cuisine and feast culture, and more. In connection with the folk calendar, Novruz correspond with the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. The traditions of Novruz, in addition to being a calendar ceremony of the population living in Azerbaijan, also regulates people's activities in the socio-economic sphere. Any initative (for example, going on a trip, getting engaged, having a wedding, doing charity work, building or buying a new house, giving up negative habits, etc.) is planned in relation to Novruz, e.g. "after Novruz," "before Novruz," or "during Novruz."

On the eve of the holiday, forms of mutual assistance are activated, with families providing each other with material and physical assistance. Clothes, food, and money are donated to poor families, orphaned children, and lone elders. On the eve of the Novruz holiday in Karabakh, a "wedding of mercy"[9] was organized for children from poor families or young people who had lost their parents, and according to the sayings of elders, relatives and neighbors wove carpets for them, and gave gifts to the newly married couple.

Since the Novruz holiday is deeply rooted in the moral culture of the people, boys born on these days are often given the names Novruz, Novruzali, or Bayram, while girls may be named Bahar or Yazgul, among other options.

8 Mirza Jamal Javanshir Karabakhi (1989). History of Karabakh. Karabakhnames, Volume I, page.144

9 Karabakh: Material, Moral and Cultural Heritage (historical–ethnological research). (2023). (Scientific editor I.G. Mammadova), Baku, page.264

## Stages of the Novruz Holiday

People's activities during the Novruz holiday are organized into two stages:

1) Water, Fire, Wind, Earth: This includes celebration of these elements, especailly on Tuesdsays, and preparation for the holiday (refreshing things, washing and cleaning, etc.), and associated customs and beliefs;

2) Year transition celebrations: These encompass events, customs and traditions held on the last day of the year and the first days of the new year after the holiday.

The Novruz holiday is associated with the astronomical beliefs of the people. According to folk meteorology in Azerbaijan, the winter season is divided into 3 parts: the "big chilleh" (40 days, December 21st/22nd – January 30th), the "small chilleh" (20 days, January 31st – February 20th/21st), and "ala chill" or "ala-chalpo" (February 21st/22nd – March 21st). Historically, a celebration called "The Sada" was observed in the transitional phase between the first two periods, occurring 50 days before Novruz.[10] The third stage of the winter season, is accompanied by preparations for Novruz.

Preparations for the holiday begin about a month in advance and continue with the celebration of Tuesdays of each week. At this time, each family prepares for Novruz and plans various events. Since renewal and purification are the philosophy of Novruz, everyone strives for innovation on this holiday. Wearing new clothes, buying new things for the home, weaving new carpets in rural areas and using them during holidays, etc., had special significance. Along with women, men also participate in household chores called "Holiday cleaning." Houses, entrances, yards and chimneys are cleaned, fences are whitewashed, blankets, mattresses and carpets are washed. Before the holiday, those who have passed away are also remembered by those visiting their graves. Those who have passed away less than a year after their death are visited on a "black holiday," and condolences are expressed to their families.

According to older generations, in the past, on the eve of the holiday, with the help of the village elders, public facilities (roads, irrigation systems, markets, etc.) were also put in order. Before Novruz, there was a revival in the markets and craft workshops. In large cities (Baku, Ganja, Shusha, Guba, Sheki, etc.), confectioners lined up to take orders for *baklava, bukma, nogul, nabat* and other types of sweets. Tailors, hatters and shoemakers had a lot of work sewing new clothes and shoes. Copper vessels were also tinned before the holiday, so coppersmiths and tinsmiths also had a lot of work. Currently, in addition to bazaars and markets, special fairs are organized for the holiday, and appear on the eve of Novruz. Before the holiday, cookies, dried fruits, sweets, fireworks and other celebratory things are purchased.

Relatives and neighbors used to gather in each other's houses everyday to help prepare sweets for Novruz (*shekarbura, bakhlava, shekarchorek, shorgogal, zilvie* (Ganja), *sukhari* (Shusha), *sesame halvah* (Sheki), *tel halvah*, and more) Currently, this tradition continues in districts and villages. In Nakhchivan, two or three days before the holiday, women gather and bake a walnut cake in a tandoor.

One important element of the Novruz holiday is *samani*, which is considered a symbol of abundance, fertility and greenery. High-quality yellow wheat was harvested in early spring to sprout samani. It was believed that if the samani sprouted well, the year would be prosperous, and if not, there would be famine. Sprouting wheat and preparing samani from it left a deep mark on the moral culture of Azerbaijanis:

10 Azerbaijani Ethnography (2007). In 3 volumes, Volume III, Baku: East – West, page.16

"Samani, save me,
I will grow you every year!"

In the first days of spring, food prepared from samani, including halvah, were prepared in various cities and villages of Azerbaijan (for example, in Karabakh, Shirvan, Nakhchivan, Guba, Baku, and other places). Food from samani, a part of the daily life of agricultural peoples, and is made from wheat – and is a custom among a number of neighbouring peoples.

Cooking samani was celebrated as a special occasion. According to some sources, in Guba, wheat was sprouted in pots several weeks before the holiday. Colorful candles were bought, wheat was roasted, and new clothes were sewn for each family member.[11] Women, dressed in festive clothes, would come to the house where the samani was stored, carrying a *honcha*. The celebration that began in the morning in the house where the samani cooking process would take place, continued until the morning of the next day, when the samani was completely cooked.[12] Since cooking samani is a complicated process, it was prepared through the joint effort of relatives and neighbors. The work was started by saying "Bismillah," and then the processing of the sprouted wheat would begin. Traditionally, the wheat was pounded with a stone (now it is typically passed through a meat grinder to squeeze out the juice). Flour and water were added to the juice, and then it was cooked for hours in a large copper pot with a long-handled spoon. A little salt was added, and when it was almost ready, walnuts, hazelnuts or almonds were also added. When the samani was ready, it was poured into deep bowls and distributed to local religious figures, elders, relatives, and neighbors. The tradition of cooking samani has been preserved to this day.

Samani halvah was also prepared. The dough is kneaded from sprouted wheat, fried in oil, and spices, juice, doshab and walnut kernels are added. This exquisite halvah is considered one of the most important and unique elements of the festive Novruz table. Currently, samani halvah (also called "Isfahan halvah" or "sufan halvah") is prepared not only during Novruz, but also in winter months. While sprouting the seeds and preparing food from them servied a practical purpose of providing nourishment, the process also carried symbolic significance. By sprouting wheat on the eve of Novruz, people cultivated their desires and hopes, viewing this process as a symbol of abundance and prosperity.

## Tuesdays

In Azerbaijan, on every Tuesday for four weeks before the holiday, a festive table is laid, bonfires are lit, and fun contests and games are held. Each of these days is associated with one of the four elements – water, air, earth and fire – as documented by Ahmad Javad (1892-1937), the renowned poet of Azerbaijan, in his ethnological poems.[13] The first Tuesday is known as "Water Tuesday." People regarded water as the source of life and an symbol of purity and cleanliness. They would throw water after travellers embarking on long journeys and make water-related vows.

Water Tuesday falls in February, during the cold winter days. This day is also called "usku," "lying Tuesday" (in Baku), or "Tuesday of reward for glad news" in some regions. Although the first Tuesday is not celebrated as elaborately as others, it remains a special day, marked with bonfires.

11 Chelabizadeh A.E. (1935). "Ethnographic materials related to the Guba region". Central State Archive of Literature and Art of the Azerbaijan SSR, invertar 247, fund 164, list 1, storage unit 4, notebook 22, page 24, Guba

12 Naghiyeva Sh.Sh. (2009). Ceremonies related to the Samani in Guba city // History and its problems (theoretical, scientific, methodological journal), No. 1–2, page.381

13 Farzin Rezaejan (2019). The Spirit of Novruz: One Family, One Song, Tehran, page.110

In the past, women would visit rivers, springs and other water sources of water, where they performed various rituals including jumping over water. There they would also cut their nails, comb their hair and pray for a good future, with the words: "Let my failure and misfortune go away, let them stay here." They would then bring water back in jugs and, believing in the blessing of the water of Tuesday, sprinkled it all around their homes. People believed that fresh water possessed healing properties and protected against diseases.

The following Tuesday is celebrated as "Fire Tuesday." In different regions of Azerbaijan, it is also called, "reward for glad news," "messenger," or "kul," among other monikers. As people begin to feel the warmth of the spring air, their thoughts turn to sowing and harvesting. They consider fire sacred, viewing it as a symbol of the sun, and believe that it has healing and cleansing powers that will drive away evil forces. Fire remains significant in the beliefs of Azerbaijanis, as well as in their greetings and prayers. Oaths and expressions such as "I swear to this fire," "Let your fire burn," and "Let your fire never fade away" remain in common use.

In the villages, when it began to get dark, children and teenagers create a celebration by launching fireworks into the sky. Each family lit a bonfire in their yard, or on the roof of their house. Moreover, bonfires were lit in the squares and streets. In the central squares of Baku and other cities, as well as in other suitable places, bonfires were lit, and young people would jump over them, saying: "*Agirligim, ugurlugum*!" ("My burden, my success!"). In rural settlements, young men and teenagers would go to the mountains to burn tires, jump over bonfires and say: "*Od! Derdi-belamizi sov!*" ("Fire! Take away our troubles").

Since faith in the cleansing power of fire is strong, everyone tries to jump over the festive bonfire. After the fire, considered a symbol of the sun, goes out, its ashes are scattered in yards, fields and gardens. People believe the earth will be warmed by the heat of the fire, and quickly wake up from its winter sleep and be blessed.

On "Wind Tuesday," tables are set in houses, and bonfires are lit in every neighborhood. People believe that fruit trees that bear fruit should not be burned. In most regions, early in the morning, women dressed in colorful clothes would go to the spring – the *qanat* (*kahriz* - underground water-supply) – to retrieve water so they could sprinkle it on the corners of their homes. Everyone would try to be the first to step into the spring.

The last Tuesday before Novruz – known as "Earth Tuesday" – is celebrated lavishly in many regions of Azerbaijan, as it is the last day of the year. Also called "Last Tuesday," it symbolizes human values such as kindness, humanity and hospitality, and is celebrated not only as a holiday, but also as a holy day. In accordance with the tradition, all family members, even those who are far away, must gather in the family home, and light a candle.

Interesting practices are performed on Last Tuesday. According to tradition, people gather water from a river, well or mill trough early in the morning, and return home to sprinkle it in all the rooms. The place where the water comes out is called the "Khidir place" as, according to belief, the water of Last Tuesday was discovered by the prophet Khidir.

Young girls and brides cut their nails and combed their hair at a trough or fountain. From there they would take seven stones, along with grass, and put them in a vessel filled with water. This would be kept at home until the next holiday. The grass symbolized longevity, abundance and fertility, and the stones symbolized the strength and health of the house.

In some regions of Azerbaijan a tradition called "Loyun," "Lavin," "Seven loyun," "Seven lavin," or sometimes "Yeddisin," is practiced. The names are significant – people believe there should be seven goods on the Last Tuesday table, all with names that begin with the letter "s" in Azerbaijani:

for example, water (*su*), wheat shoots (*samani*), ears of wheat (*sunbul*), sumac (*sumag*), onion (*sogan*), garlic (*sarimsag*) and *sulag*.[14] Sometimes, these are different in different regions. In the city of Shusha, samani, milk, water, *sukhari* (candies), *sarimsag* (garlic), and *sudpilaf* (pilaf with milk) were put on the table. These were called seven blessings whose initials begin with "s."[15] In the city of Ordubad, seven kinds of food were laid out on the "Table of 7 Levin."

On Last Tuesday, a holiday *honcha* is celebrated in every house. Various types of pilaf are cooked, such as *turshi-qovurmah*, *sebzi-qovurmah*, fennel pilaf, bean pilaf, *kirkhbugumlu* pilaf, and *arishte* pilaf (noodle pilaf), along with *dolma* and other delicious dishes and sweets. The Novruz honcha typically consists of dried fruits (walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds), cookies, sweets, and more. *Shekarbura, bakhlava,* sweet pie, *shorgoghal*, oiled pie (*keta*), walnut pie and other sweet breads are also prepared especially for Novruz. *Miyanpur, sujuk* (*basdig*), *alana, nogul*, jams, drinks, dyed eggs, *iyde, innab, movuj* (dried grapes with seeds), seasonal fruits, nuts and more, are also integral parts of the holiday table. In Karabakh, Nakhchivan, and the Western region, *govurga* (fried wheat) is prepared in every house on the days of Novruz. Peas, sesame seeds, wheat, and flattened hemp are roasted separately in a pan and mixed with *nogul*. A portion of the roast is placed on the hat thrown at the door on the day of the holiday. Decorating the holiday table with abundant blessings is, on the one hand, a symbol of hospitality, and on the other hand, related to the belief that it will make the new year prosperous. On the Last Tuesday, the Novruz honcha is sent to engaged girls. Sweets, cookies and jewelry, depending on financial means, are placed in the honcha. In the Caspian coastal regions, both on the Last Tuesday and during the holiday, there must be fish on the table and in the portion served to engaged girls.

As on previous Tuesdays, on the Last Tuesday, each family makes a bonfire, jumps over it, and has fun around it. In some places, *uzerliks* (a type of firecracker) were also thrown into the fire. In general, on holidays, it has been customary to light an uzerlik and spread its smoke over the house and the cattle in the barn. Mostly in rural areas, animals, especially sheep, would be jumped over the fire, and small lambs would be held by people who would then jump over the fire with them.[16]

Interesting games and entertainment were held on Last Tuesday. When darkness fell, young people would approach the doors of relatives and acquaintances, and make a sound by hitting a bowl with a spoon. The owner of the house would come out, and then put food in the bowl. Sweets, dried fruits, decorative items, and in some cases money, were put aside for the event.[17] In the distant past, shawls were also hung on chimneys on the roofs of houses. The owner would tie some of the food from the Novruz table to the end of the shawl, and young people waiting on the roof would pull it down. At present, this tradition continues in all regions of Azerbaijan in the form of throwing hats and bags at doors. On the Last Tuesday, and in the evening of the holiday, children knock on doors, throw bags and hide, while the owner of the house puts sweets, fruits, and painted eggs in the bag and closes the door. The children take their share and run away without being seen by the owner.

Some local customs are also observed. In the city of Sheki, the youth of the region make dolls, tie red scarves on their heads and carry them through the streets.

On the Last Tuesday of the month, the ceremony

14 Shahbazov T., Kozgambayeva G. (2017). About the customs and rituals of Novruz in Azerbaijan // KazNU Bulletin. History series. Al–Farabi Kazakh National University №1 (84) page .220

15 Huseynov Y.R. (2015). Shusha Chronicle. Baku: Shusha Publishing House, page.127

16 Dadashzadeh M. (1985). Medieval Moral Culture of The Azerbaijani People. Baku: Elm Publishing House, page.106

17 Ibidem, page.109

of wasfi-hal was common among women. Young girls made wishes and eagerly awaited this day, because it was in this ceremony that they placed endless hopes on their future destiny. Relatives and neighbors gathered in one house and placed a "wish bowl" filled with water in the middle. From among the participants, a woman who was eloquent and knew many examples of poetry would be chosen to host the ceremony. She would take rings, earrings, pins and other small items from the girls, throw them into the water, and cover the bowl with a kerchief. Then she would loudly and pleasantly recite poems and invisibly pull the objects out of the water. The owner of the object could interpret her fate from the content of the poem. Wasfi-hal continued with hope and joy.

On the Last Tuesday and holidays, after dark, young girls would go out for *gulag fali* (ear fortune telling). This entailed hiding behind doors without knocking, and interpreting their fate through the meaning of the words they heard. To facilitate the girls to be able to hear, residents often left the doors of their houses open, and would speak loudly. On the holiday, everyone spoke optimistically, prayed for and were kind to each other. In addition, young girls conducted other tests. They threw their shoes from their right shoulders at the door. If the toes of the shoes landed facing outward, they believed they would get married that year.

On the Last Tuesday, the Danatma ceremony was performed. This entailed staying up until the morning, telling tales and legends. In connection with popular belief, night is considered a symbol of winter (evil forces), and day a symbol of spring (good forces). Consequently, people stayed up until the morning, waiting for good to triumph over evil.

## Festive Day

The last day of the year is celebrated with even greater splendor. Since the new year is counted from Novruz, people believe that how they spend the days of Novruz, will set the pattern for the rest of the year. On the holiday, everyone wears bright, new clothes; women apply henna to their hair, hands and feet; dye their hair; use cosmetics; and employ various decorative elements. On the last day of the year, family members sitting at the table congratulate each other, shake hands and embrace.

Following the good intentions of Novruz, everyone should have a good time. Before organizing the festive table, as a sign of respect, each family sends a "holiday share" to homeless people, orphans, and other disadvantaged families living with relatives and neighbors, as well as elders.

The holiday is celebrated with a colorful table adorned with sweets such as shekerbura, baklava, shekerchorek (sweet bread), shorgogal, samani halvah, nogul, nabat, miyanpur, and more, as well as dishes such as pilaf, dolma, fish lavangi and others, fresh fruits (apples, oranges, holiday food ("*bayram yemishi*") preserved since summer), dried fruits and desserts (walnuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, almonds, iyda, innab, lentils, raisins, dried mulberries, and figs) and of course, samani. Dyed eggs can be seen on the Novruz holiday table in any part of Azerbaijan. The colorful painting of eggs, symbolizing the creation of the world, is also considered a sign of the seasons. One interesting form of entertainment is egg fights at the table.

Since Islam has a strong influence on the lifestyle and culture of the peoples of the East, they never use alcoholic beverages on this holiday. Some believe that Hazrat Ali ascended the throne on the Novruz holiday.

On holidays, people gather in the squares and watch wrestling competitions (Kandyrbazlyk, Kilimarasy, wrestling, rope walking, etc.), various characters from folk theater, funny games, cockfights, egg fights, and other games and entertainment. Kosa and Kechal, symbols of the struggle between winter and spring, appear in the

squares as the main characters of Novruz, making funny statements:

"Hey Kosa, please, come,
Come and greet us,
Fill the scoop please,
And give us the gifts."

Until the middle of the 20th century, wrestlers demonstrated wrestling, kabbade, *miloynatma* (spindle play), *sengi* and other traditional sports games in *zorkhanas* (the place of power) that existed in Baku, Shusha, Ordubad, Ganja and other cities. During the Novruz holiday, the zorkhanas looked more luxurious; they were decorated with garlands, festive wreaths, and painted eggs, and torches were lit everywhere.[18]

Some local games and forms of entertainment have survived in various cities of Azerbaijan to this day. Residents of Ordubad play the game *Khan Bezeme* (Decorating the Khan) for three days in Sarshaher Square. The Khan, his vizier and two lawyers are the main characters and carry out various activities. For example, the Khan orders food or colored eggs to be brought from a certain house and person, while a certain person has to congratulate the dancers. Dances (e.g. *yalli*) are held in the square, festivities are organized, and gulab (rosewater) and sweets (candies, nogul, etc.) are distributed.

During the holiday, people visit each other, especially the elders of the generation, to congratulate them. They believe that the prayers of the elders during the holiday morally enrich the younger generation. H. Sarabsky (1879-1945), in his memoir, writes that those who came to the holiday meeting sprinkled gulab, and that tea, coffee, and sherbet was served.[19] As before, guests today bring gifts with them, and the host presents them with a share as well. On the one hand, this custom depends on the dividing and separating nature of the Novruz holiday, and on the other hand, it follows from the essentially fundamental institution of hospitality, which has been firmly close to the Azerbaijani people for centuries.

It is customary to go for a walk and visit friends the day after the holiday. In Baku, the gardens and parks (e.g. Fountain Square, Baku Boulevard) become full of people in the days after the holiday. According to an ancient custom, on the 13th day after the holiday, people do not stay at home. On this day, considering "13" an unfavorable number, the residents of Guba gather on the bank of the Gudyalchay River and throw their yellowed samanis, left over from the holiday, into the water in a "samani throwing" ceremony while sweets are distributed. This ends the holiday in a joyful mood. Despite the passage of centuries, Novruz has not faded from the lives of the people of the East, including the Azerbaijanis; on the contrary, it has evolved to acquire new elements.

18 Encyclopedia of Nowruz Holiday (2008). Baku: East – West. page. 204

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# NOWROUZ IN INDIA: REPRESENTATION OF THE PLURALISTIC INDIAN SOUL

Manish Kumar MISHRA

## Introduction

India is a land of religion and philosophy. People from different castes, customs and traditions have been living together in India for centuries. The Sanatan Hindu tradition has given space to everyone. As an integrated nation, India is plural in nature. This country, full of external diversities, has some internal core elements which are like a shield for its integrity. Concepts like "Indianness" remain safe in the cave of these clear elements. There is no other example like this in the whole world. These elements are the inner centers of light which present true statements through literature and culture for the establishment of sacred, pure thoughts and human values. As a nation, they make us energetic, wise and progressive. They also teach that we are one in the expansion of vision. In the *Prithvi Sukti* of *Atharvaveda*, it is written that

"जनं बभ्रिती बहुधा वविाचसं नाना धर्माणं पृथवि यथौकसम्" [1]

That is, many people speak many languages and have many religions. That is, this land has been multilingual and multi-religious for thousands of years. Great epic texts likethe *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* describe people of many cultures and their geographical conditions.

It is our cultural teaching that we have to extend our human generosity so that a broad outlook remains our legacy. Only in this way can meaningfulness be planted in meaninglessness. The displacement and destruction of accepted values is worrisome. Seeing the world in a multi-centric form is a comprehensive, complete and holistic process of seeing. Every component striving for totality is a factor of nationalism. The clarity, sharpness and flow of life require constant activity. Ideological and personnel activity are the life elements of the clarity of life. The culmination of life lies in this continuity. Coordination is the main thing in the core of Indian culture. Seeing everyone together will be our right way of seeing. Despite the warnings of

1 Atharvaveda, Prithvi Sukti – 12–1–45

darkness and their credibility, we will have to keep the consciousness of social justice alive. We will have to remain engaged in truth for the whole behind the fragments. We will have to make it our eternal truth by constantly weaving love, compassion, and tolerance in the cultural structure.

Festivals in India are the basis of the manifestation of culture. These are the most important and reliable sources of understanding, and of testing social behavior. An inherent process of coordination is constantly active within different festivals. A process-bound fraternity is its nature. When the rays of the sun's bloom in the spring, and the mother earth leaves the gloom of winter and starts singing the tune of new life, then a festival knocks at our door – Nowrouz. "*Now*" means "new" and "*rouz*" means "day" – Nowrouz, new day, new life, new rituals. Although its roots run deep in the soil of ancient Iran, the cultural land of India has embraced it with aplomb and adorned it with its own colors. It is not just a festival but a philosophy, which celebrates the rebirth of life every year and the flower-like consciousness of the soul that blooms again. This article is an attempt to understand more closely the festival of Nowrouz, which is created, settled and flourished in the colors of Indianness.

## History and Overview

The history of Nowrouz goes back about 3500 years, and its origin is found in the Avesta – the Zoroastrian scripture. It is a festival associated with the Zoroastrian religion founded by Zarathustra, and is celebrated on the day of spring equinox in Iran and surrounding areas. This is the moment when day and night become equal, and the sun begins its journey towards Uttarayan - this period becomes a symbol of spiritual balance, light and renaissance. "Vedic Indian people calling themselves 'Arya' or the 'Noble' ones and their home as 'Aryavrata' or 'abode of the noble' and the ancient Iranian king Darius referring to his lineage being 'Ariya' in his Bistoon Inscription situated in the contemporary Kermanshah city of Kordestan province of Iran, is not a coincidence and in fact points towards the common lineage and roots of Indian and Iranians."[2]

"With the establishment of the Safavid Empire (1502-1736), Shiʾism – the Persian brand of Islam – became the state religion of Persia and the persecution and flight of Zoroastrians to India and elsewhere became the order of the day."[3] The first glimpse of Nowrouz in India appeared when the Parsi community left their homeland after the Islamic attacks on Iran and headed towards India by sea route. Around the 8th century, they settled at Diu in Kathiawar then shifted on the west coast of India, especially in the Sanjan, Udhvad, and Navsari regions of Gujarat. They brought their faith, traditions and festivals with them. Nowrouz was not just a festival for them, but a means of keeping their cultural identity alive.

India welcomed the Parsis, as spring brings life to dry trees. The Parsis also incorporated this land into their soul. And from here began the Indian journey of Nowrouz – which was not only limited to the Parsi community, but later reached the Shia Muslim community and the Mughal courts. Nowrouz had special political importance in the Mughal Empire. "Under the Mughals, Nauroz was celebrated by all. Following the customs of the ancient Parsis, banquets were held and there was great festivity in the court, harem and the empire. It is known as Nauroz, Alam e Afroz. A day before, at an auspicious moment, a married woman would grind Dal (pulse) and soak it in Ganga jal (water of Ganges which is

2 Holi and Noruz in India and Iran, Dr Aziz Mahdi, https:// www. academia.edu /109514509/ Holi_and_Noruz _in India_ and Iran. file:///C:/Users/admin/Downloads/Holi_and_Noruz_in_India_and_Iran.pdf

3 From Western India to Eastern Africa—the Rise of the Parsis in the 18th and 19th Centuries – Kaveh Yazdani | ORCID: 0000–0003–0573–5412, University of Connecticut, USA, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 67 (2024) 161–206

considered holy), and prepare into a tasty dish for Nauroz. The Emperor would bathe and wear bejeweled clothes, his family jewels, and some Hindu style jewelry."[4]

Babar has mentioned Nowrouz celebrations in his Baburnama in a poetic way. On Nowrouz, royal favors, *khil'ats* (robes of honor), and titles were often distributed – a tradition inherited from Persian and Temurid courts. Babur mentions exchanging gifts and rewarding loyalty during Nowrouz, using it as a moment to consolidate power and build allegiance. Humayun and Akbar gave it a grander appearance. Akbar offered a dignified place to the Meherji Rana, senior priest of the Parsi community in his court. "Evidence from Humayunnama also suggests that Nauroz celebrations were associated with Humayun's 1546 victories over Kandahar and Kabul."[5]Nowrouz was not just a Parsi festival during the reign of Akbar. Rather it became a coordinating state festival. Abul Fazal has written in *Ain-e-Akbari* how Noworuz was given a place in the state calendar, and especially in Fatehpur Sikri. In cities like Agra and Lahore, state functions were held on the day of Nowrouz.

Seasonal festivals have a special place in the tradition of India. Vasant Panchami, Holi, Chaitra Navratri – all are festivals associated with the arrival of spring. In the context of seasons, Kalidas' Ritusanhar, Guru Nanak Dev's Tukhari Raga and Rajasthani, Awadhi's Barahmaasa carry on the same tradition. Guru Nanak Dev has presented a beautiful depiction of the twelve months of the year in the Barahmaasa of the Tukhari Raga. Malik Mohammad Jayasi also carries on this tradition in Padmavat. Nowrouz can also be seen as a link to these seasonal cycles. Here, Nowrouz is not a festival of only one particular section, but rather of the soul's journey with the seasons, and a celebration of the regeneration of nature and the concept of cosmic balance. The vernal equinox is also an important date in Hindu astrology. This day is considered to be the beginning of the new year, of new beginning, and new light. Nowadays, Nowrouz is celebrated in India in two forms – the Parsi Nowrouz and the Iranian Nowrouz of Shia Muslims. Nowrouz arrives 200 days later in India and is celebrated in the month of August as the Parsis in India follow the Shahenshahi calendar, which does not account for leap years. In contrast, Iranian Navroz, which is based on the spring equinox, is celebrated on March 21st.

## Parsi Nowrouz

In Mumbai, Pune, Surat, and in cities like Navsari, Parsi Nowrouz has special significance. Special prayers are offered in Parsi fire temples on this day; people wear new clothes, houses are decorated with rangoli and flowers. Parsi dishes like Phirni are prepared. This is a day of community unity, family gathering, and spiritual purification. The Parsi community is said to commemorate King Jamshid of Persia by celebrating the festival of Nowruz, according to their beliefs.

## Iranian Nowrouz

The Shia Muslim community, especially in Lucknow, Hyderabad, Kashmir and Delhi, celebrate Nowrouz with deep dedication. The Haft Sin table is decorated on this occasion, which contains seven symbolic objects – an apple (symbolizing health), a coin (prosperity), vinegar (wisdom), a sprout (growth), garlic (health protection), a watch or a book (knowledge), and mirror (introspection). Bouquets, candles and the

4 https://ranasafvi.com/nauroz-then-and-now/

5 https://map.sahapedia.org/article/The-Evolution-of-Nauroz-in-the-Mughal-Court/11123#_edn24

Holy Quran are also included in the spread.

"Navroz is a festival of family bonding and reaffirming goodness within humanity. Traditionally, rituals such as spring cleaning, fire-jumping, and laying the Haft Sin dining table abound."[6] The significance of Nowrouz as cultural heritage was highlighted in 2010 when the United Nations General Assembly declared March 21st to be International Nowruz Day. It stated that, "In a rapidly changing world, Nowruz serves as a reminder of our shared human heritage. It champions the values of tolerance, cultural diversity, and peace – principles that resonate deeply in our modern, interconnected society. By celebrating Nowruz, communities reaffirm their commitment to preserving ancient traditions while also embracing contemporary influences that enrich their cultural tapestry."[7]

## Characteristics of Nowrouz Practices in India

The strongest cultural base of Nowrouz in India is the Parsi community. These communities are mainly concentrated in Gujarat (especially Surat and Navsari) and Mumbai. They were "the first permanent settlers of immigrants from Greater Khorasan into coastal Gujarat and founded the city of Sanjan, named in memory of their city of origin. The assimilation of the Parsis into the Indian mix began with this settlement, which was allowed by the local prince under three distinct terms whereby the settlers were prohibited to carry any arms, the women were to take up the local dress of saris, and the local Gujarati language would become their own. It is thus that we find the dialect of the Parsis to be similar to Guajarati even today, though the concentration of the community has shifted to what is known as greater Mumbai. Thus a settler community fleeing religious persecution from Muslim conquerors established an oasis following the principles of Zoroastrianism in India."[8] Parsi Nowruz is also known as "Jamshedi Nauroz," which is associated with the Persian king Jamshid. Parsi rituals of Nowrouz in India can be defined as below:

- Cleanliness and purity: Houses are cleaned, new clothes are worn and *sapanu* (meaning decoration in Gujarati) is done.
- Week-scene tradition: This is part of the Persian tradition in which seven objects with names beginning with the letter "s" are selected and displayed, as described above. In India, decoration with these items is more aesthetic.
- Fire temple tour: On the day of Nowrouz, the Parsi community goes to the fire temple to pray and seek blessings from Ahura Mazda for the new year.
- Food specialties: Parsi dishes like Sali Boti, Dhansak, Patra ni Machhi, Akoori, Lagan nu Custard, Parsi Sev, Berry Pulao, Sali Boti, Chicken Farcha, Sali par Eedu, and Parsi Mawa Cake are prepared. In India, local influence can be seen in Parsi food.

## Presence of Nowrouz in the Muslim Community

Nowrouz in India is not limited to the Parsi community only. For the Shia Muslim community, especially Bohra and Ismaili Muslims, it is also an important religious-cultural festival. "According to some hadiths, Nowruz is a blessed day, which is to be celebrated. For instance, Imam al-Sadiq (a) is reported to have instructed ghusl, wearing one's best clothes, a special prayer, and fasting on Nowruz. In another tradition, Imam al-Sadiq (a) is

6 https://navinajafa.wordpress.com/2024/03/20/navroz–mubarak–triumph–of–light–over–darkness–celebrating–healing–and–peace–dr–navina–jafa/

7 https://www.un.org/en/observances/international–nowruz–day#:~:tex t=In%202010%2C%20the%20 United%20Nations,peace%2C%20unity%2C%20and%20renewal

reported to have mentioned a number of important events that had occurred on the day of Nowruz, such as the event of Ghadir. However, according to a hadith from Imam al-Kazim (a), Nowruz was a custom that Islam did not recognize and thus the Imam (a) refused to celebrate it. Many scholars have studied these two sets of hadiths. Allama al-Majlisi, for instance, concludes that the hadiths that recognize Nowrouz are more reliable."[8]

## Features of Nowrouz in Shia Tradition

- Relation to Imam Ali: The Shia community also observes Nowrouz as the day of the Caliphate of Imam Ali, which gives it religious meaning.
- Quran and Dua: Special prayers are recited on this day, and the Dua-e-Nauroz is recited.
- Feeding and donating: Giving food and distributing clothes to the poor is a special tradition within the community.
- Social gathering: Gathering in mosques or community centers to mingle and discuss.
- In India, this festival is celebrated mostly in North India (Lucknow, Delhi) and in Shia dominated areas of Hyderabad.

## Cultural Diversity of Indian Nowrouz

Nowrouz in India is not only based on religion; it is a cultural event as well, in which drama, music, Rangoli, poetry, and group dinners are are organized. In cultural centers, Nowrouz fairs bring together Parsi, Muslim and Hindu communities. In schools and colleges, drama, dance and speech competitions are organized. Rangoli and lamp decoration is performed, which is a basic element of Indian festivals. In this way, the Indian Nowrouz deviates from its original Persian form. It has become a folk festival which takes on forms influenced by the localities in which it is practiced.

## Nature of Nowrouz in Modern India

Nowrouz in contemporary India, on one hand, nurtures cultural identity and tradition, and on the other, is influenced by modernity, urbanization and globalization. Young generations celebrate Nowrouz through social media. Digital celebrations of the feasible have become common and include the sharing of pictures of the Haft Sin, Parsi Cuisine Reels, and exchanging of greetings. In the Parsi community, despite population decline, Nowrouz cultural energy remains, as an identity of their existence. The government of India has also celebrated Nowrouz, by placing it on the list of national festivals, and thus giving it an institutional identity. The symbolism and philosophy of Nowrouz is very important. In India, this festival is celebrated with the arrival of spring season, which is a sign of reconstruction and creation. Worship of natural elements like fire, water, flower, food and more, are revered in Nowrouz, matching with Indian religious philosophy. This is a festival of self-purification and charity, and is a symbol of moral revival.

Nowrouz in India is not just an imported or minority community festival, but a living example of the spirit of Indian pluralism and coexistence. Embracing religious diversity, cultural inclusivity, and harmony with modern life, it is a unique festival. Today when communalism and identity politics dominate, festivals like Nowrouz offer positive messages to the world, promoting sensitivity, tolerance and cultural dialogue. "Being the most important day on the Parsi-Zoroastrian calendar,

8 https://ijtihadnet.com/nowruz–in–shia–islam–traditions/

Navroze brings the entire community together. The word Navroze itself, is an Indian variation of Nooruj. Navroze, literally meaning "new day," is a result of the community's adaptation indigenous language and culture. Bonds of friendship are made and renewed at this time of the year. In India, this community celebration of the agricultural season has changed in a primarily urban environment to become a mainly a social gathering."[9]

## Sociocultural Impacts and Symbolism of Nowrouz

India is a multi-religious, multilingual, and multicultural nation where traditions are not limited to just one community. Rather, they mingle with each other like flowing rivers.

Nowrouz is a multi-dimensional cultural tradition. In India, this festival spreads its social meaning beyond its roots, so it is not just a religious ritual but a mode of cultural dialogue. Nowrouz today crosses the boundaries of Parsi and Shia Muslim communities. It is sharing the culture of India by becoming a part of it. Non-Parsi and non-Muslim communities also participate in it, leading this festival to become a symbol of social harmony in India. Programs related to Nowrouz can be seen in in schools, universities and cultural institutions. "It should be noted that although the myths sound ancient, they are narrated and alive in our culture at the present time; tales; epics; poetry and song competitions in addition to the classical poems from the *Shahnameh* all come alive on Navroze: this comes through the experiences, skills and arts of the community."[10]

## Social Impact of Nowrouz

Nowrouz in India is a symbol of collective identity and shared memory. When family and community members eat together, and participate in prayers and celebrations, they enact this. In Muslim society, this spiritual and social interaction is an opportunity to dialogue and promote coexistence. Festivals like Nowrouz offer a bridge of communication which connects different religions and castes. Nowrouz is becoming a medium of cultural consciousness in the young generation. It is a symbol of coordination of tradition and modernity. Nowrouz in India celebrates traditional Persian rituals within the Indian context like rangoli, lamp decorations, flower decorations, and Parsi cuisine, alongside Indian cuisine. In cities like Mumbai, Parsi cuisine can be seen combining Indian flavors and spices with original Parsi dishes. On the occasion of Nowrouz, many cultural programs, including drama, *mushaira*, musical evenings, and painting exhibitions are organized. It enriches the Indian cultural world by providing a platform for creative expression.

## Tourism and Cultural Festivals

Globally, cultural festivals are gatherings honor the customs, tradition, histories, and principles of a particular society or culture. They frequently include dancing, music, food, and art work, and attract tourists from all over the world. In addition to being essential for maintaining cultural identity, these events are also very important for boosting intercultural understanding and cultural tourism. With the participation of other communities in the programs organized by the Parsi community on the occasion of Nowrouz, cultural tourism also gets encouragement. Many foreign tourists come to India to learn about the Parsi culture first hand.

9 https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/30756–EN.pdf

10 https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/30756–EN.pdf

In 2011, the Parsi (Zoroastrian) population in India represented approximately 0.06% of the total population. This is a slight decrease from 0.13% in 1951. Despite their small population, four of India's top 20 wealthiest individuals are Parsis. They are arguably India's wealthiest and most prosperous community. This is the reason why tourists from all over the world want to understand the history and culture of this society.

## Symbolism of Nowrouz: Opening of the Depths

Nowrouz is not just an external festival, it is a festival of symbols and meanings. Every object and ritual is connected to a deep emotion and philosophy. Symbolic interpretation of the Haft Sin (Persian: هفت‌سین) table is an example of this. "Sabzeh (سبزه): sprouted wheat grass – the symbol of rebirth and growth. Samanu (سمنو): sweet wheat pudding – the symbol of power and strength. Senjed (سنجد): sweet dry fruit of the lotus tree – the symbol of love. Somāq (سماق): crushed spice of berries – the symbol of sunrise. Serkeh (سرکه): vinegar – the symbol of age and patience. Seeb (سیب): apple – the symbol of beauty. Seer (سیر): garlic – the symbol of health and medicine."[11] Fire is also a sacred element in Zoroastrianism, and on Nowrouz, prayers are offered in the fire temple. It is a symbol of light, energy and purification – which burns negativity and paves the way for positivity.

## Globalization and the Indian Context of Nowrouz

The unique celebration of Nowrouz in India illustrates the cultural diversity of the Parsi and Shia communities on the global stage. Mentions of Nowrouz are increasing in Indian movies, literature, and international performances. Several Indian films feature the Parsi community. Some notable films include *Parzania; 1947: Earth; Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi*; and *Rustom*. These films offer glimpses into Parsi culture and traditions. Writers like Rohinton Mistry also give voice to the ethnic Parsi religion through his mode of fiction. "His career started from *Tales from Firozsha Baag, Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*. They all were shortlisted for the honor of The Man Booker Prize."[12]

The declining population of the Parsi community in India has led to the decline of this festival. Protection has also raised concerns. Despite this, the young Parsi generation is active in keeping this tradition alive through digital mediums. Nowrouz in India offers a message of beauty in harmony and balance in difference. It also enriches India's international image. "The rituals of Holi and Nowrouz festivals provide the experience of empowerment and euphoria to the masses; by not being limited to only a particular social class of society."[13]

11 https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/c.php?g=1016304&p=7366460

12 https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/305237/1/1.%20chapter%201.pdf

13 Holi and Noruz in India and Iran–Dr Aziz Mahdi
file:///C:/Users/admin/Downloads/Holi_and_Noruz_in_India_and_Iran%20(1).pdf

## Sociocultural Significance and Interpretations of Nowrouz in Modern Society

### Respect for Elders and Tradition

On the occasion of Nowrouz, Parsi families honor elders, take blessings, and eat communally, matching with Indian family values. Compassion for family and pride for tradition also exist in the young generation.

### Social Redefinition in the Digital Age

In today's social media era, traditional festivals like Nowrouz gain new meanings and expressions. For example, using Instagram and Facebook, youth on platforms like YouTube use hashtags like #NowruzCelebrationsIndia, #ParsiPride, and #SpringEquinoxFest, presenting the festival on global platforms. In this way, this festival has become a part of social discourse – where tradition, identity and cultural heritage mix with innovation and beauty.

### Nowrouz and Indian Cultural Creativity

Many compositions on Nowrouz are found in Urdu poetry and Persian poetry, which are read and presented with great interest in India. Nowrouz mushairas, conferences and poetry reading are organized which highlight its cultural depth.

## Contemporary Challenges and Role of Nowrouz

- Dialogue against communalism
- Festivals like Nowrouz, amid communal tension in modern India, create opportunities for cultural dialogue, brining different communities together
- Nowrouz helps build inter-religious harmony and unity
- The shrinkage of Parsi society and reestablishment of Nowrouz
- The population of the Parsi community is decreasing in India. Because of this, there are concerns for the protection of Nowrouz. Providing hope, the young generation of Parsis and Shia Muslims are reestablishing cultural consciousness and identity.

## Conclusion

Overall, we can say that the presence of many festivals in the depths of the pluralistic Indian soul is very positive. These are the carriers of the generous and humane Indian consciousness. The Indian culture of “festivals every day” is unique in the world, and shows the way to humanity. The Indian form of Nowrouz symbolizes the process of receptivity, generosity, humanity, satisfaction, sophistication and refinement. It is easy to understand the Indian philosophical principles of nature, man and consciousness with the symbols of this festival. Nowrouz is a simple interpretation of the social and practical rehabilitation of holy life.

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From Western India to Eastern Africa-the Rise of the Parsis in the 18th and 19th Centuries, Kaveh Yazdani University of Connecticut, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 67 (2024) 161–206.

# NOWROUZ: A LIVING HERITAGE OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS IN IRAN

Hassan BASTANI RAD

## Nowrouz in the Persian Calendar

The Persian calendar, also known as the Iranian Calendar, is, according to NASA "the most accurate of calendars" (NASA 2025). As one of the oldest, the calendar has been used in Iran / Persia since at least the Achaemenid kingdom in the 6th century BCE. Its errors have been corrected several times, including during the Sassanid period, when a Zoroastrian religious monarchy dominated, and the celebration of Iranian festivals such as Nowrouz was important. After the spread of Islam (since the 7th century CE), the Islamic lunar calendar became widespread among Arab-Islamic populations in the region. The celebration of Persian festivals such as Nowrouz

Table 1. The Most Important Seasonal Festivals in the Persian Calendar

| Date in both Persian and Gregorian calendars | 1st Farvardin 21st March | 1st Tir 21st–22nd June | 1st Mehr 22nd–23rd September | 1st Dey 21st–22nd December |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Seasonal position | First day of spring (Bahār) | First day of summer (Tābestān) | First day of autumn (Pāiez / Khazān) | First day of winter (Zemestān) |
| | Spring Equinox | Summer Solstice | Autumn Equinox | Winter Solstice |
| Festival | Nowrouz | Chella Tābestān (Tamouz) | Mehregān | Yaldā / Chella |
| Type of Seasonal Festivals | First day of the year and of spring | Tirgān / Abrizagān (the pouring of water) | A festival dedicated to the Mithrā / Mehr and the beginning of wheat cultivation | The longest night of the year, Shab-e Chella |
| Inscribed - UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity | 2009, updated in 2024 | - | 2024 | 2022 |

contributed to keeping the Persian solar calendar alive. During the rule of the Seljuks – Jalal-aldin Malek-Shah (11th Century CE) – Hakim Omar Khayyam Neyshaburi, made another correction, and this version of the calendar (Solar Hijri/ Persian Calander) is still used as an official, national calendar in Iran and Afghanistan today, including for identifying the correct date of festivals such as Nowrouz, Yalda, and Chaharshanba-suri in various countries in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Each of the 12 months in the Persian Calendar has a major traditional festival. Among them, four are important in marking the first day of each season:

Nowrouz, the first day of the Persian solar year, is a Persian word meaning "new day." The first day of the year and of spring is located exactly at the spring equinox and the end of winter. This is a significant reason to celebrate Nowrouz with spring attributes: the rebirth of the earth, the blooming of flowers, the awakening of trees from hibernation, the greenery and freshness of spring.

## Nowrouz in Myth and History

Among Iranian celebrations, Nowrouz has been the most documented. This numerous documentation comes from diverse fields including mythology, history, archeology, architecture and monuments, anthropology, literature, astronomy-science, inscriptions and manuscripts, financial and tax documents, and economic and political history.

The origins of Nowrouz in Iranian mythology are related to the king Jamshid, who in the epic texts of the Sassanids, the *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*) of Ferdowsi, and in other Iranian historical and epic texts, is described as having reigned for 700 years and having created many necessities for human life on earth. On the first day of Farvardin (March 21st), the elders of the country from various regions went to the court of Jamshid and brought him gifts. The day was called "Nowrouz" or "Nowruz-e Jamshidi."

In their epics and myths, Iranians have identified Darius I (521-486 BCE), the Achaemenid king, as Jamshid. One of his capitals, Persepolis in the Fars (Pars) Province, is called Takht-e Jamshid, which was one of the most important centers for Persian celebrations. Relief sculptures in the East and North staircases of the Apadana Palace at Persepolis depict 23 delegations from different regions and tribes of the kingdom bringing tribute and gifts to the king. Darius on the throne, the parade of gift-bearers, and other descriptions of the statues and carvings of Persepolis remind us of the traditional Nowrouz ceremony entailing the giving of gifts to the king, and the holding of a royal greeting ceremony by Jamshid, as described in Persian epics. This tradition was long held in Iran, with a royal greeting ceremony held on Nowrouz, to which elders and heads of tribes, clans, provinces, and representatives of other countries, visited the king's court to congratulate him and give gifts. To host these Nowrouz greetings reason, a royal hall was used in the palace of the kings. There is no doubt that symbols associated with the Nowrouz ceremony can be observed in Persepolis, such as thousands of lotus flower carvings, and the iconic battle scene between a lion and bull (Lindsay 1971), which some researchers consider to be a sign of the beginning of spring. Others have examined the architectural layout based on astronomical and calendar formulas, which suggest that the location of Persepolis, with the direction of the sunrise from its eastern mountain of Mehr, aligns with the day of Nowrouz, and the spring equinox (Zoka 1979).

During the first millennium BCE, the new year and Nowrouz were celebrated on the Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia, and the surrounding lands. At the same time, extensive contacts were established between Persians and other societies and lands. The Achaemenids dominated Persia, Mesopotamia, India, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Western Asia, Eastern Europe, and North Africa. Festivals like Nowrouz played a significant role in their calendar, marking occassions to gather together. Although the calculation of the days of the year and the division of the seasons of the

ancient Persian / Iranian solar calendar diverged somewhat with the calendar modified by Omar Khayyam Neishaburi in the 11th century, various Persian celebrations such as Nowrouz remained and were protected.

During the Sasanian (224-651 CE) period, two phases of the Nowrouz festival were celebrated: general Nowrouz, occurring during the first five days of spring and of the month of Farvardin (March 21st – 25th), and Great Nowrouz, occurring on the sixth day of the month (March 26th). This day was attributed to the birthday of Zoroaster (Bulookbashi 2001: 26-30). The Nowrouz celebration during the Safavid kingdom from 16th-17th centuries was celebrated for seven days. In Isfahan, the capital of the Safavids, the river bank of the Zayandeh-Rud was where Nowrouz celebrations were held, with the king and other rulers coming out to meet wit the people on the sixth or seventh day of celebration.

Although Islamic holidays such as Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha (Qurban / 10 of Dhu Al-Hijjah) became very important among Muslims, Nowrouz did not lose its cultural significance even after the Arab victory over the Iranians. It also remained important during the rule of the Turks and Mongols in Iran. The role of Nowrouz in facilitating cultural interaction between groups, communities, and territories, as well as its coincidence with the time of tax collection were some reasons behind this. In medieval Iran, the festival of Nowrouz was not celebrated at the beginning of spring however, but at the beginning of summer, which coincided with the grain harvest, especially of wheat, and the collection of agricultural taxes. It was not until the order of the Seljuk king, for Omar Khayyam of Neyshaburi to reform the Iranian calendar, that Nowrouz began to be celebrated at the beginning of spring, on the day of the spring equinox (Mardukhi, 2019: 155-170).

Scholars like Khayyam in his *Nowruz-Nameh*, and Biruni in his *Al-Baqiya*, among others, have described how Nowrouz was celebrated in ancient Iranian courts like those of the Sassanids. The king sat on the throne in the hall or portico in front of the palace and the elders of the country would come to pay their respects to him. These congratulatory ceremonies typically included religious officials, the grand vizier, and other bureaucrats who would enter to honor the king.

## Nowrouz Ceremonies and Celebrations

Today, many countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Albania have official holidays lasting from one to five days for Nowrouz ceremonies and celebrations. In Iran, the official holiday lasts from the 1st to the 4th of Farvardin (March 21st-24th). The thirteenth day of Farvardin (April 2nd) is also an official holiday – Nature Day (Sīzdah bedar) – and thus universities, schools, and most companies and offices are closed for the thirteen days between March 21st  April 2nd inclusive.

## Cultural Symbols of Nowrouz and Ceremonies

*Peik Nowruzi* or *Amir-e Nowrouz* (*Nowrouz Messenger*): A few weeks before Nowrouz, some people celebrate the arrival of Nowrouz with music, dancing, and singing in villages, towns, and cities. One tradition has been that one person would be appointed the "Amir of Nowrouz," who would then be allowed to rule the village or town during the days of the festival.

Hāji Firuz or Fire-Maker: A person wearing red clothes and a blackened face, sings poetry, beats drums, and dances, informing people of the last Wednesday of the year (*Čahāršanba-sūrī*) and the coming Nowrouz. Researchers suggest that the blackened face of the Hāji Firuz symbolized

a returning from the world of the dead, while red clothing would symbolize Siāvaš's blood and the coming back to life of the sacrificed deity (Bahar 1995: 231). Hāji Firuz would sing the poem (Omidsalar 2012):

"Ḥāji Firuz-e, ʿEyd-e nowruz-e, Sāl-i čand ruz-e!"

"It's Ḥāji Firuz, it's the Nowrouz festival, it's only a few days a year."

*Amu Nowrouz and Ajouzeh Nowrouz*: Two other symbolic Nowrouz messengers are a man and a woman. The Amu Nowrouz (uncle Nowrouz) wears new clothes, is very clean and washed, and announces the arrival of Nowrouz. An elderly, unattractive woman named Ajouzeh Nowrouz, joins him, along with Ḥāji Firuz. Ajouzeh Nowrouz symbolizes the old year, while Amu Nowrouz symbolizes the new year.

*Nowrouz - Khani / Nowrouz Reading*: As UNESCO described when adding Naqqāli to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, it is "the oldest form of dramatic performance in Iran and has long played an important role in society, from the courts to the villages" (UNESCO 2011). Naqqāls need to be acquainted with Persian poems, local cultural expressions, languages and dialects, and traditional music. Acting as poem readers, they participate in various ceremonies throughout the year. During the days before Nowrouz, a Nowrouz Khān, similar to Naqqāls describes the end of winter and the beginning of spring in beautiful poems. In different regions of Iran, they use various languages including Persian, Kurdish, Balochi, Gilaki, Mazani, Turkish, Arabic, and more. They also recite works by great poets and herald Nowrouz loudly in the alleys and streets in literary language.

*Nowrouz Plays and Theaters*: A group of artists herald the arrival of Nowrouz by playing games and performing plays, music, and dance on the rooftops of houses or in public squares.

*Nowrouz Greens*: A few weeks before Nowrouz, families plant wheat, millet, chickpeas, or flowers. During Nowrouz, they place these sprouted greens next to the Nowrouz reception table. When visiting the tombs of the dead in cemeteries, they also bring green plants. On the thirteenth day, which celebrates nature, the remaining greens are taken to parks or outside the city or village and left there or thrown into water.he remaining greens are taken out of the city and village or to parks, the day of the celebration of nature, and left there or thrown into the water.

*Khaneh Tekani / Cleaning the House*: House cleaning is an important ritual before Nowrouz. This entails sweeping, washing curtains, dusting the house, and laying out new carpets and rugs to welcome Nowrouz guests.

*Shopping for Nowrouz*: The weeks before Nowrouz, especially on Eid night (Shab-e Eid), see bazaars become colorful, fragrant, and bustling with activity. People purchase new and clean clothes for Nowrouz. They buy or prepare nuts and homemade sweets. They also obtain new banknotes to give to children as gifts.

*Chaharshanbeh-e-Suri (Čahāršanba-sūrī)*: The first celebration of the Nowrouz season is the fire-making celebration on the last Wednesday of the year. On Tuesday evenings, people collect dry wood and light fires in squares, alleys, or streets, and then jump over them. They join hands in a circle around the fires, and recite poetry (Kashef and Saʿīdī Sīrjānī 2012). In some southern provinces of Iran, such as Kerman and Yazd, and among Zoroastrians, a similar ceremony, called Sadeh, is held 50 days before Nowrouz, in the middle of winter. Today, in addition to burning wood, firecrackers have also become popular. Unfortunately this has detracted from the cultural authenticity of Chaharshanbeh-e-Suri, and also caused great harm to people, especially children.

*Qāshuq Zani / The Sound of a Spoon*: Children, especially girls, take a spoon and bowl and go around their neighbors' houses making noise with them, and receive gifts, like children on Halloween receiving

candy and chocolate.

*Wishing for Marriage*: In some parts of Iran, on Wednesday, during the ritual of bowl and spoon noise making, girls who have reached marriageable age go to the tombs of poets or mystics and pray that they will find a suitable husband to marry in the new year.

*Visiting the Cemetery*: On the last Thursday and Friday of the year, people visit and clean the tombs of the dead, and and pray for them.

*Nowrouz Table / Sofreh Haft Sin (Seven "s")*: The most famous symbol of Iranian Nowrouz is a table laid with goods, which every family puts together. These goods often include a mirror, candlestick, a poetry book or religious book, painted eggs, traditional and homemade foods, sweets, and nuts (roasted wheat, pistachios, sunflower seeds, almonds, etc.). The exact time of the beginning of Nowrouz (to the hour, minute, and second) is specified in the Iranian calendar, so a clock is also placed on the table. For the Haft Sin, seven objects which have names beginning with the letter "s" in Persian are included, such as apples (*sib*), Samanu, vinegar (*serkeh*), sumac, hyacinth (*sonbul*), garlic (*sir*), and Elaeagnus (*senjed* / Russian olive). Some people assemble items beginning with "sh" or seven "m," or may place coins (*sekkeh*) next to the table (Bulookbashi 2001: 80–85).

*The Beginning of the New Year*: The beginning of the new year is the most notable moment of Nowrouz. In the Iranian solar calendar, each year is 365 days and 6 hours long. The additional 6 hours are deducted from each year, and every four years, a leap year is declared, which is 366 days. Therefore, the moment of the end of the year and the beginning of Nowrouz is different every year. It may be midnight, morning, noon or evening. Some people celebrate by visiting special historical places, the most important of which are the tombs of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Ferdowsi, Hafez, Saadi, and Khayyam, or the banks of the Zayandeh Rud in Isfahan, the Persian Gulf, or even significant historical monuments like Persepolis or Pasargadae. Some families also sit at home, and gather around the Nowrouz table for the moment. Muslims read the Quran and pray, and followers of other religions also recite their special religious prayers. But for Iranians, reading Persian poems from Ferdowsi, Hafez, Saadi, Khayyam, Mawlana, and Nezami is one of the most important rituals of Nowrouz.

In the past, the exact time of Nowrouz was announced with artillery. Today, special Nowrouz music, with drums and serenas, is popular to play. The importance of the role of the mirror and egg on the Nowrouz table dates back to when many people lacked regular clocks. They would place the egg on the mirror, believing it would shake at the first second of the new year. The first minutes of Nowrouz would then begin with laughter and joy. Families kiss and forgive each other if they are upset, and start the new year with joy.

Nowrouz holidays are good occasions to visit families. During Nowrouz, people are expected to make short visits to friends, family, and neighbors. First, young people visit their elders, and the elders return their visits afterwards. They go to the homes of grandparents or the families of those who have had a close relative die in the previous year. Tea, cookies, pastries, fresh and mixed nuts or other snacks are eaten during short visits. Since the Islamic calendar is lunar and shifts throughout the year, if Nowrouz coincides with the month of Ramadan or religious or mourning days, Islamic rituals are respected.

*Nowruzaneh / Nowrouz Gift*: Giving gifts on Nowrouz is still one of the most important customs, and is still popular. In the ancient Iranian calendar, Nowrouz was a time for giving gifts and even paying taxes to the state. Today, elders give new banknotes to younger people, and call it "Eid" or "Nowruzane." These new banknotes are placed between the pages of books such as the *Divan of Hafez*, works by Ferdowsi, Saadi, Mawlana, and Khayyam, or religious books such as the Quran. They are given as gifts to symbolize an increase in income in the new year.

*Nowruz-e Sultani / Royal Nowrouz*: A Nowrouz tradition in Iran and surrounding countries was for the Nowrouz greeting ceremony to be held in the palace of the king, or the tent of the tribal chief. Poets would write poems describing spring and Nowrouz, and receive gifts from the king. The Nowrouz greeting, as a political and social tradition, played an important role in leading rulers to pay attention to the grand celebration of Nowrouz.

*Shanbeh Sāl / Saturday of the Year*: The first day of the week is Saturday in the official Iranian calendar. Weekends occur on Thursday and Friday, when Muslims attend Friday prayers. In many villages and tribes in southern Iran, people go into nature on the first Saturday of the new year to celebrate.

*Sizdah Bedar*: The 13th day of Farvardin (April 1st – 2nd) is Nature Day in Iran, and is an official celebration. People leave their cities and the villages on this day to enjoy picnic and to celebrate the last day of Nowrouz in nature. Some people believe the day is unlucky. Iranians tie two small leaves of plants together and make wishes. The celebrations are also accompanied by humor and jokes as the date coincides with April 1st, with revelers imitating the Europeans who celebrate April Fool's Day on this day.

*Safar-e Nowruzi / Nowrouz Trip and Vacation*: During Nowrouz, Iranians make special Nowrouz trips, often to the coasts of the Caspian Sea, the beaches of the Persian Gulf, and to historical cities such as Shiraz and Isfahan. Some years, more trips are made than expected.

*New Monuments and Safeguarding*: Today, during the celebration of Nowrouz, artists, with funding from municipalities, create sculptures of Nowrouz symbols and install them in streets, parks, and squares. Traditional games, horse riding, and competitions such as archery were popular in villages and among nomads, but are less common today. The use of firecrackers instead of lighting fires, and the proliferation of industrial goods in place of traditional handicrafts jeopardizes the social, cultural, and economic authenticity of Nowrouz, and must be corrected through collective actions.

## Nowrouz in Persian Literature and Local-Ethnic Languages

In Persian literature and other local languages, Baharieh is a literary genre which focuses on describing spring, the new year, and greenery. Spring is the season of the rebirth of nature, love, kindness, and beauty. As the beginning of the new year and spring, Nowrouz has a special role in Persian literature; from Rudaki and Ferdowsi to contemporary poets, everyone has tried to compose the most beautiful literary descriptions about Nowrouz. Rudaki commemorated Nowrouz and Eid al-Adha together in the 10th century. Ferdowsi (940-1020) introduced Nowrouz as the most important day for the coronation of kings in his book, Shahnameh, which is about the epic history of the Iranians. Hafez Shirazi (14th century), in *Ghazal 454*, beautifully describes Nowrouz and many of its rituals. Other Persian poets, such as Saadi Shirazi and Mawlana, have also described Nowrouz as a symbol of the rebirth of nature, renewal, and even of having new thoughts.

Omar Khayyam Neyshaburi (1048-1131), whose *Rubaiyat* has been translated into most of the world's languages and who reformed the Iranian solar calendar, wrote beautiful descriptions of Nowrouz. The first chapter of Khayyam's book, *Nowruznameh*, is about the history of Nowrouz, the Iranian solar calendar, and Nowrouz in Iranian mythology and history. It may be the oldest complete text about Nowrouz.

Several themes are of great importance in Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*:[1] living happily, the transience of life, renewal, the turning of the human body into dust after death, drinking wine to enjoy life, and man's place in the universe. Among the Khayyam's 187 rubaiys, I consider the following to be the best description of these themes:

حون ابر به نوروز رُخ لاله بشُست
برخیز و به حام باده کن عزم دُرست
کاین سبزه که امروز تماشاگه توست
فردا همه از خاک تو برخواهد رُست

"When Nowruz's raincloudswash the tulip's face,
Get up and to red wine your will entrust.
Since this green lawn that now delights your eye,
Tomorrow will be growing from your dust."

1 A rubaiy consists of four poetic lines, and "rubaiyat" (the plural form) means "fours" in Arabic. Together, these four lines express a a profound meaning.

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# THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF NAWROUZ IN IRAQ

Shaymaa Mahmood SUHAIL

Nawrouz is one of the oldest Iraqi holidays, and has been celebrated by our ancestors both officially and traditionally for over five thousand years until the present day, with variations in names, forms, and religious and cultural practices. It is one of the most inclusive holidays in Iraq, observed by all communities within Iraqi society, including the Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Syriacs, Sabeans, Yazidis, and others. Each community celebrates it with its own name and specific historical and religious significance, yet all agree on celebrating this time with the arrival of spring, when greenery blooms and fertility flourishes, symbolizing both environmental and spiritual renewal.

The Kurds of Iraq celebrate Nawrouz on March 21st every year, considering it a day of new birth that overcame oppression and tyranny. This date marks the first day of the new Kurdish year and is the most popular holiday among the Kurdish people. It coincides with the spring equinox. The word “Nawrouz” in Kurdish means “new day,” and it is a bright historical day in the history of Eastern peoples, especially the Kurds. Since Nawrouz is considered a national occasion for the Kurds, its origins are deeply rooted in their history, although historians' opinions about its origins may differ.

Kurdish researchers believe that the event dates back to around 700 BCE, and is associated with the story of the legendary Kurdish hero Kawa the Blacksmith who led a revolution against the oppression and tyranny of King Sargon, also known as Zohak. Sargon would sacrifice the best of the youth and young men daily, based on the advice of his doctors and wise men who counciled that this would cure his deadly disease. Kawa the Blacksmith, along with a group of strong young men, rebelled and lit fires on the mountains and valleys of Kurdistan to announce to the world that the day of freedom had arrived. It became a day of victory and liberation from slavery, oppression, and tyranny.[1]

1 Eid al–Nawuz, the historical origin and the legend, introduction, Abdul Kareem Shathin, first edition: 2008, Damascus/Syria

Historical evidence recorded on clay tablets dating back to the Babylonian era indicates that the ancient inhabitants of Iraq celebrated the new year's festival over five thousand years ago,[2] coinciding with the Nawrouz celebration, although it was known by different names. The Sumerians are considered the first to have celebrated Nawrouz, referring to it as Zakmuk, the Sumerian New Year, celebrated on March 21st. The month of March was known to the Sumerians as Shikurku, which means the festival of birth and renewal. This holiday was also associated with the spring equinox and rituals symbolizing the resurrection and rebirth of the god Dumuzi[3] and his marriage to the goddess Inanna,[4] in a sacred ritual symbolized by the king and the high priestess between the temple and the palace.

Over time, the Sumerians began calling the holiday Akitu, initially a separate festival for rain invocation and the king's coronation. The new year celebrations of the Sumerians and Babylonians (Zakmuk and Akitu) evolved, and Mesopotamian hymns began to take on a ritualistic theatrical form during these celebrations.

At the beginning of the second millennium BCE (1894-1595 BCE), during the reign of the First Babylonian Dynasty, under King Hammurabi, the Zakmuk festival was abolished, and celebrations were focused solely on the Akitu[5] festival. The Babylonians and Assyrians established a new calendar starting from March 21st, with the first of Nisan in their calendar corresponding to March 21st in the current calendar.

It is possible that the celebration began with the appearance of the first full moon after March 21st, according to the Babylonian calendar, marking the beginning of the new year, and becoming known as the Akitu festival.

Most scholars specializing in ancient myths and history agree that Nawrouz is one of the oldest holidays in human history. In the history of ancient Mesopotamia, one academic expert in mythology suggests that the Sumerian Dumuzi festival was the same as Nawrouz. There is also consensus among archaeologists and historians that the Sumerians migrated from Kurdistan to southern Mesopotamia.[6]

The relationship between Dumuzi and Nawrouz is evident in several factors, such as their occurrence on the same day according to the solar calendar, and their symbolic meanings as the beginning of the new year and the arrival of spring. One in-depth study has confirmed the influence of the Dumuzi myth on Nawrouz in terms of rituals and traditions, highlighting similarities between the two holidays, including:[7]

- *Unity of Celebratory Rituals*: Both holidays share similar celebrations, including decorations, festive

2 The Historical Roots of the Popular Epic of Nowruz, Dr. Hussein Qasim Al–Aziz, p. 25, Baghdad 2010

3 Tammuz is an ancient Sumerian deity, regarded as one of the most prominent figures in Sumerian mythology. He was known as the god of shepherds and agricultural crops. Tammuz was associated with fertility and life on Earth, and was closely linked to agricultural cycles. He is often depicted as a young and handsome god with a significant role in Sumerian myths.

4 Inanna is the goddess of love, beauty, war, fertility, and the heavens in Sumerian mythology. She was one of the most important deities in Sumerian beliefs, known for her multifaceted nature, embodying contrasting aspects such as love and war. Inanna represents the feminine power that expresses divine strength in both the heavens and on Earth, and she was highly revered in religious rituals.

5 The Akitu Festival was one of the traditional spring celebrations in Mesopotamian civilization, particularly in Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon. This festival marked the beginning of the new year in the Babylonian calendar and was typically celebrated in the month of Nisannu (April). Akitu was closely tied to agriculture, symbolizing the revival of life and growth in nature with the arrival of spring. It was also a time to honor the gods, especially the god Marduk in Babylon. The festival featured religious ceremonies, special traditions, and sacred rituals, including offerings and sacrifices.

6 https://www.bahzani.net/?p=47477

7 The Historical Roots of the Popular Epic of Nowruz, Dr. Hussein Qasim Al–Aziz, pages. 149,150, Baghdad 2010

rituals, washing dishes, clothes, and bodies, preparing special foods at home and outdoors, listening to the mythical narrative of creation, and culminating with the myths of Dumuzi and Nawrouz.

- *Symbolism of the Holidays*: Both symbolize the joy of the people in the triumph of good will and achieving their desires to escape tyranny and oppression. While in Nawrouz, salvation comes from the defeat of King Zahhak, in Dumuzi's myth, it is represented by the revival of the god Dumuzi for six months.

- *Symbolic Characters*: Both holidays embody central figures symbolizing the suffering and triumph of the people. In the Babylonian myth, Dumuzi represents the suffering god, while in the Nawrouz myth, Fereydun is the human figure who brings victory.

- *Connection to Spring*: Both use the spring equinox as a symbol of human willpower and the desire for change.

- *Timing of the Celebration*: The celebrations of both holidays occur in a very close time frame, between late March and early April each year.

- *Punishment in the Depths*: Both holidays share the concept of punishment, as Dumuzi is imprisoned in the earth for six months, while Zahhak is eternally imprisoned in the depths.

- *Verbal Similarity Between the Two Names*: There is a phonetic similarity between Nawrouz and Dumuzi, which suggests a potential connection between the two terms.[8]

This Iraqi holiday spread to the Aryan and Turkic peoples of Central Asia after the fall of Babylon to the Persians in 539 BCE. The Persians adopted this holiday along with other elements of Iraqi civilization, such as writing, language, sciences, arts, and religious beliefs. The Persians named it Nawrouz, a near-literal translation of the Babylonian term "Yomo Nishan," meaning "the day of blooming and renewal." They began celebrating it according to the Babylonian calendar, which started on the first of Nisan, corresponding to March 21st in the modern calendar. Among Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis, this day is known as Eid Khidr Elias,[9] and is celebrated on March 21st with the lighting of candles, placing henna and branches of green myrtle in the river at night, and making the waters glitter with candlelight. This celebration was accompanied by joyful events and wishes for a prosperous future. The figure of Khidr is believed to symbolically correspond to the Babylonian god Dumuzi, representing plant growth and the renewal of life, and shares similarities with the figure of Utnapishtim, the only immortal man in Mesopotamian heritage.

In northern Iraq, the Kurdish people celebrate Nawrouz, using the same name as the Persians, commemorating the victory of Kawa the Blacksmith over the tyrannical king in the well-known Kurdish myth.

## Cultural Meanings and Social Significance

Nawrouz, in Kurdish culture, is considered a national symbol that reflects the resilience of the Kurdish people in the face of ongoing oppression and serves as a renewed challenge to tyrants. It is a call for unity and convergence, symbolizing the triumph of truth over falsehood and marking the beginning of an era of goodness, freedom, and prosperity across the ages. Over generations, Nawrouz has evolved into an annual celebration that embodies the Kurds' love for nature and

8 Previous source

9 The figure of Khidr in folklore corresponds mythologically to the Babylonian god Tammuz, who symbolizes the greening of vegetation and the renewal of life. Khidr is also linked to Utnapishtim, the sole immortal man in Mesopotamian mythology.

their longing for freedom, expressing their need to reunite with friends and loved ones under the warmth of the sun on March 21st of every year. This day, coinciding with the spring equinox, signals the end of winter and the arrival of spring. Nature dons a beautiful green cloak, and the remnants of winter and its chill gradually dissolve, reflecting Nawrouz's meaning as the "new day," as defined by the Kurds, and indicating the renewal and continuity of life.[10]

On this day, the fires lit in the evening and burned until dawn hold profound symbolism: they represent victory over oppression and freedom. Thus, Nawrouz has become a source of cultural inspiration and a national identity for the Kurds, regarded as one of the most significant festivals that annually revives Kurdish folklore. The Nawrouz epic has enriched Kurdish history and civilization through its intellectual and cultural heritage, aiding the Kurds in preserving their authenticity in the face of policies that oppose their cultural legacy.

The meanings of Nawrouz have influenced literature and the arts throughout history, providing a rich source of inspiration for writers and artists who have drawn from it to create artistic and poetic images that reflect their people's struggles, such as folk songs, epic poems, dramatic works, visual art, and sculptures. This historic day has always captured the attention of Kurdish poets who have written about Nawrouz in their poems since ancient times, and the theme continues to resonate in their creative works to this day.

Among the most famous poems that have remained etched in the collective memory of the Kurdish people is the poem by the Kurdish poet Birê Mird,[11] written in 1948. This poem has become a popular anthem, recited at Nawrouz celebrations every year. The poet Abdullah Goran[12] also left his distinctive mark on Nawrouz with a series of poetic works celebrating this festival, and linking it with revolution and liberation.

In modern Arabic literature, some poets, like Badr Shakir al-Sayyab,[13] have used Nawrouz as a symbol of struggle and resistance against colonialism, defending the unity of the Kurdish and Arab peoples against imperialist schemes and advocating for the revolution of the oppressed against injustice.

The influence of Nawrouz was not limited to poetry but extended to the theater, where Kurdish writer and poet Kamran Mukri[14] staged the first play about Nawrouz in 1958, which had a significant impact on the development of Kurdish theater. In this play, the writer reinterprets the Kurdish legend of Nawrouz, portraying the Kurdish rebels, led by Kawa the Blacksmith, triumphing over the tyrant Dahhak. This influence continues to this day, as playwright Zaki Ahmad Henari presented a poetic drama depicting the fall of the oppressive Dahhak.

Other artistic works, such as photographic paintings and visual art exhibitions, also depict the Nawrouz epic and its popular symbols. Additionally, Nawrouz is celebrated through folkloric performances, including the famous Kurdish *dabka* dance, performed by the Kurdish people of all ages, as an expression of their joy for the occasion.

10 https://www.algardenia.com/2014–04–04–19–52–20/menouats/22473–2016–03–18–17–57–28.html

11 A Kurdish poet born in the city of Sulaymaniyah in 1867 and who passed away in 1950, was laid to rest on the Mam Yara hill in the same city.

12 An Iraqi poet, named Abdullah Suleiman, was born in Halabja in 1904. He is one of the most important poets who wrote about Nowruz.

13 Badr Shakir al–Sayyab (1926–1964), an Iraqi poet born in the village of Jikur in Basra Governorate in southern Iraq, is considered one of the most famous poets in the Arab world in the twentieth century, and one of the founders of free verse in Arab literature.

14 Kamran Mokri is the poet Muhammad Ahmad Taha, born in 1929 in Sulaymaniyah Governorate. He is one of the most prominent Kurdish poets in Iraq, and one of the tributaries of modern political poetry in Kurdish literature. Mokri died in 1986.

Nawrouz represents as a spiritual and cultural symbol that deeply reflects Kurdish identity. It is an essential part of the Kurdish heritage that connects history, spirit, and society, representing a symbol of hope, optimism, and freedom. It is noteworthy that March 21st, the day of Nawrouz celebrations, is also World Poetry Day,[15] which highlights the historical relationship between poetry and Nawrouz. On this day, poetry pulses with the spirit of freedom and renewal, just as in the love and romance poems crafted between Dumuzi and Inanna in Sumer.

On this occasion, Nawrouz is recognized as an international holiday by the United Nations, highlighting its value as an element of intangible cultural heritage that reflects cultural diversity and promotes tolerance among nations.[16]

Socially, Nawrouz serves as an opportunity for family gatherings and social interaction, where relatives and friends come together to celebrate and visit one another, strengthening social bonds. It is also an occasion for reconciliation, as people seek to resolve past conflicts and start the new year with open hearts.

## Rituals and Traditions

Amid joyous traditional rituals and customs, Iraqis from all communities and minorities celebrate Spring Festival on March 21st each year. This day coincides with the Nawrouz Festival, which the Kurds consider a national holiday marking their traditional new year. Nawrouz commemorates the legendary hero Kawa the Blacksmith and the famous story of his uprising against the tyrant Zahhak, whom he struck down with his hammer, ending his oppressive reign over the Kurdish people. For this reason, Kurds celebrate this day as a symbol of good triumphing over evil and tyranny.[17] In recognition of its significance, Iraq declares it a public holiday across the country.

On this occasion, the Kurdish governorates (Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Erbil) and various Kurdish-populated districts witness large gatherings and traditional celebrations. Official festivities are organized by provincial councils under the sponsorship of the Kurdistan Regional Government, while non-official events take place in parks and public gardens. These celebrations include lighting bonfires, venturing into nature, performing traditional Kurdish dances (dabke [18]), singing folk songs, wearing vibrant Kurdish attire (for both men and women), and preparing traditional Kurdish dishes and sweets.

The town of Akre[19] (Aqrah) in Duhok Governorate is particularly known for its unique and enthusiastic Nawrouz celebrations. Thousands of people from across Kurdistan flock to Akre to witness its iconic Nawrouz festival, which features the raising of the longest flag and the grand torchlight procession. Before sunset, celebrants ascend the town's mountaintop, where festivities begin with fireworks and the lighting of hundreds of torches, creating a spectacular view. Young volunteers carry these flaming torches in a grand procession up Akre's mountains, following the tradition of Kawa the Blacksmith, who led his people's revolution against tyranny.

15 Akitu Festival: From Sumerian Roots to Global Horizons / Dr. Khazal Al–Majidi, p.34

16 https://www.unesco.org/ar/days/poetry

17 The Historical Roots of the Popular Epic of Nowruz, Dr. Hussein Qasim Al–Aziz, page 207, Baghdad 2010

18 A type of traditional dabke or hand–holding dance similar to those found in the Balkans, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Kurdish dabke is a form of circular dance, often with or without an independent dancer added to the geometric center of the dancing circle. According to the Encyclopedia of Islam, Kurds sing and dance at festivals, birthdays, weddings, Nowruz and some religious ceremonies in some communities. Dabke is the most prominent folkloric dance that distinguishes Kurds from their neighboring populations.

19 A district of Iraq, administratively affiliated to Dohuk Governorate in the Kurdistan Region. Its center is the city of Aqra.

Due to Akre's exceptional Nawrouz celebrations, it was declared the Capital of Nawrouz by the Duhok Provincial Council in 2018. This distinction is attributed to the efforts of young volunteers who work collectively and in an organized manner, preparing for the festival weeks in advance. Their dedication to this traditional celebration not only showcases their love for Nawrouz but also promotes Akre's cultural identity. The town's picturesque landscape, surrounded by mountains and its historic fortress, further enhances the festive atmosphere. In March 2023, notable events included a torch relay with 2,000 flames, the placement of 3,500 torches on Akre Mountain, as well as laser light displays and advanced sound systems, creating a breathtaking spectacle.

In Sulaymaniyah,[20] particularly on Mama Yara Hill, the Nawrouz Flame (Kawa's Torch) is ignited during a mass gathering featuring artistic and cultural performances. Similarly, in Erbil's historic Citadel,[21] the official Newroz festival is held, attended by high-ranking Iraqi officials and Kurdistan Regional Government representatives.

At the popular level, on the morning of Nawrouz, Kurdish families, along with families from other ethnic groups, take part in a long-standing tradition of heading to the mountains, parks, and green spaces that flourish in spring. Tourists, visitors, and residents from diverse ethnic groups and religions, including minority communities – both from within Iraq and abroad – join in an atmosphere of harmony, love, and coexistence. They extend warm greetings to one another while enjoying traditional Iraqi dishes, such a Dolma, Biryani, Qaliya, Yaprak (stuffed grape leaves), as well as Quzi (roast lamb or chicken). Additionally, barbecues are an essential part of the Nawrouz feast, where families share meals freely with others, even with strangers. Tea is prepared over small bonfires, fostering a sense of camaraderie and strengthening social and human bonds regardless of cultural, religious, or ethnic differences.

During these celebrations, men, women, and children form dance circles, and perform folk dances to lively Kurdish music in the heart of nature, away from the hustle and bustle of city life. They chat, reminisce, and engage in various pastimes such as chess, backgammon, and card games for entertainment. Meanwhile, Kurdish poetry and folk songs echo through the air as people dance energetically to traditional rhythms.

As part of the Nawrouz tradition, Kurds wear their distinctive traditional attire. Men's clothing includes loose-fitting trousers wrapped with a long embroidered sash (sometimes up to 10 m long, depending on financial ability), a white shirt, and a half-zipped jacket. Women's outfits consist of two-piece garments in vibrant colors, unlike men's attire, which features earthy, gray, and blue tones. Accessories such as belts, weapons, and jewelry are added based on personal preference, particularly among villagers. Wealthy families often adorn their outfits with gold accessories and ornate headpieces. In modern times, Kurdish fashion has evolved, integrating contemporary designs while preserving traditional elements. Young women's attire differs from that of older women, yet Kurdish costumes across Kurdistan remain largely similar, with only minor regional variations.[22]

Beyond Kurdistan, Nawrouz is still celebrated across Iraq under the name *Yawm Al-Mahya* (Day of

20 An Iraqi city and the capital of the Sulaymaniyah Governorate in eastern Iraqi Kurdistan, near the border with Iran. Sulaymaniyah is located at an elevation of 2,895 feet. Since its founding, Sulaymaniyah has always been a center for great poets, writers, historians, politicians, scientists and singers.

21 Erbil Citadel is an ancient citadel and fortress located on a hill and the center of the city of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. It serves as the historic center of Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The citadel has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since June 21st, 2014.

22 https://iraq.shafaqna.com/AR/355324/

Reviving Spring). In Kirkuk and Turkmen villages, people gather on the evening of March 21st, where children carry torches and sing in the streets and on rooftops. At night, they break old clay and ceramic jars, a practice rooted in folk tradition. Among the Turkmen Christians of the Kirkuk Citadel, the celebration is known as Helana, marking the legend of Saint Helena. In Basra, it is called *Kisla* Day, while in other regions, it is referred to as Dawrat Al-Sana (Turning of the Year) or Day of Al-Khidr, a mystical Islamic figure associated with eternal life, fertility, and greenery. On this day, Iraqi families head to gardens, public parks, or orchards, bringing along traditional dishes such as dolma and biryani, as well as grilled meats to enjoy the spring atmosphere before returning home in the evening.[23]

## Nawrouz: A Symbol of Connection and Cultural Diversity

Nawrouz embodies Iraq's rich cultural diversity, bringing together various social and ethnic communities, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Syriacs, Sabians, and Yazidis across many cities and provinces. Each community celebrates it under a different name, with unique religious or historical justifications, yet all share in the essence of this season – welcoming the renewal of greenery, the arrival of spring, and the spread of fertility in both environmental and spiritual senses.

The celebrations include:

- *Festive Parades and Public Gatherings*: These take place in mountainous and plains regions, where people wear traditional clothing and perform folkloric dances.
- *Lighting of Fires*: A symbolic tradition representing light, freedom, and triumph over oppression. It is believed to be linked to the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, who led a revolution against tyranny.
- *Traditional Cuisine*: Special dishes are prepared for the occasion, such as Dolma, Biryani, grilled meats, and other festive meals.

The celebration of Nawrouz forms a vibrant mosaic, reflecting Iraq's diverse cultural and ethnic spectrum. Massive crowds gather freely to observe the rituals, joined by high-ranking officials and diplomats from Iraq and abroad. This interactive display of cultural harmony helps showcase Iraq's national and religious diversity to the world.

Nawrouz is a testament to coexistence and peace among Iraqis, highlighting the country's rich heritage of traditions and cultures, all united in a shared celebration of joy and renewal.

## Challenges and Advantages: Celebrating Nawrouz and Spring Festivals in Iraq

All communities across Iraqi society widely celebrate Nawrouz and Spring Festivals on March 21st each year, under different names. However, the celebrations are primarily concentrated in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq due to the holiday's deep national significance for the Kurds, in addition to its alignment with the natural beauty of the season.

In recent years, these celebrations have witnessed a growing presence across Iraqi cities, particularly in the Kurdistan Region, since it gained autonomous status within Iraq in the spring of 1991. This development has played a crucial role in preserving the holiday, passing its traditions to new generations, and promoting awareness of its cultural and symbolic significance.

Nevertheless, the celebration of Nawrouz in Iraq faces several challenges, especially in the Kurdistan

23 https://iraqination.net/archives/5500

Region and other areas where it is celebrated. These effects can be summarized as follows:[24]

- *Rise in Food and Grocery Prices*: Demand increases for essential food items such as meat, fruits, vegetables, and traditional sweets, leading to a temporary price surge due to heightened consumer activity. Restaurants and local markets benefit from the increased demand, but this can also contribute to inflation in the days leading up to the holiday.

- *Higher Transportation and Travel Cost*: The transportation sector (buses, taxis, and domestic flights) experiences a surge in prices due to increased travel between cities and tourist destinations. Travel fares between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region rise significantly, particularly as visitors flock to mountainous and natural areas to celebrate Nawrouz.

- *Increase in Hotel and Tourism Service Prices*: Hotels in cities like Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok witness price hikes due to the influx of tourists from both inside and outside Iraq. Resorts and tourist attractions also raise their prices as demand peaks during the holiday.

- *Higher Prices for Clothing and Gifts*: As Nawrouz approaches, there is a surge in demand for traditional Kurdish attire and gift items, leading to price increases in local markets.

- *Rising Fuel Prices*: Due to the surge in travel and road trips during Nawrouz, fuel prices may temporarily rise in some areas, especially with increased demand for gasoline and diesel.

- *Positive Economic Impact on Certain Sectors*: Despite the temporary price hikes, business owners and merchants benefit from increased sales, which stimulate the local economy, particularly in the tourism, trade, and service sectors.

## Conclusion

The Nawrouz celebrations lead to a temporary rise in prices due to increased demand for goods and services. However, they also contribute to boosting economic activity, particularly in the tourism and commercial sectors.

24 https://www.skynewsarabia.com/varieties/1606278–%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86–%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2–%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%86–%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1–%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A%D9%85–%D8%A7%D9%94%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82–%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86

# NAURYZ IN KAZAKHSTAN: ORIGINS, BACKGROUND AND MODERN PRACTICES

Rustam MUZAFAROV

## Culturological Prerequisites and Origins of Nauryz in Kazakhstan

The resurgence of Kazakh national culture and spirituality prompts an examination of the historical foundations of its distinctiveness and identity, including its sacred dimensions. It is essential to comprehend the values established by Tengriism millennia ago, which have been preserved to varying extents up to the present day.

In the region of Kazakhstan, semi-nomadic cattle herding was the primary economic and cultural practice, with substantial agricultural activities taking place, in the fertile river valleys of the Syr-Darya, Irtysh, Talas, Chu, Ili, and Karatal. In this region, Turks, Persians, Sogdians, Mongols, and other ethnic groups lived together peacefully. The Turkic Kaganate effectively brought together urban and rural areas into a cohesive economic system, integrating livestock raising and farming, commerce and nomadic lifestyles.

Through military expansion and subsequent assimilation, the integration of diverse ethnic groups into the Turkic cultural domain played a significant role in fostering cultural synthesis. Lev Gumilev wrote: “The Arabs began to refer to all the warlike nomadic groups situated north of Sogdiana as Turks. These groups embraced this designation, as the original bearers of the name, having vanished from existence, had become exemplars of valor and heroism for the steppe peoples” (Gumilev 1967: 6).

The ethnic groups residing in the region currently identified as Kazakhstan have undergone a complex and extended historical evolution. This journey began with the early worship of deities such as Tengri, Zher-Su, and Umai, and progressed to include the veneration of shamans and sorcerers.

Zoroastrianism emerged through the veneration of Mithra, a deity esteemed by pastoral tribes, reflecting the pagan characteristics inherent in these beliefs. The cults associated with the sun and ancestral figures were regarded as superior to the realm inhabited by spirits, magicians, and sorcerers.

The Turkic world is characterized by a rich tapestry of belief systems, from Tengrianism to Zoroastrianism. In fact, these belief systems are not mutually exclusive; rather, they represent a continuum, each serving to extend and enrich the other.

In the nomadic outlook, Tengri-Heaven was perceived as the representation of the masculine principle, characterized by an upward vertical orientation, and was referred to as Heaven-Father. In contrast, Zher-Su was understood as the Horizontal Earth, or Ene-Mother, embodying the nurturing and life-generating principle. The community's aspirations for a thriving existence were intrinsically linked to its generative capabilities, as the fertility of both the pastures and livestock was contingent upon it. The earth was venerated as the source of fertility, with pivotal events such as Nauryz, signifying the beginning of the year, and the autumn fertility festival being closely associated with it.

The veneration of Mithra, acknowledged as the deity of shepherds, was regarded by nomadic herders as an extension of Tengrianism, which included the worship of Tengri and Zher-Su. This religious practice was of considerable significance to pastoralists, who were compelled to relocate to new grazing areas and continuously establish new habitats. The Avesta, as highlighted by Ahura-Mazda, emphasizes the crucial role of Mithra for the steppe herders and their pastures. Consequently, the cosmological perspective unique to the steppe dwellers was initially shaped by Tengrianism and shamanistic traditions, subsequently conveyed to Mithra, and ultimately assimilated into Zoroastrianism. This latter religious framework exerted a profound and lasting impact on the foundational consciousness and existence of the steppe peoples, which were anchored in the principles of freedom and independence. Zoroastrianism infiltrated the norms, customs, values, and behavioral patterns, and more broadly, the culture of the nomads, becoming an indispensable element of their collective mindset.

Zoroastrianism, which initially arose and expanded among the nomadic groups east of the Volga River, constituted the religious framework for the Saks, Usuns, and Massagetes residing along the Syr Darya and the Aral Sea. This historical association is documented in oral folklore and the Saka heroic epic. Academician V.V. Struve wrote: “Within the ranks of the Achaemenid army, the Saka contingents continued to perform songs that hailed from the distant steppes of Central Asia. These songs celebrated the illustrious achievements of the Saka people from earlier times. In the absence of a formal written history, these epic narratives served as a vital means of preserving the historical legacy of the Sakas” (Struve 1968: 53).

Zoroastrianism was a prevalent religious tradition in the southern areas of Kazakhstan and the Semirechye region. Archaeological investigations in these locales frequently uncover Zoroastrian altars, known as *atashdans*, which historically served as sites for maintaining an eternal flame and conducting sacrificial rituals. The remnants of settlements such as Kostyube and Krasnorechensk in Semirechye have yielded numerous material artifacts indicative of the local Zoroastrian culture. Importantly, Zoroastrianism did not conflict with indigenous belief systems but was instead adapted to them, as evidenced by the incorporation of nomadic life elements into Zoroastrian monuments.

In the 20th century, archaeologists highlighted a phenomenon where nomadic populations exerted influence on sedentary agricultural cultures by incorporating the imagery of nomadic dwellings into religious rituals (Senigova 1968: 55). The burial sites and oval-shaped ossuaries, reminiscent of yurts and embellished with koshmas, exhibit elements of ancestral and familial spirit veneration, alongside the reverence for horses and other animals, thereby mirroring the traditions of the indigenous communities. This evidence points to the potential existence of a distinct form of Zoroastrianism in Kazakhstan, which was developed through the syncretism of the cults of Tengri, Zher-Su, Umai, shamanism, and Mithra, among others.

Zoroastrianism encompasses a variety of seasonal festivals dedicated to Ahura-Mazda and six lesser deities, reflecting the religion's agricultural

and pastoral roots. These festivals include The Middle of Spring, The Middle of Summer, The Festival of Grain Harvesting, The Celebration of the Cattle Homecoming from Summer Pastures, and The Middle of Winter. Additionally, a significant celebration takes place on the last evening of the year, just before the vernal equinox. The seventh festival, Nauryz (New Year), is particularly venerated for its association with the element of fire.

During this time, people engaged in reciprocal visits to extend congratulations on the advent of spring and the new year. This celebration symbolized the revival of benevolent spirits, ushering in warmth and light following the cold winter season (Orynbekov 2013: 75). It intricately wove together pagan rites and rituals from the ancient agricultural-pastoralist observance of spring's arrival. For this occasion, a traditional beverage, referred to as *kozhe*, was prepared using wheat, millet, barley, and other grains. Additionally, purifying fires were ignited, and juniper smoke was employed to fumigate livestock, thereby protecting them from disease.

Ancient Chinese records document the observance of the New Year Spring Festival by the Turks of the Eastern Khaganate in the region between the Yangtze River. This festival was intricately connected to cattle breeding, with a particular emphasis on horse breeding and the production of *koumiss*, activities in which the Kagan was actively engaged. Comparable references regarding the Turkish sultans were found in the manuscript archives of the Ottoman Empire (Kalan 2004).

The Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia, who departed from their homeland over a century ago, observes this holiday by following traditional customs. The celebration begins with the welcoming of the new year on the night of March 21st. Central to the festivities is the preparation of kozhe, a traditional beverage, accompanied by offerings of meat, koumiss, and various dairy products. The event is further enriched by musical performances and traditional competitions, such as *kokpar* and *kyz-kuu*, spanning two to three days. A significant aspect of the celebration involves receiving blessings from the *aksakals* during visits to each yurt. (Kalan 2004).

## Historical and Anthropological Overview of Nauryz Celebrations in Kazakhstan

The Kazakh population predominantly engaged in cattle breeding, a vital component of their economic structure. As noted by academician S. Zimanov, “this branch of production provided them with everything that was necessary for existence in a simple, steppe way of life: food, clothing, means of transportation and goods for exchange“ (Zimanov 1958). The labor-intensive nature of cattle-breeding operations required an in-depth understanding of the climatic and natural-geographical characteristics specific to the regions occupied by Kazakh clans (Valikhanov 1985).

For Kazakh nomadic communities, the observation of their natural surroundings and the tracking of celestial bodies, including the sun, moon, and stars, were crucial for successful long-distance migrations. Historically, the Kazakhs exhibited a profound awareness of shifts in environmental and climatic conditions, as well as meteorological patterns. This acute perception enabled them to discern the periodicity and recurrence of these conditions and, at times, to anticipate the likelihood of favorable or adverse natural events (Segizbaev 1996). By linking seasonal transitions with the movements of celestial bodies, nomads deduced that a year is composed of 12 months, each divided into four weeks.

Research indicates that East Asian societies incorporated the traditional calendar system of Central Asian nomads, characterized by a twelve-year cycle aligned with the Jupiterian solar year (Tsybulskiy 1982). Additionally, Chokan Valikhanov documented that the Kazakhs utilized the Pleiades constellation to discern nocturnal hours and monitor seasonal transitions (Valikhanov 1985).

Aubekir Divayev observed that in the 19th century, the Kazakh population utilized both the official solar calendar and a widely recognized folk lunar calendar, which incorporated the positioning of the Pleiades constellation. In the Syr Darya region of South Kazakhstan, it was a common belief that from the twentieth day of the month of Sauir (April), the "setting of the Yrker (Pleiades) and the initiation of water stream resolution" took place (Divayev 1896).

The crafting of the initial koumiss of the new year, along with its associated rituals, is deeply entrenched in the ancient cultural practices of the early inhabitants of the Great Steppe. These traditions are closely tied to the folk calendar. The first milking of mares and the creation of the initial koumiss marked the onset of the new year. In contemporary times, Kazakhs commonly link this occasion with Nauryz, which signifies the new year across the Central Asian region. Nauryz occupies a prominent role in the symbolic calendar of Central Asia; however, the springtime rituals of the nomadic Kazakhs are fundamentally rooted in an ancient folk calendar. This calendar represents a confluence of multiple calendrical traditions, encompassing lunar, solar, Jupiterian, and Pleiades systems. The month of Chynkuran, commencing in March, is closely associated with the fertility cult. Among the Kazakhs of all three zhuzes, as well as the Kyrgyz residing in the Issyk-Kul and Suusamyr Valley, the term *kuran* is linked to the term *teke* (mountain goat), which serves as a symbol of masculinity. The initial milking of mares and the creation of the first batch of koumiss constitute a significant ritual that signifies the commencement of the new year. This event, which includes the ceremonial offering of the first koumiss to guests, acts as the culmination of the primary spring Kazakh rituals: *biye bailau, aigyr kosu,* and *kymyz muryndyk* (Sultanova et al 2017; UNESCO 2018).

The Argyns from the Middle Zhuz, recognized the beginning of Nauryz as a true new year for cattle-breeding, distinct from the solar calendar (Fielstrup 2002). Similarly, Kazakhs from other tribes, including the Zhalairs, Andas and Naimans, followed the lunar calendar in their phenological practices, observing the cyclical alignment of the Moon with Yrker (the Pleiades constellation), referred to as *togyys aylary* (Argynbayev 1998; Karmysheva 1986). In the Chimkent uyezd, Nauryz was observed on several dates: March 1st, known as All-Kazakh festival, and March 9th, identified as Persian festival, also called Koktas or Kazybeknauryz, in honor of the Kazakh astronomer (Divayev 1896).

Chokan Valikhanov documents a distinctive cosmogonic ritual associated with the advent of the first spring thunder, termed "the roaring of the heavenly stallion." During this event, the household leader was obliged to leave the yurt, carrying a ladle. As they circled the yurt, they would strike the ladle against its walls while declaring, "There is plenty of milk, but not enough coals." Following this, a small amount of milk had to be poured at the entrance, and upon re-entering the yurt, the ladle was to be placed into the lattice structure of the yurt, known as *kerege*. Valikhanov explains that this ritual served as a hopeful invocation for plentiful milk and, by extension, an increase in the herd (Valikhanov 1985).

Mashhur Zhusup Kopeyev, a prominent historian, linguist, and folklorist (late 19th – early 20th century), documented in his work *Nuh, Nauryznama* these historical records indications. The new year for Kazakhs and Persians was traditionally celebrated earlier than the widely recognized dates of March 20th-21st, specifically on March 14th. According to the old calendar, the Nauryznama festivities were extended from March 1st to March 8th, which dates aligned with March 14th-21st in the modern calendar (Kopeev 2007). The traditional Nauryz celebration is held on March 22nd (corresponding to March 9th of the old calendar) and it is titled Ulystun Uly Kuni, or Uly Mereke.

Ethnographer A. Tokhtabai, drawing on the insights of Shakarim Kudaiberdiev, observes that the Kazakhs, in alignment with their ancestral

practices, initially marked the spring equinox with the traditional name Ұlys. It was only following the profound and devastating events of the Kazakh-Dzungarian conflicts and the subsequent hardships of the 18th century, known as Aktaban shubyryndy, which necessitated the migration of most Kazakh tribes to Central Asia, that the term Nauryz was assimilated into Kazakh cultural practices (Tokhtabai 2005: 12). In the Mangystau region, the term Kyzylbastyң nauryzy is used by the older generation for the date of March 22nd; this underscores the Persian etymology of Nauryz (Mangystau) (Suraganova 2024).

Nauryz, a principal holiday in Central Asia, is deeply associated with solar phenomena, the solar cycle, and the reverence for fire, symbolizing life and fertility, with origins in Indo-Aryan calendar traditions (UNESCO 2016). Nauryz (also known as Navruz or Novruz) is distinguished among the array of calendar and agricultural celebrations, as the most prominent and widely cherished by common people (Isomitdinov, 2014). Regrettably, the traditions of Nauryz in the Kazakh steppe have long been overlooked by historians and ethnographers, often being relegated to mere components of agricultural rituals.

In March 1920, Turar Ryskulov, the Chairman of the newly established Central Executive Committee of Soviets of Turkestan, enacted an order to officially respect Nauryz. The order proclaimed that "…the day of March 22nd is to be recognized the national holiday titled - the beginning of spring – Nauruz." However, in 1926, the holiday was abolished, as it was perceived as a religious remnant. Despite this formal prohibition, ethnographic studies reveal that from 1960 to 1975, the tradition endured within local communities in the Semirechye, Jambul, Aktobe, Kustanay, and Karaganda regions. The official recognition of Nauryz was restored in 1988 in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, primarily due to the efforts of the Minister of Culture, Uzbekali Zhanibekov, and the poet Mukhtar Shakhanov (Dzhanibekov 1990). Subsequently, on March 5th, 1991, a presidential decree reconfirmed March 22nd as the national spring holiday Nauryz Meiramy, and since 2001, the dates from March 21st to the 23rd were officially designated as public holidays.

## Modern Nauryz Practices in Kazakhstan

Nauryz is celebrated annually throughout the entire country, and is marked by the robust preservation of traditional transmission methods. These methods are sustained through rituals conducted within families, local communities, labor groups, and educational and cultural institutions.

At the behest of the President of Kazakhstan, the holiday was restructured in 2024-2025 to be celebrated in a novel format across all regions of the country over a ten-day period. This interval was designated as Nauryznama, with each day imbued with symbolic significance. The inaugural day is associated with holiday traditions specific to the western regions. Historically, Kazakhs commenced the celebration of Nauryz on March 14th (March 1st according to the old calendar). In the western regions of Kazakhstan, specifically Atyrau and Mangistau, the day is traditionally referred to as Amal, whereas in the West Kazakhstan region, it is known as Korisu ait. March 15th is recognized as the Day of Charity, emphasizing the importance of sustaining traditions of mutual assistance and nurturing a sense of compassion and support among individuals. March 16th is celebrated as the Day of Culture and National Traditions, with a variety of events organized to promote Kazakh culture and artistic heritage. March 17th is designated as Shanyrak Day, which focuses on activities that promote family values and the moral education of the younger generation. On this occasion, respected elders impart their well-wishes and guidance to the youth. March 18 marked the commencement of National Clothing Day, which initiated efforts to promote traditional garments.

Following this, on March 19th, Renewal Day was observed with collective spring tree planting activities in the southern regions. March 20th was designated as National Sports Day, featuring a range of sports competitions conducted nationwide. On March 21st, Solidarity Day was celebrated, focusing on the enhancement of peace and unity among individuals, thereby fostering mutual respect. March 22nd, traditionally known as Jyl Basy, signified the beginning of the year and was celebrated with extensive cultural and sports events across the country, including the establishment of yurt settlements and fairs. Lastly, March 24th was declared Cleanliness Day, during which a nationwide environmental campaign was executed in all regions.

Between 2019 and 2024 under the guidance of tradition bearers and scholars, the Nauryz Shuagy Concept was formulated. This Concept was endorsed by the Ministry of Culture and Information. It prescribes a celebration period from March 14th to 23rd, with each day assigned a distinct social and cultural purpose. It also proposes a unified design and logo format for nationwide use.

## Sociocultural Impacts and Symbolism of Nauryz in Kazakhstan

Nauryz, known as the Vernal Equinox Day, Nauryz Meiramy, Ulystan Uly Kuni and Zhyl Basy is recognized as the most significant holiday in the calendar due to its universal importance. In the Mangystau region, the elderly refer to March 22nd as Kyzylbastyn Nauryzy, which highlights the Persian origins of the term Nauryz (Suraganova, 2017). This celebration signifies the conclusion of one annual cycle and the commencement of a new calendar year, as reflected in the folk sayings and proverbs: "*Zhyl arkauy - Zhyl basy Nauryz*" ("The end of the year - the beginning of the year Nauryz") and "*Nauryz - Zhyl basy, Bakyt zhalgaasy*" ("Nauryz - the beginning of the year, happiness – continuation").

The holiday symbolizes the unity and equality between citizens and the nation, people and nature, which is reflected in its authentic names. Its designation as a public holiday is grounded in its profound significance. The annual addresses from the Head of State, extensive media coverage, and the celebrations held in workplaces, educational settings, and cultural institutions highlight its symbolic importance.

The rituals and mythology associated with Nauryz encompass a diverse array of elements that can be traced back to ancient times and the Middle Ages. It reflects the cultural practices of the peoples of Central Eurasia and Central Asia. These elements foster an appreciation and understanding of the significance of cultural diversity. The ritual foods linked to Nauryz are essential in representing the connections to the pan-Eurasian culinary traditions.

## Sociocultural Significance and Interpretations of Nauryz in Kazakhstan's Modern Society

The festivities commence on March 14th with the initial stage known as Amal Korisu and Korisu Ait Reunification Day. The greeting, "*Zhyl basy - Korisu Merekesi kutty bolsyn*!" ("The beginning of the year - let the Greeting Holiday be happy!"), underscores the traditional role of the Greeting Ritual in marking the start of a new calendar cycle. This tradition involves a ceremonial exchange where children offer greetings and receive a blessing, Nauryz bata, from elders. The event includes various greeting rituals, where family members, neighbors, and elders welcome guests, recite prayers (*duga*), share ritual meals, and kindle a ritual fire, which symbolizes the essence of life and the light of hope. The greeting ritual is intrinsically linked to the reverence for elders, who reciprocate with a bata – a wish for

prosperity in the new year.

In Mangistau Oblast, the local populace celebrates Amal Mereke on the revered mountain of Otpantau, whereas Korisu Ait is observed in West Kazakhstan Oblast at the esteemed site of Dadem Ata, known as the mausoleum of a saint and healer. The event itinerary includes a pilgrimage to the sacred site, the ignition of a ceremonial fire at Otpantau, and scholarly gatherings featuring educators, local historians, and youth, culminating in a shared ritual meal. In Kazakhstan, it is a customary practice to initiate the year with acts of goodwill, which involve visiting at least three residences of elder relatives and loved ones to extend greetings, thereby demonstrating respect and reverence, and engaging in mutual forgiveness (Suraganova 2020).

The fifth day of the holiday is recognized as Ulttyқ Kiim Kuni, or National Clothing Day. Over the past ten years, individuals in Kazakhstan, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, have increasingly celebrated Nauryz by donning attire inspired by traditional Kazakh garments. This practice has significantly contributed to the advancement of cultural industries, including the arts and crafts sector. Furthermore, traditional games such as *asyk atu, kazaksha kures, aitys, togyz kumalak, kyu* and *orteke* are essential components of the celebration, underscoring the region's rich cultural heritage.

The celebratory table is embellished with the customary new year's soup, which is recognized by several regional appellations, such as *nauryzkozhe, nauryzdyk, zhylkozhe, uyzkozhe,* and *kopkozhe*. There is a common belief that consuming this dish will provide nourishment for the entire year. This soup is notable for its composition, requiring a minimum of seven ingredients, and for the communal aspect of its consumption.

Within the familial context, the perpetuation of holiday traditions holds significant importance. During these festive occasions, children engage in the practice of visiting neighboring households to extend their congratulations, for which they are traditionally rewarded with sweets as tokens of appreciation. A notable custom during this period involves naming children born during the holiday. The girls receive names such as Nauryz, Nauryzgul, and Nauryzjan, while boys may be named Nauryzbek, Nauryzali, Nauryzbai, and Nauryzkhan. Among the esteemed rituals there is the *tusak keser*, a ceremony that signifies a child's initial independent steps. On March 21st, 2023, a vibrant ceremony was conducted at the central square of Kyzyl-Orda for 85 children from large and low-income families to symbolize their first steps.

In the southern part of the country, where the climate is warm, the holiday is celebrated in outdoor settings. This facilitates a connection with the natural environment and reveals a link to traditional practices in livestock management and agriculture. The customs of nomadic life are reflected in the expressions of wishes for plentiful dairy resources, the sharing of koumiss, the erection of yurts, equestrian sports and contests, and the use of traditional swings known as *altybakan*. Agricultural traditions are echoed in ecological activities related to farming, such as the cleaning of springs and canals and the planting of trees.

Educational and cultural organizations host exhibitions showcasing both fine and applied arts and crafts. They also arrange competitions and theatrical performances that engage children, students, and young adults. Furthermore, these institutions convene scientific conferences at regional, national, and international levels. In metropolitan areas, there is a particular emphasis on exhibitions dedicated to handicrafts and applied arts.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, ancient spiritual beliefs have significantly shaped the cultural and spiritual identity of the steppe peoples, profoundly impacting the upbringing and education of their youth. Religious culture was instrumental in the evolution of steppe society, with elements from

the cults of Tengri, Zher-Su, Umai, shamanism, Mithra, and Zoroastrianism enduring into modern times. Since the pre-Islamic period, rituals such as cattle sacrifice, matchmaking, wedding ceremonies, childbirth celebrations, and the Nauryz festival have persisted with minimal alteration. Many folk customs, originating in ancient times, have survived to the present day. The ritual of dousing matchmakers with water, rooted in the ancient water cult (Su), was believed by the steppe peoples to cleanse both body and soul. Traditional games, including kokpar, kures (wrestling), *aytys* (singing competitions) and altybakan (swing games), were integral to wedding celebrations. The ideologies of Tengrianism and the Mithra cult, central to pastoral tribes, fostered a societal ethos that respected women as co-leaders of the family and partners in communal endeavors, a perspective reflected in folk games such as *kyz-kashar, kyz-bori* and kyz-kuu.

The nomadic civilization evolved to achieve greater stability in both spatial and temporal contexts, ultimately establishing a large-scale organizational structure for nomadic social life. Rituals and beliefs have persisted as integral components of the worldview, forming the foundation of our ethical and cultural identity. This continuity has significantly shaped the cultural trajectory of the Kazakhs over subsequent centuries (Orynbekov 2013). Within ancient belief systems, nomads discerned universal spiritual foundations and existential purposes. Traditionally, the Nauryz celebrations were grounded in three fundamental sociocultural principles: *tepe-tendik*, representing balance in nature and society; *igilik, qayyrymdylyk*, denoting acts of charity and assistance; and *zhaanaru*, signifying the renewal of the human environment and surroundings.

The modern concept of Nauryz celebrations includes a ten-day program from 14th to 23rd March, known as Nauryznama. Nauryz in Kazakhstan continues to be at the center of creative trends. While preserving traditional cultural elements, the holiday, supported by both the state and the scientific and cultural communities, is taking on ever richer colors. Each of the ten days is filled with symbolic content and includes cultural and ritual and social practices around charity, family values, renewal, traditional dress, national sports, social harmony, welcoming the new year, and respect for nature. The concept revitalizes the tradition of multi-day celebrations with a large number of active participants, expanding the traditional set of activities. It promotes cultural diversity and creativity at both national and local levels, and fosters mutual respect between communities, groups and individuals. In Kazakhstan, Nauryz remains a central element of creative expression. While preserving its traditional cultural elements, the holiday, supported by both governmental and scientific-cultural institutions, continues to evolve in its vibrancy and richness.

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# CELEBRATING NOORUZ IN KYRGYZSTAN: A TAPESTRY OF TRADITION, COMMUNITY AND RENEWAL

Sabira SOLTONGELDIEVA

## Introduction

The smell of burning juniper fills the house as my mother walks from room to room, murmuring quiet blessings. The fragrant smoke curls around the corners, seeping into the walls, lingering in the air. It is the eve of Nooruz, and the ritual of *alastoo*, the purification of the home. It is a sacred tradition that marks the beginning of the new year. My mother, like her mother before her, believes that the juniper smoke drives away evil spirits, misfortune, and illness, making way for prosperity and well-being. As she moves through the house, she chants in Kyrgyz:

Alas, alas, alas,
May we be free from all misfortunes.
The old year has gone,
The new year has come.
Alas, alas, alas,
May we live safely to see the new moon,
May we live soundly to see the new year.
The Almighty has granted goodness,
The bright sun has been generously given.
May our granary be filled with grain,
May our mouths be full of bread! Alas, alas.

Outside, the crisp spring air is tinged with the promise of renewal. The wheat grains, sprouted well in advance, stand proudly on our table, symbolizing abundance and the awakening of nature.

Later that night, the community gathers around a large cauldron to prepare *sümölök*, the beloved and labor-intensive dish of Nooruz. It is a communal act, one that embodies unity, patience, and shared purpose. Elders and children alike take turns stirring the thickening mixture, while laughter and stories weave through the warm air. The rhythmic sound of the wooden paddle scraping the bottom of the pot becomes a lullaby, reminding us that patience yields sweetness.

## Food and Symbolism: The Heart of Nooruz

Nooruz is not just a celebration of the changing seasons; it is a deeply symbolic event that brings communities together through shared labor, ritual, and feasting. It is a time when people reaffirm their bonds with one another, express gratitude for the past year's blessings, and welcome the promise of renewal. Central to these festivities is the preparation and sharing of food, which carries layers of meaning that reflect the values of resilience, generosity, and interconnectedness. The communal preparation of traditional dishes embodies the essence of Nooruz, reminding people that survival and prosperity are only possible through cooperation and shared effort.

Among the many dishes prepared for the holiday, sümölök holds a special place, both nutritionally and spiritually. This thick, sweet porridge, made from sprouted wheat, signifies the rebirth of the land, the promise of spring, and the collective strength of the community. As a dish rooted in ancient traditions, sümölök is more than just sustenance; it is a sacred offering to nature and a symbol of continuity. The transformation of simple wheat grains into a nourishing, caramelized dish parallels the natural cycle of growth, reminding people that patience and dedication bring forth rewards.

The preparation of sümölök is an act of cooperation and shared purpose. By this time of year, winter stores are running low, and food must be rationed wisely. Yet, rather than keeping what little they have for themselves, families contribute to the communal pot, trusting in the principle that what is shared will return in abundance. The act of gathering together to prepare this dish reinforces social ties and strengthens the sense of belonging. It is not just about feeding the body but also about nourishing relationships, reinforcing the idea that the well-being of an individual is inseparable from the well-being of the community.

The cooking process itself is an endurance test that requires patience and teamwork. Sprouted wheat, softened and simmered for hours, gradually transforms into a rich, caramel-like dish, its natural sweetness emerging through the long process of slow cooking. The preparation of sümölök often extends through the night, with participants taking turns stirring the mixture in large cauldrons set over open fires. The rhythmic scraping of wooden paddles against the pot creates a meditative, almost hypnotic sound that blends with the laughter, songs, and storytelling shared by those gathered around.

As the dish thickens, stones or walnuts are added to the mix, preventing the grains from sticking together and ensuring even cooking. But beyond their practical purpose, these objects hold a symbolic meaning. The stones, carefully selected and placed in the pot, represent resilience and stability. Just as stones withstand the passage of time, so too must individuals and communities endure challenges and hardships. Instead of being obstacles, difficulties in life can serve as shaping forces, teaching valuable lessons and making people stronger. It is believed that whoever finds a stone in their bowl of sümölök will have good luck and strength in the coming year—a reminder that perseverance brings its own rewards.

When the sümölök is finally ready, it is not merely eaten but distributed as a blessing. It is customary to share portions with neighbors, friends, and those in need, reinforcing the idea that prosperity is meant to be shared. Elders often recite prayers or traditional well-wishing incantations before the first taste, acknowledging the collective effort that went into making the dish and expressing gratitude for the renewal of life. The first spoonful is eaten with intention, and the savoring not only of the taste but also of the meaning behind it. This reflection is a recognition of the labor, patience, and unity that made it possible.

Through its rituals, symbolism, and communal preparation, sümölök embodies the spirit of Nooruz, reminding people that the arrival of spring is not just a seasonal change but a philosophical renewal, an opportunity to embrace resilience, strengthen bonds, and celebrate the shared journey of life.

## Beyond Sümölök: A Feast of Symbolic Foods

While sümölök holds a central place in the Nooruz celebration, the holiday is also marked by an array of other symbolic dishes that reflect the values and traditions of the Kyrgyz people. Each food prepared during Nooruz carries deeper significance, reinforcing the connections between the people, the land, and the timeless rhythms of life.

*Köjö*, a thick grain porridge made from a mixture of all the remaining grains after winter, is one of these important dishes. Traditionally, köjö is crafted from a blend of barley, wheat, oats, and other grains that have been preserved throughout the cold months. This porridge not only symbolizes nourishment and sustenance but also serves as a representation of cultural diversity within Kyrgyz society. The mix of grains in köjö mirrors the varied backgrounds of the people who come together to celebrate Nooruz. Just as each grain contributes to the flavor and texture of the dish, each individual, regardless of their origins, plays an essential role in the fabric of the community. This symbolic meal reinforces the idea that when people from different walks of life unite, they can create something greater together – a thriving and harmonious society. The act of sharing köjö at the Nooruz table thus becomes an affirmation of unity, a reminder that through cooperation and mutual respect, we can overcome challenges and make a lasting impact.

*Boorsok*, deep-fried dough balls, is another beloved food that holds great meaning during Nooruz. These warm, golden treats are served to guests as a sign of hospitality, and their crispy, fluffy texture is beloved by both young and old. Especially adored by children, boorsok is a dish that brings joy to the celebration, with little ones eagerly reaching for the hot, aromatic pieces. The act of sharing boorsok is not just about enjoying delicious food, but about fostering happiness and prosperity within the community. In Kyrgyz culture, hospitality is sacred, and boorsok embodies this value as a symbol of generosity and good fortune. It is said that the round shape of boorsok represents the continuity of life and the cycles of nature. As the dough rises and becomes golden brown, it mirrors the community's growth and flourishing under the blessings of Nooruz. The process of making boorsok, kneading the dough, shaping the small pieces, and frying them until golden, is a labor of love that underscores the importance of putting care and effort into what we share with others.

Meat dishes like *beshbarmak* and *plov* (Central Asian steamed rice) are also essential elements of the Nooruz feast, each carrying its own significance. Beshbarmak, a hearty dish of boiled meat served over wide pasta and accompanied by onions and broth, represents not just sustenance but also the principles of hospitality and generosity. Traditionally, beshbarmak is served during significant family gatherings, and its preparation is often a communal effort. The dish emphasizes the importance of coming together to share a meal and celebrate both the bond between family members and the broader community. For the Kyrgyz people, offering beshbarmak to a guest is a profound expression of respect and care. It is more than just food – it is a gesture of warmth and welcome, inviting others to partake in the joy of the occasion. Similarly, plov, a dish made from rice, meat, carrots, and onions, highlights the generosity of spirit that defines the holiday. Often prepared in large quantities for communal meals, plov is a symbol of abundance and the willingness to share one's good fortune with others. Both dishes embody the values of selflessness and hospitality, which are at the heart of Kyrgyz culture and the spirit of Nooruz.

Every dish prepared for Nooruz, from sümölök to köjö, boorsok, and meat dishes like beshbarmak and plov, carries its own unique meaning, yet all reinforce the same core values. Together, they serve as a reminder of the deep connection between the people, the land, and the cycles of nature. The foods of Nooruz are more than just

a way to mark the changing seasons; they are an expression of the shared history, struggles, and joys of the Kyrgyz people. They reflect the communal spirit that sustains both families and societies, nourishing not only the body but also the soul. Just as the grains in köjö come together to create a nourishing meal, the people of Kyrgyzstan come together to share in the abundance of the land and celebrate the cycles of life. Through these rituals, Nooruz serves as a powerful reminder that every dish, every gesture of hospitality, and every act of unity carries meaning – they are symbols of renewal, growth, and the promise of a brighter future for all.

## Nooruz and the Balance of Nature

At its core, Nooruz is not just a celebration of the coming of spring, it is a profound symbol of balance and equilibrium. Occurring on the vernal equinox, Nooruz marks the day when night and day are perfectly equal, each sharing the same length of time. This celestial event, when light and darkness engage in their eternal dance, is a powerful reminder of the natural rhythms that govern our world. It serves as a symbol of the constant tension between opposing forces, a reminder that these forces (though they may seem in conflict) are necessary for harmony and the cycle of life. Just as day and night take turns in their eternal struggle for dominance, so too do the many forces of life: good and bad, joy and sorrow, birth and death, all contributing to the greater balance of the world.

This concept of balance is not confined to the heavens. In the context of Nooruz, it reflects the very principles that underlie the societal and cultural fabric of Kyrgyzstan. Nooruz celebrates justice, fairness, and unity, inviting all to reflect on the importance of maintaining equilibrium in every aspect of life. The very essence of the holiday underscores the belief that no force, whether it is light or dark, wealth or poverty, youth or old age, should have the power to dominate or imbalance life indefinitely. Just as the sun and moon take turns in the sky, Nooruz teaches that each force or experience, no matter how difficult or how joyous, plays a vital role in the continuous cycle of life and must be embraced in harmony.

In a society that holds elders in high regard, where wisdom is carefully passed down from one generation to the next, Nooruz is a time for both honoring the past and looking to the future. Elders often share stories of history, hardship, and perseverance, teaching younger generations the lessons learned through years of experience. In this way, Nooruz offers a rare moment to pause and reflect on the lessons of the past, both the triumphs and the struggles, while also extending an invitation to embrace the new year with open arms, full of possibility and hope. The balance of night and day on the equinox is mirrored in this reflection, where we are reminded that no matter the hardships we face, there is always time for renewal and the promise of better days ahead.

This theme of balance also calls for inner harmony. Just as the earth undergoes its yearly renewal during spring, so too are individuals encouraged to renew themselves, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The equality of night and day invites people to take stock of their lives, to resolve conflicts, forgive past grievances, and make peace with themselves and others. It is a time to seek equilibrium in one's relationships, to let go of grudges and embrace reconciliation, and to approach life with a fresh perspective, unburdened by past wrongs. Through this process of self-renewal, Nooruz offers not only a new year but also a chance to forge a new path, one that is guided by hope, compassion, and the belief in the transformative power of balance.

In this way, Nooruz is not just the beginning of a new year; it is a moment to reflect on the rhythms of life and to embrace the values of unity, justice, and renewal. It is a celebration of the endless dance of light and darkness, the eternal forces that shape our world and remind us that

life, in all its complexities, must always find its way back to balance.

## Community, Hospitality, and the Spirit of Giving

One of the most beautiful aspects of Nooruz in Kyrgyzstan is the way it fosters a strong sense of community spirit. The holiday is not merely a family celebration; it is a collective event that brings entire communities together, transcending individual boundaries. Across the country, Nooruz celebrations spill into the streets, where the vibrancy of the holiday can be felt in every corner. People of all ages gather for music, dance, and traditional games, creating an atmosphere of joy and unity. Streets and town squares come alive with the sound of traditional instruments, the rhythm of dancers' feet, and the laughter of children playing. These shared experiences reinforce the importance of social connectedness and the collective identity of the community.

At the heart of these celebrations are the yurts, which are symbolically erected in town squares as temporary homes for the festivities. The yurt, a traditional nomadic dwelling, represents warmth, hospitality, and the spirit of inclusivity. During Nooruz, these yurts serve as communal spaces, welcoming all who wish to partake in the celebrations, regardless of status, background, or wealth. There is no exclusion, no guest is turned away. Hospitality is considered a sacred duty, deeply embedded in the culture of the Kyrgyz people. It is not just about offering food and drink but about extending a genuine sense of belonging to all who enter. This unconditional welcome is an expression of the Kyrgyz commitment to kindness and openness.

Sharing a meal is one of the most important ways people come together during Nooruz. The act of offering food goes beyond mere nourishment; it is a symbol of generosity and solidarity. Offering well-wishes to guests and ensuring that even the less fortunate has a place at the table are essential elements of the holiday. In fact, the spirit of Nooruz is rooted in the belief that no one should be left out, and that sharing, whether it be of food, blessings, or goodwill, is key to fostering harmony within the community. The festive meals, often rich with symbolism, are a manifestation of the interconnectedness of all people, reinforcing the idea that the celebration is as much about communal ties as it is about personal joy.

This spirit of giving extends far beyond the festival itself, permeating daily life in the lead-up to and following Nooruz. Acts of charity and kindness define the essence of the holiday, underscoring the deeply ingrained belief that prosperity is meant to be shared. People take time to visit the elderly, ensuring that those who may be isolated or in need are not forgotten during the celebrations. Food distribution to the needy is also a significant tradition, with communities coming together to ensure that even the most vulnerable have access to the sustenance and warmth that Nooruz brings. In many towns, families prepare extra portions of food to share with those less fortunate, turning the holiday into a collective act of social responsibility.

Additionally, donations to religious and community organizations are common during Nooruz, with individuals and families giving to causes they hold dear. These gestures, while often small, help to strengthen the fabric of the community, building trust and ensuring that everyone shares in the collective success of the community during the holiday. The act of giving is seen not just as an obligation but as a rewarding opportunity to connect with others and to be part of a larger, more meaningful whole.

These acts of generosity and charity serve as reminders that a truly abundant life is one that is enriched by giving, rather than one that is merely filled with material wealth. The exchange of kindness during Nooruz highlights the importance of emotional and social prosperity, and that the richness of life is not measured by how much one has, but by how much one is willing to share with

others. In this way, Nooruz is not just a celebration of the new year or the arrival of spring; it is a celebration of human connection, compassion, and the enduring power of community.

## Nooruz as a Bridge Between Generations and Cultures

Nooruz is far more than just a celebration in Kyrgyzstan; it is a living, breathing link between cultures, histories, and traditions that transcend borders and centuries. With deep roots in the customs of Central Asia, it is a festival that unites people from diverse backgrounds under the shared theme of renewal and togetherness. The holiday has its origins in ancient Persia, celebrated by Indo-Iranian peoples for millennia, but over time it has been adopted and adapted by various cultures across the region, including the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and beyond. As a result, Nooruz embodies the intersection of different civilizations, linking the sedentary agricultural societies of the Indo-Iranian peoples with the mobile, pastoral cultures of the Turkic nomads, such as the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks.

For the Turkic peoples, Nooruz symbolizes the arrival of spring, a time when the earth awakens from its long winter slumber, and the cycle of life begins anew. The festival represents a deep connection to the land, especially in terms of agriculture and the rejuvenation of crops. In contrast, for the sedentary Indo-Iranian cultures, Nooruz is steeped in ancient rituals that focus on the renewal of the earth, the sun's victory over darkness, and the prosperity that accompanies a bountiful harvest. Despite these distinct origins, Nooruz serves as a bridge between these two worlds. The agricultural practices of the sedentary people complement the pastoralist traditions of the nomads, both cultures relying on the land for sustenance and prosperity. This shared reverence for nature and its cycles fosters mutual understanding and respects, bringing together societies that, while different in lifestyle, are united in their connection to the earth.

In Kyrgyzstan, where multiple ethnic groups, including Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and even Russians, live side by side, Nooruz is a unifying force. It provides an opportunity for people to celebrate not only their unique cultural identities but also the interconnectedness of their shared heritage. The ritual practices of Nooruz may vary from one ethnic group to another, but the core values of renewal, unity, and prosperity are universally embraced. The holiday creates a space where cultural boundaries blur and a common sense of belonging emerges. Whether through the preparation of sümölök, the exchange of gifts, or the sharing of meals, Nooruz fosters a collective sense of purpose, as people from different backgrounds come together to mark the arrival of spring.

The celebration of Nooruz is also a profound way to honor and connect with the past. It serves as a vital link between generations, providing a framework through which younger generations can learn about their ancestors' customs, values, and beliefs. For many young Kyrgyz, Nooruz is an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural roots, to understand the significance behind each ritual, and to carry forward the traditions that define their identity. As children sit around the table, listening to their elders recount stories about the origins of Nooruz and the ways it has been celebrated over the centuries, they inherit not only knowledge but also a sense of responsibility to preserve their heritage. This transmission of cultural memory is a cornerstone of Nooruz, ensuring that the lessons of the past are passed down to future generations, while simultaneously allowing each new generation to contribute its own interpretation and innovations to the celebration.

Nooruz also serves as a reminder that cultural identity is fluid and interconnected, rather than rigidly defined by ethnic or historical boundaries. It is a festival that allows people to honor their roots while celebrating the diversity and richness

of the broader community. For the Kyrgyz, the tradition of Nooruz is not merely a relic of the past, but a living, evolving celebration that bridges different worlds – those of sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic herders, the Turkic peoples and the Indo-Iranian civilizations, the ancient and the modern. In this way, Nooruz embodies the harmony that arises when diverse cultures come together, sharing common ground while respecting the differences that make each community unique.

As Nooruz is celebrated, it is a time not just for looking backward but for looking forward, as well. It is a moment to reflect on the interconnected fates of all who observe the holiday, regardless of their cultural background, and to renew a collective commitment to peace, unity, and mutual respect. The shared observance of this ancient holiday offers a chance to honor the richness of Central Asia's diverse peoples while affirming the common values that link them together.

## Conclusion: Nooruz as an Eternal Celebration of Continuity and Renewal

As the sun sets on Nooruz, the air is filled with the sounds of music, laughter, and heartfelt exchanges of well-wishes. The warmth of shared meals and communal joy lingers, reminding us of the values that make this celebration so meaningful. Yet for me, the most enduring image of Nooruz remains the quiet ritual of alastoo, the juniper smoke swirling through our home, carrying my mother's whispered blessings. Just as she learned this tradition from her mother, I hope that my daughter, and her daughter after her, will carry it forward – purifying their homes and welcoming Nooruz with their families and communities.

But Nooruz is more than just the sum of its rituals and feasts, it is a profound testament to the resilience of tradition and the cyclical nature of life itself. Across centuries and shifting landscapes, Nooruz has remained a bridge between past and future, an unbroken thread that connects ancestors to descendants. Each generation leaves its mark on the festival, adapting and reinterpreting its meaning while preserving its essence. In the flickering embers of the juniper, I see the continuation of our heritage, a thread that binds us to the past while lighting the way for the future.

Beyond our own families, Nooruz stands as a celebration of collective renewal, a time when communities reaffirm their ties to one another and to the land that sustains them. It is a reminder that no winter lasts forever, that after hardship comes renewal, and that prosperity is most meaningful when shared. The sprouted grains of sümölök symbolize not just agricultural abundance but the faith that patience and perseverance will bring reward. The balance of light and darkness on the equinox speaks to the harmony we strive to cultivate in our own lives, between hardship and joy, tradition and change, the individual and the collective.

As Nooruz continues to be celebrated across Central Asia and beyond, it serves as a timeless lesson in resilience, unity, and the deep interconnectedness of all things. Whether through the rising smoke of alastoo, the stirring of sümölök, or the laughter shared around a table laid with köjö and boorsok, Nooruz remains an eternal call to renewal, an invitation to honor our past, embrace our present, and step forward into the promise of the future.

# CELEBRATION OF NOWRUZ IN MONGOLIA

Enkhbat AVIRMED

## Introduction

One of the major holidays widely recognized and celebrated throughout Mongolia is Nowruz. This festival coincides with the day the first Mongolian traveled into space and is regarded by Mongolians as a solar celebration, a spring festival, and the Kazakh community's new year – akin to their own Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year). In Mongolia, the Kazakh, Uzbek, and some Khoton ethnic groups celebrate Nowruz on a significant scale.

The Kazakh population in present-day Mongolia permanently settled in the Khovd region between 1868 and 1869, which marked the beginning of Nowruz celebrations in the country.[1] Among the Khoton ethnic group, those residing in Bayan-Ölgii Province alongside the Kazakhs celebrate Nowruz, whereas those dispersed across other regions of Mongolia generally do not.

Although Nowruz was reportedly banned in 1926, it continued to be celebrated in Bayan-Ölgii until the late 1940s.[2] However, no official decree or resolution from 1926 explicitly banning the holiday has been found. Archival records indicate that on January 4th, 1933, during a meeting of the People's Great Khural of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), the Council of Ministers discussed and approved a resolution (No. 21) regarding the designation of official celebration days. The resolution formally recognized revolutionary and communist-themed holidays, but it did not issue any explicit prohibition on traditional celebrations like Nowruz.[3] Nevertheless, under the strict

1 Пүрэвсүрэн Ц., *Монголын баруун бүс нутгийн хүн амын шашин шүтлэг, Олон соёлын хэв шинжүүд,* Улаанбаатар 2024. т.131

2 Алтангүл Б., *"Казахын соёл, зан заншил", эрдэм шинжилгээ өгүүлэл, нийтлэл,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.51.

3 МУҮТА, ТБА, Х-11, Д-1, Хн-258. хуудас–3–5.

communist regime, where anything not explicitly permitted by law was considered prohibited, Nowruz was effectively banned. Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1990, the Kazakh community in Mongolia, like the rest of the Mongolian people, regained the freedom to celebrate their traditional holidays. Finally, on July 7th, 2010, the Government of Mongolia officially included Nowruz in the list of recognized commemorative days.

## The Celebration of Nowruz Among Mongolian Kazakhs

According to the research of scholar N. Gongorjav, the celebration of Nowruz among Mongolian Kazakhs was traditionally observed either according to the Khizr calendar or the lunar calendar, marking the beginning of spring.[4] However, on March 15th, 1991, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan issued a decree officially designating[5] March 22nd of the Gregorian calendar as the day of the Nowruz Festival. Following this decision, Mongolian Kazakhs immediately adopted March 22nd as the official date for celebrating Nowruz.[6]

Thus, Mongolian Kazakhs celebrate Nowruz every year on March 22nd. Although the origins of Nowruz trace back to ancient Iranian culture, the nomadic Kazakh tribes have deeply integrated their own traditions, customs, and beliefs into the holiday. Nowruz is often referred to as the "birthday of spring," and the day it is celebrated is known as "Ulistin Uli Küni" or "The Great Day of the Nation." Kazakhs hold the sun in great reverence. On the morning of Nowruz, they wake up early to observe the sunrise and predict the year's fortunes. This tradition is why Nowruz is also known as the Festival of the Sun.

## Preparations for the Celebration

Nowruz is a spring festival and a celebration of the new year, thus everything is prepared with the intention of welcoming purity and renewal. This aspect of the festival bears a strong resemblance to the Mongolian Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year). Regarding the preparation process, Dr. B. Altangul observed:

> In anticipation of the festival, people begin thorough cleaning in their homes several days in advance, ensuring that the first day of the New Year is greeted with cleanliness and order - a practice quite similar to the preparations for Tsagaan Sar. Skilled individuals sew new wall hangings and bed covers to decorate their homes. Young people craft and embroider new caps for their fathers and brothers, while others carve wooden utensils such as ladles, spoons, cups, and trays, contributing to the household with handmade items. Decorating the home is also a way to showcase craftsmanship.
>
> There is a belief that welcoming the New Year as pure and clean as a peeled onion will keep people healthy and free from misfortune throughout the year. As part of this belief, every household removes dust and dirt, purifies the home with fire, and prepares for a fresh start.
>
> Men trim their beards and groom their hair, while children are bathed, have their nails trimmed, and are dressed in fresh clothes.

4 Гонгоржав Н., *"Монголын казахуудын уламжлалт баяр ёслол, холбогдох зан үйл", Магистрын дипломын ажил, Улаанбаатарын их сургууль Хүмүүнлэгийн ухааны тэнхим,* Улаанбаатар 2019, т.12.

5 https://7kun.kz/news/aza–stan–respublikasyny–tarihynda–y–nauryz–ajy.

6 Гонгоржав Н., *"Монголын казахуудын уламжлалт баяр ёслол, холбогдох зан үйл", Магистрын дипломын ажил, Улаанбаатарын их сургууль Хүмүүнлэгийн ухааны тэнхим,* Улаанбаатар 2019, т.12.

New garments and accessories are prepared for everyone, as it is believed that entering the New Year in a clean and purified state ensures a prosperous and fortunate year ahead.[7]

From this, it is evident that the primary purpose of Nowruz preparations is to welcome the new year in a state of purity, with fresh clothing and household items. Additionally, the tradition of purification through fire, a long-standing practice among ancient Mongol and Turkic nomads, remains alive to this day.

Historical records indicate that the Huns, Turks, and Mongols would ritually purify foreign envoys and gifts by passing them between two fires, a practice noted by European travelers. The tradition of using fire for purification and warding off evil continues to be an important custom among both Mongolian and Kazakh communities today.

Before the festival, Kazakhs fill all available vessels in their homes with milk, yogurt, or fermented mare's milk (*khormog*) as a symbol of abundance and prosperity.[8] If dairy products are unavailable, spring water is used instead. This tradition, which ensures that the new year is welcomed with plenty and prosperity, closely resembles the Mongolian custom during Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year), where households fill their containers in anticipation of the new year. Additionally, to start the year debt-free, people resolve any outstanding financial matters before the festival.

The night before Nowruz is known as "Kyzr's Night" among Kazakhs. It is believed that Kyzr Ata (Grandfather Kyzr) – a wise, elder figure and messenger of happiness and good fortune – visits homes, and blesses those that are clean and pure. In honor of this belief, elders recite the prayer:

"Kizir Ata koldasin, esh jamandik bolmasin."[9]
"May Father Kyzr bless you, and may all misfortune be kept away."

Since 2008, Mongolia has hosted an annual Mongolian national wrestling tournament dedicated to Nowruz, featuring 128 wrestlers. This event typically takes place three days before the festival. The tournament prize has increase in value over the years, with the 2024 champion receiving a passenger car as the grand prize.

Elderly women begin the morning by bowing to the rising sun, offering prayers and blessings while greeting one another. As part of the ritual, all members of the household face the sun, offering milk in honor of its life-giving power.[10] A special household blessing ritual is also performed. The lady of the house sprinkles milk inside the home and pours yogurt at the doorstep to ensure good fortune and purity.

This tradition continues to this day. The head of the household rises early to greet the sun. They leave the home and stand on an elevated spot to perform a sun salutation. Unlike some cultures that kneel or lie down in reverence, Kazakhs perform the ritual standing upright. Facing the sun, they raise both hands, forming a crescent shape with their fingers, palms open towards the sky. They then recite prayers and blessings to welcome the new year.

On the morning of Nowruz, family members rise early, dress in their national attire or clean, new clothing, and exchange greetings with their elders and each other. They wish one another health, happiness, and success in the new year.

7 Алтангүл Б., "Казахын соёл, зан заншил", эрдэм шинжилгээний өгүүлэл, нийтлэл, Улаанбаатар 2017, т.52.

8 Етекбай Т., Олон улсын Наурызын баяр, Улаанбаатар 2017, т.26

9 Tattigül Kartaeva, Gulnar Habijanova, "Kazak Kültüründe Nevruz ve Nevruznâme Bayramı Ritüelleri, Özellikleri", *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, Yaz 2017/82, s.117

10 Алтангүл Б., "Казахын соёл, зан заншил", эрдэм шинжилгээний өгүүлэл, нийтлэл, Улаанбаатар 2017. т. 52

When greeting, men clasp each other's hands with both hands and touch chests, while women embrace. When a man and a woman greet each other, they touch chests briefly.[11] This custom symbolizes the belief that "the chest is the pillar of life, and the two hands that sustain life should be healthy and strong." Family members join in, mirroring the gesture with palms raised toward the sun. After the prayer and greeting, the head of the household completes the ritual by saying "Allahu Akbar," and then gently wipes their face with their palms.

If the head of the household is absent or widowed, or if no elder is present, another family member takes on the responsibility of performing the sun salutation. Sun worship among the nomads of Central Asia is an ancient tradition. The Chinese historian Sima Qian (c. 145 – c. 86 BCE) recorded in his famous work Shiji, that the noble rulers of the Hunnu, who established their state in 209 BCE, performed rituals to welcome the new year and make offerings.[12] He wrote that their king would come out of his palace in the morning to worship the rising sun and then again in the evening to worship the moon. Archaeologists have uncovered numerous golden ornaments depicting the sun and moon from Hunnu aristocratic tombs excavated in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and the Transbaikal region. This tradition of reverence for the sun, moon, and sky was passed down to later Mongolic and Turkic-speaking peoples. Even today, the custom of offering milk and tea to the rising sun remains widespread across Mongolia.

In the early days of celebrating Nowruz, men would clear clogged rivers and plant trees and flowers on the first day of the new year. The tradition of planting trees may be linked to the Uyghurs' ancestral belief that their origins are tied to trees, as reflected in their tree-worship practices. Furthermore, Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of planting trees, as taught by the Prophet Muhammad.

The blessings exchanged during Nowruz can be divided into two types. The first relates to the state. One such blessing, "*Ulis on-Ak mol bolsiin*," means "May the state be peaceful, and may the people live in harmony." There is also another blessing, "*Ulsyn joloo mergem baig*," which means "May the nation be wisely governed."

The second type of blessing is related to daily life and is dedicated to children and family. Nowruz blessings carry wishes for goodness and prosperity, including prayers such as "May all misfortune disappear," "May you have abundant livestock," "May you have many children," and "May your food and drink be plentiful." After relatives and the community have gathered and exchanged greetings, the *aksakals* (elders) offer their wisdom and reflect on the past year's achievements and challenges. In accordance with ancient nomadic traditions, past disputes and conflicts are reconciled, and people forgive one another. This custom also exists among Mongolians. The renowned Kazakh writer D. Doszhanov wrote: "Two thousand years ago, our ancestors, the nomads of the steppe, celebrated their new year. Nowruz is also a day of forgiveness. The aksakals (elders) always used it as an opportunity to reconcile warring kings and warriors."[13]

Indeed, like the new year celebrations of many Asian peoples, Nowruz is a festival of unity and reconciliation. Therefore, during the Nowruz festivities, arguments and conflicts are strictly avoided. On this day, Kazakhs gather with their families and neighbors, listen to the advice of their elders, and celebrate with joy. During the festival, households leave their doors unlocked, welcoming all guests with open hospitality.

Like many cultures worldwide, it is believed

11 Алтангүл Б., "Казахын соёл, зан заншил", эрдэм шинжилгээний өгүүлэл, нийтлэл, Улаанбаатар 2017. т. 54.

12 Сүхбаатар Г., *Монголын түүхийн дээж бичиг 1,* Улаанбаатар 1992. т.24.

13 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.26.

that celebrating Nowruz with an abundance of food and drink ensures prosperity and happiness in the coming year. For this reason, the festive meal must include at least seven types of food, including meat, dairy products, sweets, and fruits. On the feasting table can be found lamb's head, fatty hip cuts, and *kazy* (a traditional Kazakh sausage made by salting and drying horse rib meat in its own fat), as well as various other types of meat, fried dough (*boortsog*), pastries, fruits, sweets, nuts, and raisins.

Following the traditions of ancient Mongolic and Turkic nomads, the eldest person in the household recites a blessing and begins cutting the lamb's head by slicing small pieces from both jawbones. The first portion is given to the head of the household, followed by others in order of seniority. Next, the second eldest person carves the fatty hip cut, first serving the household head and then distributing pieces according to age.[14] Traditionally, nomads honored the new year by making an entire sheep the centerpiece of the feast, a practice that later evolved into serving the head and hip as symbolic representations of the whole animal.

The main dish of the Nowruz celebration is the soup called *köje*. This festive köje soup includes lamb's head, preserved meat from winter provisions, milk, and dairy products. The dish consists of seven ingredients: water, meat, salt, fat, flour, grains (such as rice, corn, or wheat), and milk or fermented dairy (*aaruul*).

Dr. T. Yetekbai noted that the word köje is related to *khök-khool*, meaning "Heaven's blessed food."[15] In ancient Turkic, it indeed conveys the idea of "heavenly food," showing how the Kazakh people have integrated this festival into their deep-rooted traditions. Additionally, Nowruz köje must be prepared in a large pot and shared among many people. Eating from the same pot symbolizes unity and friendship. Thus, visiting and tasting köje from as many households as possible – ideally 40 – is encouraged.

The number 40 holds significance in both Kyrgyz and Kazakh cultures. Among Mongols and Kazakhs, it is believed that a man's wisdom and strength fully mature at 40 years of age. In Kyrgyz and Kazakh traditions, a newborn is given a ceremonial bath and a celebratory feast after reaching 40 days.

Dr. B. Altangul wrote that the seven ingredients in köje represent seven fundamental aspects of life: joy, happiness, wisdom, health, wealth, growth, and protection.[16] Another tradition involves serving Nowruz köje made from seven types of grain in seven bowls before an aksakal (a respected elder with a white beard). It is customary to visit at least seven homes and invite seven guests.[17] The number seven has an ancient symbolic significance, originating from the Seven Stars (*Pleiades*), and is highly revered among Mongolic and Turkic peoples.

The colors of Nowruz are also associated with the number seven. The first rainbow of spring, with its seven colors, signals the melting of the last white snow, bringing forth a vibrant landscape. This idea is reflected in the festival's colorful attire, household decorations, and festive arrangements, ensuring a visually rich celebration.[18]

In addition to köje, many other dishes are prepared on this day, incorporating blessings from both the previous and the new year. As noted, the *dastarkhan* (feasting table) is adorned with

14 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.38.

15 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т..21.

16 Алтангүл Б., "Казахын соёл, зан заншил", эрдэм шинжилгээний өгүүлэл, нийтлэл, Улаанбаатар 2017. т.54.

17 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.38.

18 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.22.

homemade boortsog, aaruul, and kazy, as well as *eetseg* (fermented dairy), sweets, fresh and dried fruits, and nuts, all prepared by the female head of household. According to tradition, portions of the feast are set aside for elders and those traveling far from home. It is believed that the more abundant the household's feast during Nowruz, the more prosperous the coming year will be. Hence, families prepare as much food and drink as possible, generously hosting guests.

## Festive Games and Entertainment

Nowruz celebrations include various performances, blessings, praise songs, poetic contests, and riddles. One of the most exciting traditions is Aitys, an improvised musical competition. Participants engage in an extemporaneous lyrical duel, composing verses on the spot while playing the *dombra* (a traditional stringed instrument). The best performers advance to compete with other finalists in a knockout-style contest.

During large public festivals, competitions primarily test men's strength, agility, and courage. These include *kokpar* (tug-of-war with a goat carcass), *kız quu* (chasing the girl), *audaryspak* (wrestling on horseback), *baluan* (traditional wrestling), and *teke atu* (coin shooting). Horse races are also a significant part of the celebration. Historically, the most popular games among the people were Aikysh-Uikysh ("Meeting Eachother") and audaryspak, where men tried to pull each other off their saddles.

Young men who participated and won such traditional wrestling matcheswere rewarded. Women also challenged men with various riddles and intellectual contests. If a man won, he earned the right to befriend the woman. However, if he lost, he had to admit defeat and fulfill any request she made. In some cases, this tradition led to Nowruz celebrations turning into wedding ceremonies.[19] People of all ages and social backgrounds participated equally in the games without restriction or obligation.

In modern urban life, celebrating Nowruz for several days with traditional competitions and games has become less common. However, the festival has evolved into a more contemporary format, including parades, ceremonies, and concerts.

## Government Recognition of Nowruz

The Mongolian government, including the president, parliament, and prime minister, highly respect the Nowruz celebration. The president of Mongolia regularly participates in Nowruz events held in Bayan-Ölgii Province, where a large Kazakh community resides. The tradition of the Mongolian president officially extending Nowruz greetings to the Kazakh people began in 1997 when President Natsagiin Bagabandi attended the celebrations. Since then, the president, speaker of parliament or prime minister has annually visited Bayan-Ölgii to celebrate Nowruz with the Kazakh community. Additionally, in honor of Nowruz, the president of Mongolia awards state medals to outstanding Kazakh citizens who have contributed to society. It is also customary for top government officials to meet with respected Kazakh elders, congratulate them, and engage in warm conversations to honor their contributions.

The Kazakh people in Bayan-Ölgii Province widely observe and celebrate the Nowruz holiday in a grand and beautiful fashion. Around 20 felt yurts are set up in the central square of the provincial capital, where a Nowruz soup is prepared. During this event, a large cauldron, called tai kazan, is

19 Етекбай Т., *Олон улсын Наурызын баяр,* Улаанбаатар 2017. т.40.

placed in the center, and a fire is lit underneath it. Then, *kök ögiz* (or *khökh shar*), a traditional Kazakh dish of meat cooked in the cauldron, is prepared and served as Nowruz köje. This dish is shared with everyone gathered in the square. Previously, this tradition was performed in steppe and rural households.

People come to the square adorned in their national costumes. Elders, youth, women, and children all dress in traditional attire, filling the square with color. In the square, heritage competitions, such as alty bakan (a traditional tug-of-war), *argamzh, ols tatah* (rope-pulling), high climbing, and strength testing are organized. In recent years, local authorities in the province have organized performances such as the "sun dance" and the "thousand dombrists." This Nowruz celebration is held not only in the provincial capital but also in the 12 districts and soums of the province. In some areas, even "eagle hunter festivals" are held.[20]

The Nowruz celebration is not limited to Bayan-Ölgii Province. It is celebrated broadly across the country. Before the Nowruz holiday, Kazakh citizens and students in Ulaanbaatar meet to organize scientific conferences about traditional customs, give interviews on TV, radio, and in newspapers to promote Nowruz, and engage in discussions about it. During the days of Nowruz, Kazakh customs, national costumes, and traditional arts are widely promoted, and people dressed in traditional attire participate in a festive parade.

For example, on March 22nd, 2025, the Nowruz Sun Festival event was held in the central square of Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. The event was organized by the Ulaanbaatar City Administration and the Bayan-Ölgii Provincial Council. It featured a performance introducing Kazakh culture, a Kazakh yurt, a handicraft exhibition, and a presentation of the delicious Nowruz festive meal.

In cities and towns with large Kazakh populations, both government and private organizations give their Kazakh employees time off during Nowruz to celebrate the holiday. Nowruz itself symbolizes everything good and prosperous. On this day, if a new baby is born, the family celebrates greatly. If a boy is born, he is named Nowruzbai, Nowruzbek, or Nowruzkhan, while if a girl is born, she is named Nowruzgül or Nowruzjan. These names symbolize that the child will grow to be a good person who receives love and respect from others, just like Nowruz.

Kazakh students also promote Nowruz at their universities by setting up festive tables, wearing traditional clothes, playing the dombra, and performing Kazakh national dances and songs for the public. Universities also offer scholarships to Kazakh students in celebration of Nowruz.

At the Mongolian University of Science and Technology, where I work, Kazakh faculty and students organize an annual Nowruz event as a tradition. This initiative was first introduced and organized by Professor Ch. Gulnar, the former director of the university's Central Library. During the celebration, the *Gılım* student club welcomes the university's rector, directors, and faculty members, serving them traditional Kazakh tea and food while celebrating with music and festivities.

This year, students Baatarbek Zhantolkh, Muratkhan Ilalla, and other Kazakh students organized and celebrated Nowruz at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Mongolian University of Science and Technology (MUST). The students sang songs in both Mongolian and Kazakh, accompanied by the sound of the dombra. They also showcased Kazakh traditions, such as the *sirga tagu* (traditional wedding ceremony), the baby naming ceremony, and the custom of cradling babies. The youngest participant in our

20 Information obtained from the Governor's Office of Bayan–Ölgii Province.

celebration was a two-month-old boy named Nurseli.

The students performed the Bürged dance to the beat of the dombra, and a festive table with over seven types of sweets and dishes was laid out, including the traditional Nowruz soup and beshbarmak, which were served to both faculty and students. The celebration of Nowruz in Mongolia continues to expand each year, involving more and more people. Large national companies now send greetings for Nowruz and organize cultural events. When we think of Nowruz in Mongolia, we picture Kazakh people, dressed in national costumes, seated at a table full of food and drinks, with the wonderful, harmonious sound of the dombra and the image of hunting eagles.

## Conclusion

The celebration of Nowruz in Mongolia profoundly reflects the customs, traditions, symbolism, and beliefs of the Kazakh people as well as those of the ancient nomadic cultures of Central Asia. As both a spring festival and a new year's celebration, Nowruz symbolizes renewal, purity, abundance, health, and prosperity. It represents a time for rejuvenation, cleanliness, and harmony. Traditionally, individuals eliminate the negativity of the preceding year through symbolic purification by fire. Furthermore, the festival promotes social cohesion by encouraging the settlement of debts and the reconciliation of conflicts, thereby underscoring its vital role in fostering societal goodwill.

For pastoral communities residing in harsh and cold climates, the arrival of the new year's sun – and the warmer seasons it heralds – holds significant importance for their livelihoods. Consequently, paying homage to the first sunrise of the new year constitutes a vital element of the Nowruz celebration. In nomadic societies, elders are held in high esteem, as their life experiences are considered essential to everyday life. Nowruz provides an opportunity to honor these elders, during which families come together, exchange greetings, and receive their blessings and wisdom.

The festival is characterized by an abundance of food and drink, accompanied by profound symbolic meanings associated with specific colors and numbers. In Mongolia, Nowruz is celebrated through traditional Kazakh attire, music, dance, games, and various competitions. In contemporary contexts, the festivities have expanded to encompass parades, official ceremonies, and public concerts.

The president of Mongolia, together with the State Great Khural (parliament) and the government, accords high importance to the celebration of Nowruz. In Bayan-Ölgii Province, home to a significant Kazakh population, the president, the speaker of parliament, and the prime minister take turns attending the festivities each year. On this occasion, the president of Mongolia also extends formal greetings to the Kazakh community. In recent years, the Mayor of Ulaanbaatar has established a tradition of hosting the Nowruz Sun Festival celebration in the city's central square and actively participating in the event. Moreover, universities and institutions throughout Mongolia are increasingly acknowledging and celebrating Nowruz.

Overall, Nowruz in Mongolia has evolved into a festival that not only highlights the rich heritage, culture, and traditions of the Kazakh people, but also serves as a powerful symbol of unity and harmony between the Mongolian and Kazakh communities.

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# NOWRUZ CELEBRATION IN PAKISTAN

Mueezuddin HAKAL

## Introduction

Although not widely popular in Pakistan, Nowruz is celebrated as a local festivity. It survives under the patronage of various communities such as the Parsis, Bahais and followers of Shia sects of Islam (Ithna-Ashari, Nizari-Ismailies); therefore, it is officially observed only in Shia majority districts. However, before the colonial period, this day was among the major celebrations of South Asian Muslims, glorified since the reign of Sultan Ghayasuddin Balban (1266-1287), and under various subsequent kingdoms including the Mughals. The Dogras of Kashmir, despite believing in Hinduism, were among the last kingdoms to celebrate the 21st of March in honour of their subjects who were mostly Muslim. It was believed to be the largest Muslim festivity apart from the two Eids, and therefore, it was often called Eid-e-Nowruz. After the partition of India, and a nearly century long colonial period (1857-1947), it survived only among Shia Muslims. Shia scholars interpret this day as the beginning of everything, including as marking the rise of first sun, and the emergence of Nur of Imamat. It is further considered a day of guidance, since the appointment of Hazrat Ali at Ghadir by the Prophet Muhamad (PBUH). To the communities to which celebration of this day is very specific it is sacred rather than secular; therefore, the religious scholars to this day have attempted to trace its philosophical connection to *hidayah* (guidance) after the Prophet. On the other side, the orthodox Sunni Muslim population (apart from some migrants from Afghanistan, and some Pushtun tribes who consider it culturally important) avoid these celebrations and consider it to be very specific to the Shia tradition. They sometime question its position among the Eids, as it is a Persian celebration, and to them, not considered religious. This is because it is also celebrated by Bahais and Parsis (Zoroastrians) across South Asia. These debates demonstrate the different ways Nowruz is regarded among various groups who believe in different interpretations of Islam. Thus, in Pakistan it is believed to be specifically related to those communities who have some direct or indirect connection to the Persian world. This celebration, connected to spring and new life however, can symbolize for Pakistan's people happiness, positive energy, and peace. Therefore, it can be celebrated

as a secular event for all, despite being considered limited to some sects. Overall, the case of Pakistan is different than those countries which celebrate Nowruz at a national level.

## History and Overview

In the past, some orators suggested Nowruz was "the beginning" of every existing thing in this world. They further suggested that it has focused human attention to think seriously about nature and about active processes of change. This includes for example, the changing of all four seasons every year as well as the fact that, all living beings grow through time, marked by the scale of years, and have a specific period of life. After giving the fruit of that life, they ultimately shall disappear, only to continue in a new form of life, blooming out of the remnants of the old. Thus nature celebrates new life with the fresh winds of spring and with the cheering and dancing of flowers and with the music of the breeze. It is the day which appears every year, on which every existing thing can find happiness through its celebration. The basic understanding of this day is shared everywhere, however, the underlying philosophy beyond its celebration depends on how people believe and relate to it. It has a global role in the tourism industry (Zamani-Farahani 2013), while in Pakistan it is understood differently than that in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran.

Nowruz seems to have grown out of the complex ancient traditions of the Proto-Historic period, relating to astronomical phenomenon (Gosh 2017: 199). Therefore, its connection to the observation of the uniform scale between day and night on March 21st, an equinox heralding spring, is recognized in the northern hemisphere. It is distinct from the longest day of the year on June 21st, the longest winter night of December 21st, and the equinox in September in the fall in the northern hemisphere. The best date for marking "the beginning of life" is the 21st of March with its uniform day and night. It seems a perfect marker to open the natural year, and therefore, to open the human calendar. Indeed, it seems that this philosophy inspired Omar Khayyam and his team to adjust the Jalali Calendar to correspond to March 21st, which is also the first day of the month of Farvardin and the first day of the year, and thus working differently than the Hijri calendar (Behzadi: 396-97).

Interestingly, a number of these days are observed by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan). For people in this mountainous area of Pakistan, December 21st is celebrated as "Thumushaling" or "Mephang," and is connected to the burning of a cannibal king named Shri-Badat. Therefore, fire rituals are performed to burn the darkness and welcome the dawn. Another agrarian festivity of the spring harvest is celebrated as "Bo-phau" ("Hunza"/"Nager") or "Bi-phau" (Gilgit) or "Heemas" (Yasin) in February. Then, the 21st of March is celebrated as Nowruz, alongside all Central Asian and Persian neighbours. June 21st is known as the "Sambula celebrations" or "Ginani," the harvest festival. Fall celebrations are not exactly observed on September 21st, and rather manifest as prayers conducted across the autumn season, mostly in October.

Among religious circles, Nowruz is usually considered to have its roots in the Zoroastrian religion (Behzadi 2016). However, our memories, and "the Shahnameh" of Firdausī, links Nowruz with the reign of Jamshid, the mythological king, who in Zoroastrian texts, is credited with having saved mankind from a harsh winter that was destined to bring an end to the world (Gosh 2017). However, the absence of references in the Avesta has left scholars in doubt of its Iranian or Zoroastrian origins. Therefore scholars are now attempting to explore its roots in Mesopotamian or Pre-Vedic Indian or Central Asian traditions. Anyway, it is clear that it has been grown out of several ancient agrarian festivities, as in illustrated in the mountainous areas of Gilgit-Baltistan where they are still observed.

With the establishment of Achaemenid Empire, Nowruz seems to have also had an economic purpose, beyond just being a celebration. Bas-reliefs at Persepolis, of the Earth and sun, and of people bringing gifts or taxes to the emperor, are related with lavish Nowruz festivities. This suggests its possible existence in Gandhara before the invasion of Alexander. However, no one has yet identified signs of it in the in classical art of complex scenes of pleasure produced in larger Gandhara. There are references to its existence under the Parthians in general, who ruled Gandhara alongside the Scythians in Taxila, but they lack detail and evidence. With the establishment of the Sasanian dynasty, it was celebrated as the most prominent ritual wherever they ruled. Similar to many other cultural matters, it continued through early Muslim empires, surviving among Muslim converts in Persia and Central Asia in the mid-17th century. Therefore, it was adopted in the Umayyad capital of Damascus, and continued in the Abbasid capital of Baghdad (Kherabadi and Razavi 2020). Following the decline of the caliphate and the reemergence of the Persian dynasties of the Samanids and Buyids, its status was elevated along with the restoration of other pre-Islamic Persian traditions of the Sasanians, altered by the caliphate (Ghosh 2017: 199-202).

However, we know its introduction in South Asia is connected to the migration of several Parsi communities connected to the Muslim Invasion (7th century CE). This migration is connected to the victory of the Arabs over the Sasanians, leading to the migration of several Zoroastrian families from Persia to India. Though, on the state level, celebrations only began under the Reign of Sultan Ghayasuddin Balban (1266-1287), who ruled India from Delhi (Ghosh 2017). Therefore, it became part of the festivities of the Indian Muslim throne of Delhi. Throughout the rule of Mughals over India, it remained the largest of all festivities (Blake 2008; Orthmann 2011). It was celebrated more enthusiastically under the patronage of the smaller kingdoms during the colonial period. Gradually however, during the early post-colonial period, the kingdoms gradually began to dissolve, and with that, such events celebrated at the level of the kingdom also gradually started to disappear. The introduction of new national celebrations began to take on more importance, although did not entirely displace Nowruz. Today, people continue to celebrate it in their homes, villages, and towns, and even at the district level in some areas.

## Characteristics

The explicitly economic purpose of Nowruz vanished long ago. However, it retains cultural, social and above all religious purposes, which sustain it among a few communities in Pakistan. It is now also one among many calendar festivities. Here, it is not a national celebration, but a ritual festivity very specific to a few scattered communities who are considered minorities, including minorities within the majority Hanafi practicing Muslim sects of the Deobandi or Brelvi centers of Islamic thought. These communities concentrate, and are even majorities in some districts. Festivities, rituals and customs are deeply inter-connected to the beliefs and practices of these communities. The institutions governing many social groups through common ideas control the nature of these festivities. Therefore, it is a festival of those who have some direct or indirect relation to the Persian world (Rizvi and Pant 2005). However, those who adhere to modern interpretations of Deobandi and Brelvi do not celebrate Nowruz. The Deobandi tradition has strong influence on religious circles, although with limits in Afghanistan – and thus these communities avoid this festivity, believing it has no relation to Islam. Both large groups celebrate the two Eids of Islam, while the Brelvi dominantly celebrate Eid-Meelad-un-Nabi. For Shia Muslims it is therefore called Eid-e-Nowruz, and is the fourth Eid, in addition to the fifth, Eid-e-Ghadir. The Shia sect does not criticise those who do not celebrate it. Conversely, the Suni Deobandi interpretation of faith does criticize others for celebrating Nowruz among other festivities, considering it a useless

addition beyond the Sharia. It is however, a common festivity among all Shia interpretations, including Shia Imami Ithna-ashari and Shia Imami Ismaili Nizari. Suni tradition relates Nowruz to pre-Islamic rituals and traditions of non-Muslims like the Parsis and Bahais. Though these interpretations also have strong influence over Pashtuns, some Pashtuns, even besides those who follow Hanafi jurisprudence, still participate. However, its celebration is gradually diminishing among the Pashtuns. Overall, it is celebrated by many, but is specific to some areas, and it is controversial to relate it with reference to Muslim tradition.

All the celebrating Muslim communities open the festivities of Nowruz with special morning prayers. They invite family and friends to the breakfast table, known as "*dastarkhuan*." In South Asia, the table is decorated with Haft Sin and newly grown green wheat plants in the centre. Exchanging of foods within families is a common tradition. Shia Imamat of Nizari Ismailies celebrates with special Taliqa (edict) from the Imam of the time, receive *rozi* from Imamat office and offer special prayers in the morning and afternoon. During daytime gatherings at various religious centres, there are discussions among the clergy. After evening prayers, the event concludes with a special dinner, often including invited friends and families.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, majority Shia believers (Ithna-ashari and Ismaili), including Nur-Bakhshies (Sufia), celebrate Nowruz. Therefore, in Gilgit-Baltistan, a local holiday is observed on 21st of March every year. Everywhere in Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral (Ismaili only), it is celebrated in very similar ways. However, local minority Suni Muslims do not celebrate the event. In Gilgit-Baltistan, this is the peak of spring. Wheat fields are green. Apricot trees are full of flowers. A sweet, cool breeze invites people to rise in the morning. Black faba beans are boiled, and children wear them around their necks, as well as eat them. Women color their hands with mehendi the day before, as well as gather to enjoy swings hung on trees, while saying prayers for blessings. Musicians play local tunes on instruments like the *surnai*, while others dance to the tunes. All wear new clothes and celebrate the whole day. Newly born babies are held on the backs of the older generations. In Gilgit and Baltistan, special polo games are also arranged for the event.

People visit various relatives on these days. Younger people are supposed to visit the older members of their families to pay them respects. Offenders who have been involved in a conflict in the previous year, visit those whom they have offended – relatives or otherwise – to be excused smilingly. Therefore, this event works effectively in society. On this day, boys and girls play with and color eggs, which symbolize fertility. They compete for finding the eggs with the strongest shell.

Among the Pashtuns of Pakistan, two communities celebrate Nowruz, including the tribes of the Tribal Area, which have some active connections with Afghanistan, and the Shia Ithna-ashari Muslims of Parachinar (Kurram Agency). Here, it is worthwhile to see the *atan*, the tribal dance of the Pashtuns. Among Shias, the musical instruments to be used in their rituals are not considered prohibited. On the *shehnai*, a tune is played accompanied by *qasidas* in praise of Hazrat Ali, which stirs the emotions of the crowd and inspires them to express their feelings through dance. As this day is related by all Shia to nomination of Hazrat Ali to the seat of Imamat, it is considered the formal beginning declared by Prophet. Further, the *mersiya* in the memory of his son Hussain, converts it into a mourning event occasionally connected in discussions of the Meriage of Imam Hussain. Among Hazara communities in Balochistan, again Shia, Nowruz is very widely celebrated. Similar to the remaining Shia communities, they also relate it to the institution of Imamat.

## Sociocultural Impact and the Symbolism of Nowruz

In the recent past, that is, before the 21st century, families met with each other and shared food, while the clergy received huge gatherings during all prayers on the day of Nowruz. In public prayer gatherings, the clergy elaborated the symbolism of the day, relating it to "the beginning." Though it is very difficult to relate this event to Islamic festivities, they attempt to discuss its religious importance. Everywhere, the interpretation is similar – with a focus on religious significance and the invitation of spring. Its beginnings are often discussed as relating to the Persian emperor Jamshid. Salman Farsi, a near and dear friend of prophet Muhammad, celebrated the event and shared gifts on the day with the Prophet's family. From his relation to the Prophet, the celebration began in the family of Fatima, and then continued in his family. Some also relate it with reference to the events that happened to the family of Prophet Muhammad and Ali. All Khilafats including the Umayyads, Abbasids and Fatimids also celebrated the event. Therefore, the clergy attempts to relate the event to Islam and look it at from a religious viewpoint.

### Sociocultural Impact

People gather on this day at different scales. First, at the family level, gathering involves a celebratory breakfast. Second, relations such as neighbours, relatives, and daughters married to other families are invited to share specially cooked food relation. Youngsters meet elders in the family, and aim to resolve conficts in happy manner. Special gatherings for dancing and games were arranged by the kingdoms of the Hunza, Nagir, Gilgit, and Yasin in Gilgit-Baltistan until 1974. Therefore, people have remembered its strong influence in society in terms of bringing harmony and respect every year. As a influence, it orients people to connection and happiness. The feeling of happiness brings new and positive energy and connects people beyond the level of sects, faiths, or tribes. It is also closely related to nature and natural processes, and so nature-based events are also held.

### Symbolism

Nowruz symbolizes new life. Different regions of the world have their own ways to reflect this. In Gilgit-Baltistan, praying before the rise of the sun symbolizes bidding farewell with thanks to the days psat, and welcoming the new days with the dawn. Visiting graves serves to help people remember those who passed away, and to to give thanks for their contributions to new generations. The wearing of long black faba beans garlands by children seems to be related to fertility, and the continuity of human life. Competiting to find the strongest egg shell among giggling boy and girls symbolizes strength and survival. Placing new born babies onto the backs of people from the older, respected generations symbolizes the shift of responsibility from one generation to the next. Discussing Nowruz's importance in our lives is part of the celebration, helping people understand its significance and ongoing relevance. All the Nowruz activities in the mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan seem to be connected to renewal and generational continuity. This day, marking "the beginning" of everything, also symbolizes the official beginning of Imamat from a Shia perspective; therefore, it is observed with great seriousness by all Shia communities.

## Interpretations of Nowruz in Modern Society

Today, modern society is equipped with means to communicate and interact globally through social

media. This is far different than the past. People now ask each other what they are observing and why they are doing it - or not doing it. Now it is the time of questions answered by artificial intelligence. In this global society of cultural exchange, people easily share their ideas and relate their customs. Many practices that existed in the past are now no longer useful, or have become sources of conflict; therefore, people avoid following all of them. Now, people search for their shared identities in different ways, beyond geographical and cultural limits, trying to relate themselves to others with new perspectives. Therefore, contemporary interpretations should differ from those that have continued from the distant past, beyond existing memory.

However, in Pakistan, Nowruz is related differently by different communities. Here, it does not appear as a secular celebration or traditional spring merriment. No secular institution offers any shelter to it, nor do any state or government institutions show care for such customs. Therefore, in Pakistan, Nowruz holds more meaning in religious circles. Nevertheless, it is not accepted by all Muslims as a tradition deeply connected to Islamic history, but is mostly limited to Shia communities, as mentioned above. Consequently, it is visible in Gilgit-Baltistan (excluding Diamer District), Upper Chitral (KPK), Parachinar, and Kurrum (KPK), and among Hazara communities of Balochistan. Shia communities in urban and rural areas of Punjab and Sindh also celebrate the custom similarly. Meanwhile, Bahai and Parsi communities, mostly living in urban centers such as Karachi, Quetta, and Lahore, also observe Nowruz. However, it is not as visible as other festivities in Pakistan. Among the Shia, relating Nowruz to the beginning of Imamat and Hidayat is very common. Nevertheless, Parsi and Bahai communities relate to it in their own ways. In the past, these communities theosophically connected the tradition of Nowruz more closely to religious interpretations. Therefore, while the basic meaning of Nowruz is the same for everyone, its symbolic meaning is understood differently.

## Key Issues and Challenges in the Protection and Promotion of Nowruz Festivities

The debate over the celebration of Nowruz questions its position among national-level festivities in Pakistan. This dispute is connected to various interpretations of Islam regarding customs and festivities, which presents a key challenge to its revival and promotion. In Pakistan, the state only recognizes festivals of national and religious importance to the majority, though sometimes it acknowledges those related to minorities. Convincing the majority about Nowruz represents another significant challenge for any minority. Therefore, establishing its secular position above any religious connection or interpretation could more effectively relate its relevance to everyone in the present time - indeed, at its core, it is a secular event.

It is also ignored by Muslim clergy that Nowruz remained a tradition in Muslim kingdoms since the time of the Umayyads, continued by the Abbasids, and in South Asia since the Sultanate period. Limited education about this event, its history, and origins presents another significant challenge for its protection and promotion. The same approach also exists within the recently established government of Afghanistan. Learning centers of Muslim civilization should consider Nowruz's role throughout Islamic history. It has a long connection to Islamic civilization which is ignored at every level. This neglect appears to stem from the intervening colonial period, which helped reconstruct Muslim thought and forced the discontinuation of many customs and traditions observed previously.

The Muslim majority in Pakistan primarily maintains customs that were deemed acceptable during the colonial period. Therefore, Nowruz's historical relation to South Asia and Islam is now understood differently; while earlier it was integrated with Islamic culture, it is now a huge challenge to connect it to Muslim culture and society. It only survives among various small

communities under the umbrella of religious interpretations, not secular ones. To shift its understanding from a sacred position to a secular understanding is a significant challenge in itself.

On one side, rescuing Nowruz from this position – fighting for survival among the people of South Asia – is crucial, as it was once the largest festivity of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. On the other side, a secular celebration like Nowruz is needed in Pakistan to bring happiness to faces, positive thinking to minds, and hopeful conversations among the people. The absence of such unifying cultural celebrations has contributed to widespread anxiety and pessimism. Pakistan needs festivities with secular and traditional meaning and spirit. Therefore, this necessitates an organization dedicated to overcoming these challenges and organizing such events by developing people-to-people contact, and helping them maintain positive energy.

The case for Nowruz can be made by emphasizing its secular diplomatic value, both domestically and internationally - a point already recognized by the International Lawyers Forum (2023). Both its domestic and international diplomatic importance to developing good relations between various communities within Pakistan and with nations sharing our western borders should be considered. This has thus far been ignored in. Domestically, Nowruz holds particular significance for Pashtun and Baloch communities, connecting them to their historical traditions. Reviving this celebration could play an important role in reconnecting these groups with their cultural heritage while fostering national cohesion.

## Summary and Conclusion

In Pakistan, the basic meaning of Nowruz is shared across communities as a celebration of spring's arrival, though it is primarily observed by followers of minority Islamic sects. The religious leadership of majority sects hesitates to include it among recognized Muslim celebrations, despite its long history in Islamic festivals throughout the centuries. In truth, such joyful cultural events are precisely what Pakistanis need to celebrate 'new life' with happiness and optimism. The primary challenges include Nowruz being perceived as limited to specific communities and regions, and widespread misconceptions about its purpose. Better education about Nowruz's secular role and universal significance is needed throughout Pakistan. The festival possesses inherent strength to foster happiness, positive energy, peace, and wellbeing across the country. Therefore, Pakistan's situation differs significantly from that of Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, and Iran, where Nowruz enjoys broader cultural recognition and acceptance.

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# FEATURES OF THE NAVRUZ SPRING FESTIVAL IN TAJIKISTAN

Dilshod RAHIMI

## Introduction

Navruz is one of the oldest and most renowned celebrations in the world. It symbolizes the revival of nature, the promotion of core human values, the fostering of friendship and peace, and the unity between humanity and nature. Additionally, it marks the beginning of agricultural and horticultural activities, embodying themes of renewal and productivity.

The term "Navruz" originates from the Persian/Tajik language, and comprises of two words: "*nav*" (new) and "*ruz*" (day), together meaning "new day" or "new year." Historical records in Middle Persian from the 6th to 8th centuries reference the term as "*nōkrouch*." Unlike events tied to specific historical, social, or military milestones, Navruz is rooted in the natural phenomenon of the equinox, when day and night are equal lengths. Consequently, researchers have characterized it as a celebration of natural equilibrium, justice, and fairness. Historically, Navruz was celebrated as the celebration of the new year among the people of Iran, and gradually became integrated into the cultures of neighboring communities.

Until the early 20th century, Navruz was widely celebrated among the Tajiks of Central Asia under various names such as Navruz, Sari Sāl, and Sāli Nav. However, during the Soviet era, the celebration of Navruz, along with other traditional rituals, faced criticism as they were labeled as religious holidays. This resulted in its exclusion from official festivities. Despite this, the customs and traditions associated with Navruz persisted among the people. By the 1970s and 1980s, intellectuals, writers, journalists, and scientists began to advocate for its recognition as a cultural and nature-focused holiday, leading to increased scholarly and literary attention. Numerous articles, treatises, and collections of poetry highlighting Navruz were published during this period.

Following Tajikistan's independence in 1991, Navruz was reinstated to its historical status as a significant cultural celebration. The efforts of H. E. Emomali Rahmon, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, were instrumental in reviving,

developing, and promoting Navruz in the modern era. His initiatives have ensured that Navruz is celebrated with grandeur across the country's regions, cities, districts, communities, educational institutions, and state and non-state organizations.

Navruz's cultural significance extends beyond Tajikistan, having been embraced by numerous countries in the broader region. Its global recognition was cemented in the early 21st century through formal endorsements by international organizations. On February 23rd, 2010, for example, the United Nations General Assembly, during its 64th session, officially resolved to recognize the "International Day of Nowruz" under the agenda item of "World Culture." This resolution, proposed by Tajikistan and other countries which celebrate Navruz, underscored the holiday's cultural importance. Additionally, in 2009, UNESCO included Navruz in its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. By 2024, the number of member states participating in Navruz celebrations had grown to 13.

Tajikistan is regarded as a principal custodian of Navruz. Under President Rahmon's leadership, the holiday is celebrated annually with elaborate ceremonies in adherence to its rich traditions. These celebrations occur across all levels of society, from villages to major cities, and involve schools, cultural institutions, and community organizations.

## Historical and Mythological Background of Navruz

Among the oldest written works, the sacred book of the Zoroastrians, the Avesta, mentions the holiday of Navruz as "Farvardgān," being celebrated at the start of spring. Farvardgān lasted for ten days, from the 21st of the month of Isfand to the 1st of the month of Farvardin. This corresponds to March 11th-20th in the modern calendar (Avesto, 2001, p. 301). This ten-day celebration was held to honor the spirits of the deceased. According to ancient beliefs, during the month of Farvardin, guardian spirits – *furuhars* (referred to as *fravashi* in the Avesta and *fravahr* in the Pahlavi) – descend to Earth. People held celebrations to please these spirits, with each furuhar returning to its former home. Since Farvardin coincided with the spring equinox and the onset of the planting season, it also became associated with the revival of nature. It was believed that during this month, the spirits of plants, animals, and humans awakened. Thus people commemorated this renewal with rituals and ceremonies.

Relatively ancient references to Navruz also appear in Middle Persian texts of the 4th-9th centuries. The eleventh section of the 9th century *Bundahishn* states for example: "All goodness, when it comes from the clouds to the world, comes on Khurdadruz (which is) Navruz" (Bundahishn 2014: 83). It was believed that wearing fine clothes, using pleasant fragrances, avoiding unclean places and people, purifying water, and performing prayers on this day would ensure prosperity and protection from evil throughout the year.

In the seventh part of Bundahishn, drawing on the words of "Din" ("Avesta"), the spring equinox is discussed: "In 'Din,' it is said that in the month of Farvardin, on the day of Hormuzd at noon, when day and night became equal, Ahriman ran away ..." (Bundahishn 2014: 33). This equinox marked the transition from the darkness of winter to the brightness of spring.

The 7th century treatise *Month of Farvardin, the Day of Khurdad* highlights the significance of the day of Khurdad in Farvardin. It records significant events associated with this day: "On the day Khordâd of the month Farvardin, Jam made depositories for the dead (*astôkdânîhâ*), and ordered men to form them; when they saw what was ordered by Jam, they declared it New Year's day and named it Navrûj (new day)" (Māhi Farvardin 2014: 279).

Pahlavi sources suggest that Navruz was celebrated in Farvardin long before the Islamic era, with the sixth day of Khurdad being particularly cherished by Iranians during the Sassanid era. The festival, originally known as "Farvardgān," came to be called "Navruz" by the 4th to 5th centuries CE.

Post-Islamic historical and literary sources provide substantial evidence of Navruz's cultural and societal significance. The festival is consistently attributed to the legendary figure Jamshid Peshdadi, who is recognized as its founder. Renowned scholars such as Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Omar Khayyam, and Abul-Said Gardezi, among others, have documented its origins and practices.

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, in his works *Kitab al-tafhim* and *Athar-ul-Baqiyya*, offers detailed descriptions of Navruz. In *Kitab al-tafhim*, he states: "It is the first day of the month of Farvardin, and it is called 'the new day' because it marks the beginning of a new year" (Abu Rayhan al-Biruni 1989: 253).

Biruni elaborates on the semi-mythical origins of Navruz in *Athar-ul-Baqiyya*: "When Jamshid ascended to kingship, he renewed the religion, and this renewal was celebrated as Navruz. On this day, Jamshid is said to have built a throne and, carried by jinn and demons, traveled from Mount Damavand to Babylon. This miraculous event astonished the people, who declared it a holiday" (Abu Rayhan al-Biruni 1990: 233-234).

Omar Khayyam (1040 1123), in his book *Navruzname*, provides a unique perspective, explaining the astronomical basis of Navruz and attributing its establishment to Jamshid. He notes: "The reason for Navruz's establishment was the discovery that the sun completes its return to the beginning of Aries every 365 days and a fraction. Recognizing this, Jamshid declared this day Navruz and instituted its celebration" (Omar Khayyam 2012: 25-26).

The mythological accounts of Navruz emphasize its association with Jamshid, a figure celebrated in Zoroastrian texts and Persian literature. In the Avesta, Jamshid appears as "Yima," while in the Rigveda, he is referred to as "Yama." Post-Islamic sources often render his name as "Jam" or "Jamshid." The second part of his name, "shed," derives from the Avestan term *xšaeta*, meaning "bright" or "shining," and symbolizing his divine radiance.

Jamshid's myth portrays him as a hero embodying light and goodness, who triumphs over the forces of darkness and evil represented by Ahriman. His victory marks the advent of Navruz, symbolizing the transition from the harshness of winter to the vitality of spring. Mythological, historical, and literary sources describe Jamshid's reign as an era of unparalleled prosperity, justice, and harmony. During his rule, it is said that humanity was free from disease, aging, deceit, and oppression.

In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (10th – 11th century), the beginning of Navruz is linked to Jamshid's triumph over the demons. Ferdowsi recounts that Jamshid established Navruz to commemorate his victory and the creation of a joyful and flourishing society.

Similarly, Abul-Said Gardezi, in the 11th century *Zayn-ul-Akhbar*, narrates Jamshid's battle against the demons (*divs*). Following his victory, Jamshid instituted Navruz, compelling the demons to mine precious gems, which were then presented to the people. This act symbolized the ushering in of a new era of abundance and enlightenment (Abul-Said 2014: 59).

The origins and evolution of Navruz are deeply intertwined with ancient Persian mythology, Zoroastrian beliefs, and the sociocultural practices of the Iranian peoples. Celebrated as a festival of renewal, justice, and the harmony of nature, Navruz transcends religious boundaries and unites diverse communities. Its rich legacy, preserved in historical texts and literary works, underscores its enduring significance as a symbol of cultural heritage and human resilience.

## The Start of the Navruz According to the Traditional Calendars of the Tajiks

Since ancient times, when complete calendars had not yet been developed, the Tajik people calculated the seasons, the spring and autumn equinoxes, and parts of the day by observing recurring natural phenomena, the movement of celestial bodies, and animal behavior. With the introduction of solar and lunar calendars, and later the Gregorian calendar, folk calendars persisted and remained in use until the mid-20th century, with some still surviving to the present day.

It is well known that according to the Solar Hijri calendar, the new year begins at the precise hour, minute, and second when the sun enters the constellation of Aries (Hamal). Persian/Tajik poet and scholar Omar Khayyam, in his work *Navruzname*, based the calculation of Navruz's onset on this principle:

"The reason for establishing Navruz was that, knowing the Sun has two cycles, one of which spans three hundred sixty-five days and a quarter of a day, it returns to the beginning of the Hamal minute. However, it does not return to the same time and day it left, and every year it advances by this minute" (Omar Khayam 2012: 25).

The transition of the year and the onset of Navruz shifts by several hours each year. At the same time, the spring equinox occurs, when day and night are equal in length. According to naturalist research, the spring equinox falls on March 20th in 63.6% of cases, on March 21st in 32.8% of cases, and on March 19th in 3.6% of cases (Heydari-Malayeri 2006: 3).

In the past, Tajiks in various mountainous regions developed their own calendars and systems of chronology, based on observation of the movement of the sun and moon, the positions of the planets and the stars, and natural and artificial landmarks, shadow patterns, and animal behavior.

### The "Sun in the Man" Calendar

One notable calendar of the people of Badakhshan, Tajikistan, is the "Sun in the Man" calendar, known as "Khirpichār" among the local people. This method of timekeeping, which involves dividing time into parts of the human body, is an ancient Tajik tradition. Ethnographers have documented its use in regions such as Karategin, Darvaz, Vanj, Yazgulam, Ishkashim, Rushan, Shugnan, Vakhan, and among Tajiks in the Badakhshan region of Afghanistan. According to this calendar, the sun is said to reside on each part of the body for several days – for instance, three days on the waist, knees, feet, and nails. Thus, Navruz begins when the sun enters the "heart" mark. This phase lasts three days, during which the new year, or Navruz, is celebrated (Shakarmamadov 2003: 11).

### Stars as Indicators of Navruz

Since ancient times, the Tajik people have observed the movements of planets, positions of constellations and stars, and their alignments to determine the time of year, particularly the arrival of Navruz. In the Rasht and Darvaz districts, early spring was marked by observing the western horizon at dawn for a sign known as "Navruzgah" in the mountains. The appearance of three bright stars indicated the arrival of Navruz, which was celebrated for seven days. A similar Navruzgah peak existed in the Khingob river basin, where villagers observed the vernal equinox. At this time, they would say, "The sun has entered the house of spring," and "Day and night has become equal." People believed the sun stayed stationary for three days during the equinox before moving northward (Kholov 2006: 78).

### Observing the Sun's Movement and Shadows

Another method for marking the year's passage among mountain communities involved observing the sun's movement and the fall of its light on specific points. Observations were made from marked locations on mountain ridges, peaks, trees, rocks, or other landmarks, noting where the sun rose or set.

Soviet ethnographer N. A. Kislyakov documented the chronologies of inhabitants of Tavildara District, writing: "The annual rotation of the sun was marked by special signs inside homes. These signs were determined by sunlight falling through a window at the top of the house" (Kislyakov 1947: 113). Similar observations were recorded by M. S. Andreev and A. A. Polovtsov in Vakhan and Ishkashim. People in these regions referred to such points of observation as "sundials."

In the village of Yamg in the Ishkashim district, a stone artifact called the *sangi aftāb-bin* (sun-seeing stone) was created by a scholar named Mubarakqadam Vakhoni in the late 19th century. This artifact is a stone tool positioned on a flat surface, featuring a centrally located hole with a diameter approximately the size of a standard cup. The observer situate himself behind the stone, orienting his view northward through the hole towards a hill where a rectangular stone frame has been constructed. If the sun becomes visible through the frame during the observation, it serves as an indicator that the celebration of Navruz has commenced. This observation could only be made between March 18th and 21st.

### Phenological Observations of Animal Behavior

Another traditional method for determining seasons and months involved observing animal behavior and bird migration. For example, residents of the Khingob river basin identified the onset of spring by the flight of a small bird called the *sandovdavak*. During this period, hawks appeared, black beetles (*gāvak*) emerged, and yellow and black-eared flowers (*čāguzak*) bloomed.

In cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Khujand, Istaravshan, and regions like the Hisar, Zarafshan, and Ferghana valleys, the arrival of spring and Navruz was associated with the appearance of storks. These birds were considered heralds of spring, and their sighting brought joy and signaled the end of winter. In other parts of Central Asia, storks symbolized the arrival of spring. "The stork brought spring, joy, and good fortune from distant lands. With its arrival, agricultural activities and other tasks began. Thus, people eagerly awaited its return and created numerous songs, omens, and beliefs around it" (Rahimi 2022: 32).

Today, with the development of scientific and digital advancements, everyone uses the global Gregorian calendar. However, some traditional knowledge and practices of determining the time of day and the onset of seasons, including the spring and autumn equinoxes, are still preserved, especially in mountain villages.

## Tajik Navruz Rituals and Customs

### Gulgardāni: The Tradition of Flower-Carrying

The Tajik people have long anticipated the arrival of Navruz with vibrant dreams and meticulous preparations. Since ancient times, the celebration has been announced by children through the flower-carrying ceremony, known as Gulgardāni. One or two weeks before Navruz, groups of children venture into the mountains and hills to gather spring flowers, including iconic Navruz flowers such as *bahman, bāyčečak, siyaguš,* and *zardak*. Returning to their villages, they visit households while singing to proclaim the advent of Navruz. The household members, predominantly women, express reverence for the flowers by smelling them and rubbing them

on their eyes, believing in their blessings. In return, the children receive gifts such as sweets, raisins, and other tokens of appreciation. The origin of this custom likely dates back to antiquity, and may be rooted in rituals to celebrate the revival of a deity associated with plant life.

### Juftbarārān: Commencement of the Agricultural Season

As the indigenous inhabitants of Central Asia, the Tajik people have historically marked the beginning of the agricultural season during Navruz through the ceremony of Juftbarārān. This ritual, infused with communal joy, often evolved into a public celebration. Until it was performed, no farmer dared to commence agricultural activities. The ceremony was initiated by Bābāi Dehqān, a respected elder renowned for his wisdom and integrity, who conducted ancestral rituals and recited a special prayer. Only after this act were farmers permitted to begin their work. As part of the ritual, elders anointed the horns and necks of oxen with oil, and uttered blessings and prayers for prosperity. Other practices included feeding the oxen a loaf of bread, which symbolized hope for a fruitful year, and using the smoke of *ispand* (Peganum *harmala*) to ward off malevolent spirits. These oxen were then guided to the fields to plow the land.

While advancements in agricultural machinery have largely replaced such traditions, Juftbarārān remains preserved in some mountainous regions.

## Ecological and Hygienic Features of Navruz Customs and Rituals

Before the onset of Navruz, Tajiks in all regions of Tajikistan perform rituals and customs focused on hygiene and environmental cleanliness, which are carried out in three stages: environmental cleanliness, spiritual purity, and physical cleanliness.

### Environmental Cleanliness

Community members engage in collective cleaning efforts known as *hashar*. These include tidying yards, streets, streams, and public spaces such as schools, mosques, and cemeteries. Men traditionally whitewash walls and tree trunks, while women clean homes meticulously. Rugs and carpets are aired and cleaned, windows and mirrors are washed, and homes are perfumed. These actions symbolize a collective aspiration for purity and prosperity in the coming year.

### Spiritual Purification

The Chorshanbesuri ritual, held on the last Wednesday before Navruz, serves as a spiritual cleansing ritual. Families light fires, over which participants leap while reciting prayers to transfer their sorrows to the fire and receive its warmth and vitality. In certain regions, this event involves discarding broken household items, symbolizing the removal of misfortune from the old year.

The custom of *āštikunāni* – reconciliation – is another vital aspect of spiritual preparation. The new year is seen as a time to resolve disputes and foster harmony, as lingering enmity was believed to bring misfortune throughout the year. Elders play a significant role in mediating conflicts, emphasizing the moral and social value of reconciliation.

### Personal Hygiene

Physical grooming is integral to Navruz preparations. Men trim their hair, beards, and nails, while all members of society ensure their personal hygiene. On the day of the celebration, people wear clean or new clothing, symbolizing renewal and hope.

Through these customs and rituals, the Tajik people welcome Navruz with a purified body, soul, and environment, setting a tone for a harmonious and prosperous year.

## The Place of Symbols in Navruz of Tajikistan

The celebration of Navruz, as a significant phenomenon of traditional culture, encompasses both explicit and implicit symbols and meanings that render it vibrant and aesthetically pleasing. The customs, traditions, and beliefs associated with Navruz are rich in symbolism, including representations of creation, purity, and innocence; blessings and abundance; health and joy; and general well-being.

### Navruz - a Profound Symbol of Renewal

Within the traditional culture of the Tajiks, the celebration of Navruz embodies a universal motif of rebirth and regeneration. As a herald of renewal, Navruz is marked by the transformation of natural elements, symbolizing their transition into a new phase of existence. Astronomically, this event aligns with the sun's crossing of the vernal equinox, initiating a new cycle as it enters the zodiac sign of Aries. Children announce the advent of spring by performing flower-laying ceremonies, spreading the joyous news to their communities. Observing the blooming of fresh flowers, people express gratitude for the arrival of the new season. The plant kingdom awakens with sprouting seeds and new growth, while animals, responding to the increasing daylight and warmth, embark on renewed life cycles. For centuries, humans have synchronized their cultural and agricultural activities with this natural revival, celebrating the arrival of the new year alongside nature.

### Whiteness as a Symbol of Purity and Innocence

The color white holds particular symbolic importance during Navruz, signifying purity and innocence. Historically, Tajiks have associated white with peace, tranquility, happiness, and sincerity, emphasizing its presence in food, clothing, and home decorations during the festivities. In preparation for the new year, houses were traditionally whitewashed, and people donned white attire to greet the occasion. The Navruz table featured white foods such as sugar, milk, yogurt, and rice-based dishes. Even the choice of meats, like chicken and fish, reflected this preference for white hues. Additionally, symbolic items like apples, and garlic, which are white on the inside – adorned the festive table.

In Badakhshan, specific rituals emphasize the symbolic power of white during Navruz. Visitors entering homes carried fresh willow branches, proclaiming "*Shāgun bahār mōbārak!*" ("Happy spring holiday!") to which hosts would reply, "*Bā ruye shōmā mōbārak*!" ("Happy with your face!"). Flour, representing purity, was sprinkled over the visitor's right shoulder and the willow branch. On the eve of the celebration, flour was also used to create decorative patterns on walls.

Historical accounts, such as those by Musa ibn Isa Al-Khisrawy, note that during the Sasanian era, a white falcon was flown on Navruz mornings, and fresh milk or cheese was consumed to mark the occasion. These traditions highlight the enduring association of the color white with notions of purity, renewal, and balance in Navruz celebrations (Inostrancev 1906: 68).

### The Symbol of Blessing and Abundance of Navruz

The themes of blessing and abundance are also integral to the cultural expressions of Navruz among Tajiks. According to N. Shakarmamadov

in *Navruz of Badakhshan*, fetching water from a spring with a pot containing pebbles symbolizes blessings for the coming year (Shakarmamadov 2003: 32).

Such pebbles are sometimes incorporated into the preparation of sumanak, a traditional dish symbolizing prosperity. Variations of this ritual include the use of walnuts in certain regions, such as Qaratogh. Traditional dishes associated with Navruz, like wheat soup and sumanak, feature grains and herbs, symbolizing the abundance of the agricultural harvest. Regional variations of these dishes – known as *dalda, kaskh, boj, farbech,* and *guja* – demonstrate the cultural richness and diversity of Navruz culinary traditions.

## The Symbolism of Nature's Revival

Greenery and joy occupy a prominent place in Navruz traditions. According to the myths and legends of Iranian peoples, the creation of the world began in early spring, coinciding with Navruz. For Tajiks, the arrival of spring is marked by the resurgence of nature and the commencement of agricultural activities. Children play a key role in announcing the season through the ceremonial collection of spring flowers, which they present to their communities while singing songs of renewal.

Tree planting is another enduring tradition, symbolizing growth, vitality, and happiness. In rural areas, planting fruit and shade trees during Navruz is considered both a virtuous act and a customary obligation. Fresh willow branches are often used in rituals, particularly in Badakhshan, where they symbolize greenery and blessings. For instance, in the Wakhan Valley, the bark of a willow bough is crafted into chains called *kalakālāk* which are then hung in homes until the following spring.

The symbol of greenery is most vividly represented by the *sabzeh* (plate of greens), made from sprouted wheat. Displayed prominently on Navruz tables, this emblem of growth and prosperity underscores the central themes of the celebration.

In conclusion, the symbolic richness of Navruz, reflected in its emphasis on renewal, purity, abundance, and the revival of nature, underscores its cultural significance for the Tajik people. Through a blend of rituals, culinary practices, and artistic expressions, Navruz continues to embody timeless values and universal aspirations for harmony and prosperity.

## The Tajik Navruz Festive Table

During the Navruz holiday, which continues for two weeks, different communities, schools, universities, cultural institutions, and other venues across the country host joyful gatherings and events to welcome the new year, according to the traditional calendar. One integral element of the Navruz celebration is the decoration of the "*7-sin*" or "*7-shin*" table, prominently displayed in many gathering halls. This tradition, rooted in ancient Iranian customs, involves arranging a table with seven items whose names begin with the Arabic letter *sin* (س): greenery (*sabzah* – سبزه), garlic (*sir* – سیر), apples (*seb* – سیب), sumanak (*sōmanak* – سمنک), Elaeagnus (*sanjeed* – سنجد), harmala (*sipand* – سپند), and vinegar (*sirka* – سرکه).

In addition to the 7-shin table, some traditions involve placing seven blessings on the festive table, whose names also begin with shin (ش): milk (*shir* – شیر), sugar (*shaker* – شکر), candle (*sham'* – شمع), wine (*sharāb* – شراب), syrup (*sharbat* – شربت), boxwood (*shamshād* – شمشاد), and honey (*shahd* – شهد). Scholars and cultural historians have extensively analyzed the symbolic meanings of these items and their connection to nature and human life. For instance, milk represents purity, peace, and tranquility, while greenery symbolizes the renewal and vitality of nature.

The concept of "sin" as associated with the festive table during Navruz does not predate the

advent of Islam. In Persian, the term originally referred to a porcelain plate, an item introduced from China. Over time, the Persian word "*chini*," meaning "made in China," underwent linguistic transformation under the influence of the Arabic language, evolving into "*sini*." Consequently, the term "sin" in the context of Navruz's ceremonial table is derived from "sini," signifying "seven plates."

The practice of placing seven plates of food and symbolic objects on the Navruz table dates back to ancient times. The number seven holds a sacred status and is deeply embedded in the culture of Iranian peoples. Numerous legends explain the origins of this tradition, but one of the most plausible explanations links it to the Zoroastrian concept of the "seven sin." This concept arises from the sum of Ahura Mazda, the supreme god, and the six Amshaspands – high-ranking angels or divine entities in the Zoroastrian pantheon. In ancient times, the "seven sin" Navruz table served as an offering or sacrifice to the creator god and his six celestial attendants.

Among the Tajik people, it was also customary to place seven types of fresh fruit on the festive Navruz table. If circumstances allowed, dried fruits were often included alongside the fresh ones. A drink called *ghulungāb* – a drink made from dried apricots, was particularly popular and remains a staple of the Tajik Navruz table today, celebrated for its health benefits. After the festive celebrations, families would consume the fresh and dried fruits together, sharing good wishes for the new year.

In the Hisar Valley, a special fruit drink was traditionally prepared for Navruz. This drink included dried fruits such as apricots, cherries, plums, raisins, peaches, and apples. The ingredients were washed, placed into a big pot of boiling water, and left to steep overnight. Known as *ābi haft meva*, "seven-fruit," this drink was an essential component of the Navruz table, and consuming it was believed to bring blessings for the year ahead (Rahimi 2021: 140).

## Women's Sumanak-making Ritual

Sumanak is a traditional type of Navruz *halva* prepared from green wheat juice, with the addition of flour and oil. The preparation of sumanak, known as *sumanakpazy*, is a communal activity that typically involves three to four neighboring women who gather in the courtyard or garden of one of their homes. This event is carefully planned and usually begins in the evening.

The process starts with the women setting a table with sprouted wheat and reciting verses from the holy Quran to honor the spirits of the deceased. After saying a prayer, they cut the wheat greens with a knife and crush them in a mortar to extract the juice. They then mix the extracted juice with flour and butter in a large pot and light a fire beneath it. The women take turns stirring the pot with a spatula to prevent the sumanak from burning. To symbolize blessings, seven pebbles or seven walnuts are added to the mixture.

As night falls, the gathering transforms into a lively celebration. A circle dance begins, accompanied by singing, laughter, and jokes. Women, girls, and children from the neighborhood join in the festivities, creating a joyful atmosphere. This communal celebration stems from the belief that welcoming the new year with laughter and happiness ensures a joyful and prosperous year ahead.

Throughout the night, the women continue to stir the sumanak until it is fully cooked by morning. Once ready, the sumanak is distributed to the community. Special emphasis is placed on sharing it with the sick, the elderly, the poor, and seven neighboring households. The act of sharing sumanak is believed to bring blessings and rewards.

Sumanak is a seasonal delicacy, exclusively prepared during Navruz as a symbol of spring and renewal. Over the centuries, Tajiks have developed various variations of sumanak, including *atālagi, halvāi, degi, biryāni, tanuri* or *kulcha-sumanak*, and *sumanaki changāli*.

## Social and Ethical Customs of Navruz

### Visiting the Sick

One of the most remarkable social customs of the Tajiks during Navruz is visiting the sick, the disabled, and the elderly. This tradition begins a week before the holiday and continues throughout the two-week celebration of Navruz in Tajikistan. During this time, people visit those in need, bringing them Navruz gifts and engaging in conversations to uplift their spirits. This practice is deeply rooted in traditional ethical norms, which holds that "it is a good deed to visit the sick and to quench the thirsty." Visiting the elderly and the infirm before the holiday is regarded as a virtuous act, earning their blessings and prayers.

Another significant and rewarding custom is presenting gifts to orphans, the homeless, and sick children. Both state organizations and private individuals, including entrepreneurs, actively participate in this practice. Bringing joy to children is considered a noble deed, and Tajiks ensure that orphans and disadvantaged children are not forgotten during this festive season.

### Custom of Exchanging Dishes

A distinctive pre-Navruz tradition is the neighborhood ritual known as *oshbarak*, or *oshbiyārak*, held approximately two weeks before Navruz. This custom is particularly prevalent in the cities and districts of the Sughd region. In the city of Khujand, for instance, households prepare pilaf on March 7th and send portions of it to their neighbors during the evening. The plates of food are typically delivered by children, who, in return, receive money, sweets, or small gifts from the recipient households. This exchange fosters a spirit of generosity and mutual support within the community. Children often enthusiastically participate, aiming to deliver food to as many neighbors as possible to collect more rewards. The following evening, households host feasts where neighbors, friends, and relatives gather. Through this practice, participants celebrate the arrival of spring, reinforce social bonds, promote equality, and strengthen unity and friendship. Additionally, it serves as a platform for friendly competition, allowing neighbors and relatives to showcase their culinary skills.

## Navruz Sports, Games and Competitions in Tajikistan

The celebration of Navruz encompasses a variety of traditional sports and games that enrich its cultural vibrancy and festive spirit. These events serve not only as sources of joy and entertainment, but also as expressions of solidarity, friendship and a sense of cultural identity. Among the most prominent events during Navruz are wrestling competitions, horse racing, goat pulling, running, horseback riding, archery, field hockey, and rope pulling, among others. Of these, wrestling remains the most popular and widely practiced sport during Navruz.

In addition to these sport events, traditional children's games contribute significantly to the festive atmosphere. Several of these games are uniquely associated with Navruz and hold immense cultural value. Examples include *chilak-bāzi* (tip-cat), *badbarak-bāzi* (kite), *argunchak-bāzi* (swing game), *khurus-jang* (cockfighting), and *sangčābāzi* (playing pebbles), which are particularly enjoyed during this occasion.

Historically, Navruz wrestling has been more than a mere sporting event; it has represented a rich tradition embedded in customs, rituals, and the broader cultural fabric. In earlier times, Navruz wrestling followed a distinct etiquette: participants would gather at the field where a "wrestling plate," typically containing traditional rice food – pilaf, was placed beside the wrestler. Those

wishing to challenge the wrestler would join him at the plate and they would partake in the meal together, symbolizing respect and camaraderie. Following this, an elder would offer prayers for the competitors before inviting them to the ring. The wrestlers would then perform ceremonial gestures, such as waving their hands and circling the ring, before commencing the match. Victory was determined when a competitor successfully pinned their opponent's back to the ground, after which the winner was awarded prizes.

In contemporary times, popular modern sports such as football, volleyball, basketball, weightlifting, and boxing have gained popularity among Tajik children and adolescents, influencing the celebration of Navruz. Nonetheless, traditional sports and games continue to play a central role in the festivities. They serve not only as a medium for recreation and cultural expression but also as a platform for demonstrating physical prowess and performing arts.

## Measures to Safeguard and Expand the Navruz Celebration

In the Republic of Tajikistan, significant efforts are being made to preserve and promote the Navruz holiday. These measures include raising public awareness of Navruz at local, regional, and international levels. For instance, each year, sports competitions such as the Navruz Hero wrestling tournament, the Navruz Race, and horse racing are organized by decree of the mayor of Dushanbe in celebration of Navruz. In 2011, the largest festival venue in Tajikistan, Navruzgāhi Pāytakht, was inaugurated in the capital, Dushanbe. In 2012, Tajikistan hosted the international Navruz celebration, which was attended by presidents and high-ranking officials from more than 40 countries and representatives of 35 regional and global organizations. In 2013, Dushanbe hosted the International Symposium of Writers of the Navruz Region, attracting 52 writers from 18 countries. Numerous books and articles have been published about Navruz, exploring its origins, customs, traditions, and its astronomical, cultural, social, and philosophical dimensions. Notably, during the period of independence, new publications on Navruz have been released annually, accompanied by conferences, roundtable discussions, and extensive media coverage, including hundreds of articles and news reports shared through traditional and social media.

In 2018, Tajikistan published the *Encyclopedia of Navruz*, which comprises over 1,300 articles covering various aspects of the holiday, including rituals and ceremonies, beliefs, folklore, art, and traditional knowledge and practices. Additionally, a three-volume *Bibliography of Tajik Navruz* has been released, cataloging over 4,000 publications. A fourth volume, featuring more than 2,000 newly published works, is currently in preparation.

Thus, the celebration of Navruz holds profound cultural, social, and political significance for the peoples of Tajikistan. It is a vital symbol of unity, peace, friendship, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of spiritual values. Furthermore, it fosters education, morality, and national self-awareness, making it an enduring pillar of cultural identity and social cohesion in the region.

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# CELEBRATION OF NEVRUZ SPRING FESTIVAL IN TÜRKIYE

Ahmet Erman ARAL

## Introduction

Nevruz, which means "new day" in Turkish, and is also known as "Sultan Navrız," "Yılsırtı," "Mereke," "March Nine," "March Bozumu," "Ergenekon," and "Yörük Bayramı," is celebrated to welcome the new year across a wide geography extending from various corners of Central and South Asia to the Balkans. This holiday, which is celebrated on March 21st of the Gregorian calendar and March 9th of the Rumi calendar, when day and night are equal lengths, thus refers to an important natural event. As can be seen in Mahmud Kashgari's *Dîvânu Lugâti't-Türk* (1074), Nevruz is a centuries-old folk festival that marks the arrival of spring and is deeply rooted in admiration for nature, the sun, and the cosmos. Celebrated across various regions of Asia, the Balkans and the Middle East, it embodies a deep respect for the natural world and for humanity, and the promotion of harmony.

As stated by M. Ö. Oğuz, diverse sources (ranging from Chinese sources to Firdevsî's *Shahnameh* and Ebul Gazi Bahadır Khan's *Şecere-i Terâkime*) suggest that Nevruz has been celebrated in the context of birth, resurrection and salvation since ancient times. Nevruz and March 21st are celebrated in different belief and cultural traditions as the day when the first human being, Adam, was created; the Prophet Yunus (Jonas or Jonah in Western languages) came out of the belly of the whale; the Prophet Moses crossed the Red Sea; and the Prophet Muhammad was heralded as a prophet. In the Turkish context, it is also interesting to note that March 21st remained in use as the beginning of the fiscal year until 1985 (2005: 5-7), which is the only remnant of the Nevruz tradition in the Turkish fiscal system.

According to the 12-Animal Turkish Calendar, Nevruz is the beginning of the year, but its significance varies between different communities. Historically, under the rule of the Temurids, Safavids, Akkoyunlu, and Seljuks, March 21st was considered the first day of the year. For communities engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, this date marked the end of winter and the beginning of spring. It symbolized fertility and

resurrection, the awakening of nature, and thus the beginning of reproduction. Güngör asserts that the relationship between Nevruz and agriculture suggests that this festival emerged during the transition from shepherding to agricultural life (2004: 47). In the northern hemisphere, particularly among the Turks of Türkiye, agricultural and pastoral practices follow seasonal rhythms. While they sow seeds in October, herders carefully time *koç katımı* – the practice of reintroducing male sheep to the herds – to ensure lambing occurs at the optimal time. This controlled breeding happens in October, as newborn lambs cannot survive winter's cold and food scarcity. By timing breeding this way, lambs are born no earlier than March 21st, when conditions become favorable: soil warms, daylight hours increase, the sun's position rises higher, and vegetation for grazing animals grows abundant (Atalay 2017: 255)

This deep-rooted and multifaceted significance of Nevruz has not only shaped religious and cultural traditions, but has also found expression in various forms of artistic and creative practices. As a festival symbolizing renewal, rebirth, and transformation, Nevruz has inspired a rich body of literature, performing arts, visual culture, and ritualistic expressions in different societies. In Türkiye, its influence extends from poetry and theatre to music and dance, from miniature and painting to sculpture, and from food rituals to belief systems. The following section explores the cultural expressions of Nevruz and its role as a catalyst for artistic creativity across these diverse domains.

## Cultural Impact and Creative Dimensions of Nevruz

For mythological and religious reasons, Nevruz has survived in Anatolia through the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Turkish periods, with rich cultural and artistic creations. Folklorist Doğan Kaya's research has shown that the poems of Pir Sultan Abdal (16th century) are the earliest examples of the deep-rooted legacy of Nevruz in literature. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, 15 poets in Anatolia were identified to have written poems on Nevruz (Kaya 2012: 1). On the other hand, as suggested by C. Bayak, it is an old tradition dating back to the first Islamic states, during which Divan poets presentied eulogies (*kaside* in Turkish) on Nevruz to the greats of the time, and for which they would recieve money or gifts in return. These eulogies, in which Nevruz and spring are described, are called Nevrûziye in Divan literature (2007: 62).

Nevruz has of course been a source of inspiration not only in literature but also in many other fields, including folk theatre traditions in Türkiye. In Köy Seyirlik Oyunları (village theatrical performances), which are closely tied to agricultural cycles and seasonal changes, Nevruz serves as a backdrop for performances symbolizing the transition from winter to spring. These plays often feature themes of good overcoming evil, death and resurrection, and fertility and abundance, reflecting the mythological and symbolic dimensions of Nevruz. In addition, as Metin And says, Karagöz and Hacivat (traditional shadow theatre) occasionally included references to Nevruz, using humor and satire to comment on changing seasons, social structures, and renewal in society (1979). The satirical nature of Karagöz plays allowed performers to address societal issues while referring to the festive and celebratory elements of Nevruz. This reflects the adaptability of oral and performative traditions in integrating important cultural events like Nevruz into entertainment and storytelling. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, theater plays performed during Nevruz ceremonies were intended to emphasize the rebirth of the Turkish nation, referring to the awakening and revival of nature. In contemporary times, Nevruz has been reinterpreted by public institutions, non-governmental organizations, schools, and communities. For example, in 2001-2002, the Ministry of Culture organized Nevruz competitions for children in the fields of painting, poetry, and composition, with the winning works being published in a book titled *Çocuk Gözüyle Türk Kültüründe Nevruz* (Nevruz

in Turkish Culture through the Eyes of Children) (Kültür Bakanlığı 2002). Another example is the International Nevruz Theatre Festival, which was most recently organized for the 14th time in Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, of the Russian Federation (URL-1). Overall, however, Nevruz is regrettably no longer a key source of inspiration for Turkish theatre and painting compared with the early 2000s.

Music stands out in the creative dimensions of this tradition as an indispensable part of Nevruz. As expressed by M. Karabulut, fun is key component of Nevruz, and often cultivated through games and music (2004: 171). For example, games such as *köse* and *usta-çırak* (master-apprentice) are often played during Nevruz celebrations (Çetin 2004: 131-134). Concerts are part of almost all Nevruz celebrations in Türkiye. In collaboration with the Presidential Symphony Orchestra and municipalities, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) has organized concerts on the occasion of Nevruz in Ankara and other large cities with the participation of artists from Central Asia and Balkans (URL-2). It should also be emphasized that Nevruz is an important the theme within the Turkish minstrelsy tradition, and so much so that this is reflected in the names of some minstrels such as Nevruz Bacı and Nevruz Ali Çiçek. In addition, works such as "Nevruz Türkü," by leading music group Kardeş Türküler are also popular. Thus, Nevruz has found its place in different areas of musical life in Türkiye.

Nevruz also has as strong relationship with cuisine, another field of creativity. Wheat soup and rice pilaf are integral dishes on the Nevruz table. Special Nevruz foods are common throughout Anatolia, but they also have localized characteristics depending on the region. One of the most common foods, eggs is dyed by boiling them with onion skins, various herbs, and *gangılız* (a flower similar to a poppy). Spring flowers such as sorrel and cornflower are eaten raw, while Nevruz flowers are also eaten after they have been picked, cleaned and then cooked like spinach, with eggs (Çay 1991: 137). These herbs, consumed alongside the Nevruz flower, also vary depending on geographical conditions. Furthermore, eating together or delivering food to neighbors, especially the poor, is a tradition throughout Anatolia. Visits to the graves of loved ones and leaving offerings of the deceased individuals' favorite foods are also among the customs of Nevruz.

On March 21st, neighboring women have breakfast together in the gardens of their houses, featuring foods starting with the letter "s." This includes milk (*süt*), bagels (*simit*), salep, sesame, saffron, and garlic (*sarımsak*). These foods are said to have been consumed in the Ottoman palace along with a Nevruz paste called Nevruziye, used for healing purposes (Turan 1999: 356). Nevruz paste is made from 41 different kinds of herbs. Today, it is called "Mesir Macunu," around which the Mesir Macunu Festival (also an inscribed element on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity) has been celebrated annually in March or April for 484 years in Manisa, Türkiye. The emergence of the paste, considered a healing food, is based on a historical story: Hafsa Sultan, the mother of Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire, suffered from an unexplained illness in Manisa, western Anatolia. To cure this illness, Merkez Efendi, the head physician of the Sultan Mosque Madrasah, prepared a paste consisting of a mixture of 41 different herbs and spices. This healing mixture, which has survived to the present day, is said to have healed Hafsa Sultan in a short period of time. Known for her benevolent personality, Hafsa Sultan wanted the paste to be distributed to the public every year during Nevruz week. The paste was wrapped in small pieces of paper, and scattered to the public from the Sultan Mosque. Still today, Mesir paste is distributed to the people gathering around the Sultan Mosque during the festival.

Çiğdem Day, which is kept alive among children as a Nevruz practice in rural areas, especially in Central Anatolia, should also be mentioned as an important Nevruz practice. Çiğdem is a flower, also known as "crocus" in Latin. Çiğdem Day is celebrated

every year between the beginning of March (mostly from March 7th) and the end of April. On these dates, children go out into the countryside, collect crocus flowers with pointed sticks, and make bunches with them. They then go from door to door, singing folk songs and receiving foodstuffs such as bulgur (cracked wheat) and sunflower seed oil. Finally, they go to the countryside as a community and eat pilaf made from the ingredients they have collected (Oğuz 2014: 28-31).

Looking at the connection between Nevruz and folk beliefs reveals that these celebrations serve as occasions when traditional customs passed down through generations are observed through specific rituals and symbols, creating common ground that unites communities. According to E. Artun, looking back on the pre-Islamic period, Nevruz includes beliefs and practices related to creation, derivation, rebirth, and the revitalization of nature. Fire jumping is a practice which cleanses sin and marks the start of the Nevruz celebration. The awakening of nature is celebrated with fire. Considered sacred, fire is the earthly extension of the sun that animates the universe (2000: 3). Therefore, as argued by M. Muhtar Kutlu, the ritual nature of Nevruz celebrations and their connection to the sacred is crucial for understanding the relationship between the celebration and beliefs (2000: 113). After Islam, the tradition has continued to carry old beliefs and practices, while also taking on new meanings. For example, M. Kutlu identifies several religious beliefs associated with Nevruz including when Allah created the earth, when Adam was kneaded from clay, when Adam and Eve met, when Noah's ark washed ashore, when Prophet Joseph was rescued from the well, and when Moses parted the Red Sea with his staff (1990: 109).

In addition, many examples illustrate Nevruz's reflection in folk beliefs. In eastern Anatolia, for instance, the Wednesday closest to Nevruz is called "Kara Çarşamba" (Black Wednesday). On this day, in places like the city of Tunceli (in eastern Anatolia), men mark their foreheads with black smudges, visit water springs, and offer prayers. On the same day, those who pass by a rose tree believe that they will be free from troubles and worries throughout the year (Şengül 2008: 68). In Şebinkarahisar, it is believed that if one bathes in a river on the morning of Nevruz, they will gain strength and health. In Sivas, it is believed that if the sky thunders on Nevruz, the crops will be abundant that year. In many regions, on Nevruz, young people make a wish and then immerse their whole bodies in cold water at least three times. By doing so, they believe that their wishes will come true. To overcome the boredom of long winter days and to ensure that the new year will be trouble-free and good, 13 stones are also thrown into the water and previously germinated wheat is placed in the water to anticipate and shape the future (Artun 1999: 5-6).

## Social Values and Intercultural Connection

At the micro level, Nevruz in Türkiye manifests through individual behaviors, family traditions, and social interactions, shaping personal experiences and reinforcing shared values. Nevruz is a time for renewal and optimism. It influences personal attitudes and interactions. People of all ages and backgrounds express hope for prosperity, peace, and health in the new year. Many people engage in symbolic acts such as jumping over fires to get away from negativity and embrace a fresh start. It is also a period of increased social bonding, during which people visit their neighbors, and engage in communal celebrations. All of this reinforces a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Within families, Nevruz is marked by special meals, home cleaning (spring renewal), and traditional greetings. Some households prepare Nevruz pilaf, symbolizing abundance and prosperity, and share it with neighbors and guests. Gift-giving, especially of decorated and dyed eggs and sweets, is a common way of spreading joy. As Oğuz mentions, on March 21st in Yozgat, grooms and their families bring various gifts to the brides and their families,

and together they go to a river or a lake and organize a celebration. Here, a wish is made with the Basmala and if nine stones are thrown into the water, it is believed that it will be granted (2005: 8). Acts of goodwill are also witnessed on Nevruz, such as helping the elderly, offering food to those in need, and forgiving past grievances. These demonstrate Nevruz as a festival that reinforces renewal not only of nature but also of relationships.

Nevruz reflects key social values such as hospitality, generosity, and respect. Hosting guests and offering food symbolizes open-heartedness and community spirit. The emphasis on visiting elders and seeking reconciliation demonstrates respect for family and tradition. The festival also reinforces equality, as communities gather to celebrate together, regardless of status or background. These practices highlight how Nevruz functions as a cultural mechanism for strengthening social ties and preserving communal harmony.

At the micro level, Nevruz is not just a festival but an active expression of shared values that guide daily interactions, reinforcing cultural continuity through personal and familial practices. For example, as A. Uca notes, villagers in Sivas contribute by giving money, food, sacrificial rams, etc. based on their economic situation. Sacrificial animals are slaughtered and bulgur pilaf is cooked. Almost every family bakes bread called *lokma*, which is similar to rusk. People gather in the village square (Uca 2007: 142). Thus, Nevruz is an occasion for people to come together and look out for each other. In this respect, it is also clear that Nevruz strengthens intergenerational dialogue.

At the macro level, Nevruz in Türkiye functions as a symbolic and social institution that reinforces cultural identity, social cohesion, and shared values across different communities. It plays a significant role in sustaining larger social structures, collective memory, and national unity. The tradition serves as a unifying cultural event, bringing together diverse ethnic and religious communities who all celebrate the festival with distinct traditions, yet share common themes. The festival strengthens social structures by fostering collective participation, as public celebrations, official ceremonies, and cultural performances create a sense of belonging. For example, the Ankara Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum affiliated with the Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Department of Turkish Folklore, views the cultural belonging created by Nevruz as an opportunity to raise awareness about nature and biodiversity and organizes activities on March 21st every year.

Nevruz also has political and diplomatic dimensions. Indeed, its recognition in Türkiye's cultural policies, and its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity reflects its role in preserving and promoting shared heritage. Currently, Nevruz is recognized as the multinational heritage of 13 States Parties under the umbrella of UNESCO (URL-3). This is a good example of the unifying power of the spring festival in terms of cultural diplomacy and intercultural communication. Despite this, it is important to remember that there have been periods in Türkiye when Nevruz was far from a unifying force. Yücel Demirer examines competing approaches to the celebration of Nevruz. His work focuses on how Nevruz emerged as a form of collective expression of Kurdish identity and politics. He analyzes how this consciousness has been promoted through organized efforts despite official social-cultural policy frameworks centered on Turkish identity. Demirer also explores how public institutions and organizations have supported and disseminated official Nevruz celebrations (Demirer 2018).

Similarly, A. E. Aral has claimed that several factors complicate understanding Nevruz's symbolic meaning and maintaining the will to celebrate it: debates about its origins, identity claims, and its portrayal in Turkish media and politics. While the past decade has seen developments supporting Nevruz's position as an important spring festival in public consciousness, Aral concludes that it has not adequately reflected UNESCO's heritage list

ideals of dialogue, reconciliation, and sharing. This shortcoming stems from the ongoing effects of developments that began in the 1990s on society and politics (Aral 2023: 625).

The challenges surrounding the perception and celebration of Nevruz highlight the problems of fully realizing its symbolic potential. Despite these difficulties, the celebrations continue to foster cultural interaction and social mobility, as seen in increasing participation in public celebrations, travel, and international engagement during the festival. Nevruz serves as a profound reflection of various social and cultural dynamics. During Nevruz, an increase in mobility is seen as individuals travel to participate in celebrations. For instance, Turkish Airlines runs ticket campaigns to encourage people to travel and celebrate (URL-4). In addition, many Iranian tourists visit various cities across Türkiye for two weeks starting from March 21st, during the Nevruz holiday (URL-5). Universities also organize and host festivals in conjunction with Nevruz, attracting participants from various regions (URL-6). These university celebrations (İstanbul, İzmir, etc.) also attract international students and contribute to strengthening cultural dialogue.

## Expressions of Culture: Perceptions, Language, and Identity in Social Life

Talking about the perception of Nevruz helps to better understand the meaning and function of the celebration. There have been some studies on this subject in Türkiye. Although the findings are not generalizable for the country as a whole, M. Büyükkuru and B. Çevik İskit found out that most people (88%) are aware of Nevruz, but participation in events is lower (59%). Only 26.5% have family traditions related to Nevruz, suggesting that transmission occurs more through non-familial social channels. Despite the low rate of family celebrations, 94% believe the tradition needs to be safeguarded for future generations. Fire rituals, such as jumping over fire, are among the most common practices. Myths and legends related to Nevruz, such as *Ergenekon* and *Kawa the Blacksmith*, are known, but only 3% of respondents could name them explicitly, which indicates a decline in awareness of Nevruz's mythological roots. Lastly, symbols like fire, spring, and flowers dominate public perceptions of the spring festival (2024: 820-823).

There are also comparative studies that try to determine the perception of Nevruz in Türkiye in the eyes of students. It is found that Turkish students see it as a historical tradition rather than an active celebration while Turkmen students emphasize its role in national identity and independence. It is interesting to note that many Turkish students associate Nevruz with political debates rather than its cultural aspects, which has led to their weaker connection with the celebration. This also shows that some Turkish students believe media and political conflicts have affected Nevruz's public perception. It should also be noted that while Nevruz is acknowledged as a cultural heritage element in Türkiye, it is not widely institutionalized as a national festival. As a consequence, there is less emphasis on celebrations within families, and the festival is not a major focus in formal education (Shajayev 2022). Based on the findings of such studies, it is possible to claim there is a need for cultural policies to reinforce Nevruz as a unifying tradition rather than a politicized event.

## Tradition and Transformation: The Evolution of Nevruz Between Fire Rituals and Islamic Heritage

Traditions are dynamic elements of social life that evolve through interaction, adaptation, and cultural exchange. While some traditions remain rooted in their original forms, others merge with

new beliefs, practices, and ideologies over time. Nevruz exemplifies this process. Linked to pre-Islamic rituals, particularly the cult of fire, Nevruz has transformed through its integration into Islamic traditions across different societies.

Seyidoğlu (2002) and İnan (1976) have emphasized that Turkic myths which suggest that fire was given to humans by gods, have led to the sacralization of fire among Turks over time. It is important to point out that Turks do not worship fire but respect it. In this context, fire has been accepted as a cleansing and protective element against evil spirits and diseases among the Turks, and this has paved the way for the emergence of many beliefs related to fire (Bekki 2007: 250). Rooted in Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1975: 175), Nevruz predates Islam. Zoroastrianism emphasizes broad concepts such as the corresponding work of good and evil in the world, and the connection between humans and nature. Zoroastrianism was the dominant faith of the Achaemenid Empire, which extended from modern-day Egypt and Greece in the west to Pakistan in the east. In this way, Nevruz serves as a symbol of shared heritage. Over time, with the expansion of Christianity and Islam, as well as the rise of new empires, Zoroastrianism gradually declined and became a minority religion (Louie 2024). Following the Islamic conquests, the festival was embraced by Muslim communities, who adapted it to Islamic cultural frameworks. This integration allowed Nevruz to flourish within Islamic societies, blending pre-Islamic customs with Islamic practices.

With the spread of Islam across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Anatolia, Nevruz encountered a new religious framework. Instead of disappearing however, it has been reinterpreted within Islamic contexts. In some traditions, Nevruz was linked to significant events in Islamic history. As mentioned previously, Nevruz has been viewed as the day when Adam's clay was kneaded, when Adam and Eve met in Arafat, when day and night were created, and when, after the flood, a dove returned to Noah's ark with a green olive branch in its beak (Söylemez 1999: 44). Regarding Sufi and Alevi-Bektashi interpretations of Nevruz: Alevi-Bektashi communities in Anatolia embraced Nevruz as a spiritual moment of renewal and divine connection. They celebrate it as the birth or emergence of Imam Ali, reinforcing its association with Islamic thought. The emphasis shifted from literal fire worship to metaphorical interpretations of light and enlightenment, aligning with Sufi concepts of spiritual awakening (Gündüz 2007: 60-61).

Nevruz has retained many of its pre-Islamic elements, proving that traditions do not disappear but rather adapt and merge with new cultural elements and layers. Nevruz remains an important festival in Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, India, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and other countries in the region, as witnessed by the growing collaboration of these countries around the element since 2009 under the UNESCO framework. Here, one of the important issues that international cooperation brings to mind is the close relationship between intergenerational transmission, safeguarding, and globalization. As claimed by Oğuz, cultural values that spread through generalization rather than being preserved through localization tend to endure. In this respect, leaving the local stories of Nevruz for scientific research, policy makers and practitioners should try to popularize its myths, motifs, and rituals that highlight its generalizable features and contribute to its globalization. Particularly significant are Nevruz myths emphasizing equality (for example, between day and night), which align with universal values of equality, peace and justice that humanity aspire to. This approach is also important for aligning the celebration of Nevruz and its functions with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, in industrialized societies facing aging populations and declining birth rates, Nevruz's birth myths could enhance its relevance in Western contexts. Furthermore, in regions where hunger remains prevalent, especially in parts of Africa, Nevruz's traditional emphasis on abundance, fertility, and eliminating hunger offers meaningful connections that could support its global recognition (2002: 146-147).

As portrayed, Nevruz exemplifies the complex relationship between tradition and change in social life. As a festival that originated from pre-Islamic fire rituals, it has been reinterpreted, adapted, and integrated into Islamic traditions, allowing it to survive in different historical and cultural contexts. The evolution of the spring festival, Nevruz, reflects how societies reinterpret traditions within new frameworks and ensure continuity while embracing transformation.

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# NOWRUZ BAYRAMY AS A HOLIDAY OF RENEWAL AND SPIRITUAL UNITY IN TURKMENISTAN

Jamilya GURBANOVA

The Turkmen people cherish the richest spiritual heritage of their ancestors – culture, traditions, and rituals. The Nowruz holiday, which came from the depths of centuries and is filled with the deep philosophy of the people, is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Turkmen and is celebrated in all corners of Turkmenistan. Symbolized by the renewal of nature and the purification of the human soul, it is accompanied by games, songs, dances, the cooking of traditional dishes and the wearing of national clothes, performing good deeds, and expressing hopes. In Turkmenistan, the celebration of Nowruz Bayramy falls on March 21st through March 23rd, which are declared public holidays and thus official days off.

The life force of ancient traditions is taking shape in modern forms of holiday organization. The grand celebration associated with the cult of fertility consists of a whole system of rituals that have been preserved in the national memory for thousands of years. Endowed with the ideals of peace, goodness and creativity, Nowruz Bayramy has always contributed to the rapprochement of cultures and the blurring of borders between peoples.

The Turkmens are an ethnic group of Iranian-speaking and Turkic-speaking tribes, which combined to preserve their mythological beliefs, calendar and cultural memory. For 2,500 years, “the government, religion, language, and partly the anthropological type and culture of the population have changed in the territory of Turkmenistan, but the ancient local ethnic group has remained.”[1] Ethnographer N. Bryullova-Shaskolskaya, who visited Turkmenistan in 1926, identifies this region as an important node of world history: “Remnants of the deep pre-Muslim antiquity, the still-undeveloped ancestral way of life, ancient beliefs have been preserved here. This is one of the corners of the globe where it is very easy to

1 Хлопин И. Н. Юго-западная Туркмения в эпоху поздней бронзы. По материалам сумбарских могильников (Ответственный редактор В. Массон). Ленинград, 1983. – 83 с.

study the most ancient layers of human culture in their modifications and experiences."[2]

Information about the origins of Nowruz and the national traditions of the Turkmens, which date back to the ancient cults of Turkic-speaking tribes, can be found in the notes of travelers and scientific sources including A. Vambery, O'Donovan, Henry de Blokville, V. Barthold, E. Bertels, A. Samoilovich, V. Uspensky, V. Belyaev, V. Basilov and others. In the historical heritage of the Turkmens, researchers identify "a stratum of early agricultural cultures that grew into the first civilization, a stratum of the Parthian era and a stratum of the Seljuk period. All of them are organically included in the powerful block of cultural heritage of Turkmenistan."[3] The coexistence of two types of economies in this territory for thousands of years – sedentary and nomadic – has had an impact on the ethnogenetic composition of the population. The synthesis of these trends influenced the development of national culture and musical art of the Turkmen, as well as the formation of decorative and applied art. The close interaction of agricultural regions with the world of nomadic tribes also influenced the formation of Nowruz traditions, resulting in a system of rituals emphasizing sacrifice.

The Turkmen tribes celebrated the Nowruz holiday in different ways. The beginning of field work symbolized a new round in the endless cycle of life, and signified the revival of agricultural functions. The settled population of Southern Turkmenistan and the Amudarya river coast, as well as the Alili, Mekhinli, Murcheli, and Nokhurly tribes, who were mainly engaged in agriculture, celebrated the arrival of Nowruz solemnly. Their holidays differed from the tribes that have engaged in cattle breeding for centuries such as the the Teke, Yomud, Arsary, Salyr, Saryk whose main concern during the winter months was the preservation of livestock. However, the relics of Nowruz in the form of traditional dishes and rituals have been preserved by all Turkmens.

The inevitable repetition of the seasons turned the calendar cycles into an evolutionary spiral. "The Turkmen ancestors had a developed system of rituals and holidays related to labor processes and seasonal changes in nature. They were based on animistic beliefs, as well as the ideas of dying and regenerating vegetation widespread in the ancient world,"[4] Turkmens call winter Gara gysh (black winter) and divide it into two periods – Uly Chille (Big Forty) and Kichi Chille (Small Forty). Before the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, it was believed that the period of Uly Chille lasted the 40 days from December 20th to January 30th, and the period of Kichi Chille from the last day of January and through February 22nd. The end of winter was marked by the purifying power of fire – put into practice by lighting large bonfires and conducting rituals.

The tradition of celebrating Nowruz on the day of the vernal equinox has spread among many Central Asian peoples. As a result of ethnic assimilation, celebrations related to holidays celebrating the new year merged into Nowruz, associated with the vernal equinox. References to the spring festival as associated with the new year are found in ancient Sumerian tales about the ruler Gilgamesh. In the lunar calendar of the Sumerians, there was a practice of observing "favorable" and "unfavorable days" – a tradition still widespread in the cultures of the Turkmens and other peoples. "Theoretically, the Sumer calendar year consisted of 360 days and was divided into 12 months of 30 days each. The first day of spring marked the

2 Брюллова-Шаскольская Н. Личный архив. Л. 4 // Указатель рукописных фондов СПБ. Вып. IV. Фонды русских деятелей XVIII-XX веков. Ленинград, 1984. – 352 с.

3 Массон В.М. Культурогенез Древней Центральной Азии. СПб.: СПбГУ, 2006. – С. 301.

4 Туркмены /Отв. ред. Н. А. Дубова/ Институт этнологии и антропологии им. Миклухо-Маклая; Институт истории АН Туркменистана. Москва: Наука, 2016. – С. 342.

beginning of the new year."[5]

The ancestors of the Turkmens, who lived at the dawn of the modern era, used the so-called "Muche" calendar (or "Tengrian" calendar). Originating more than 5,000 years ago, this calendar was adopted by peoples across Central Asia and was later used in parallel with the Muslim calendar. The nature of the upcoming year was determined in accordance with the animal, the image of which was the basis for the year. "The idea of creating a calendar with celestial symbols of the 12-year animal cycle was adopted by the peoples of East Asia from the nomads of Central Asia, who established that Jupiter makes a complete revolution around the sun in about 12 years. By dividing the path of Jupiter into 12 equal parts of 30° each and giving each part the name of a specific animal, the peoples of Asia created a solar-Jupiter 12-year calendar cycle."[6]

Kazakh researcher A. I. Mukhambetova categorizes time into small calendar cycles and big cycles. According to this classification, days, months, years, and "Mushels" constitute the small cycles – representing time available to the living and forming the foundation for larger temporal structures. The big cycles, in contrast, represent the time of the People, Aruakhs (ancestral spirits), and Tengri. This endless cycle and the simultaneity of time spirals of varying lengths and qualities developed in the nomad a sense of the scale of his life, and its simultaneous belonging to several parallel worlds – the current moments of his personal life, the infinite life of the People, and the eternal world of Aruakhs and Tengri.[7] The traditional calendar allowed various religious systems to coexist harmoniously. A single time code determined the unity of diverse phenomena, which formed a certain structural value. In this regard, the calendar acted as "an organized memory of culture, its universal characteristic and a form of self-assessment."[8]

The chronology associated with the twelve-year animal cycle made it possible to make "forecasts" for the coming year, each of which had its own character: the ubiquitous Rat opened the cycle, followed by a generous Cow, a fearless Leopard, a timid Rabbit, a rainy year of Fish, a wise Snake, a swift Horse, an easy-going Aries, a wayward Monkey, an extremely picky Rooster, a loyal Dog and a lucky Pig. Turkmen folklore contains many parables and legends related to the character of the "lord" of the zoomorphic year; heralding what to expect and what to fear in the new year. All of them rely on accumulated wisdom and life experience of the people. Thus, the year of the Rat is usually hot and arid, followed by the year of the Cow, with abundant rainfall and grasses. The year of the Leopard is stingy with rain, which is more than compensated for in the following year of the Rabbit. The snake loves abundance and luxury, which do not run out in the following years of Aries and the Horse. The years of the Monkey and the Rooster bring little precipitation, but the Dog and the Pig that follow them bring back to earth the good news of Heaven in the form of generous rains and harvests.[9]

References to the Muche calendar are widely used in classical Turkmen poetry. In the poem "Atamyn" ("Father"), which Makhtumkuli Fragi dedicated to his father, the poet Dovletmamed Azadi, there are lines indicating the time of the mentor's passing away:

"At the age of sixty, on Nowruz day,
in the year of Pisces,
Fate cut my father's path short.

5 Клочков И. С. Духовная культура Вавилонии: человек, судьба, время. Москва, 1983. – С. 207.

6 Цибульский В.В. Календари и хронология стран мира. Москва, 1982. – С. 79.

7 Мухамбетова А., Аманов Б. Казахская традиционная музыка и XX век. Алматы: Дайк-Пресс, 2002. – С. 39.

8 Рабинович Е. Тип календаря и типология культуры // Историко-астрономические исследования. Т. 14. М., 1978. – С. 141.

9 Джикиев А. Традиционные туркменские праздники, развлечения и игры. Ашхабад, 1983. – С. 13–14.

Such is life, it is known!
My father's life ended." [10]

Sultan Myalik Shah, the ruler of the Seljuk dynasty, was known for his patronage of outstanding personalities of that time, including scientists, poets, and musicians. Desiring to establish a new order of chronology, Myalik Shah built the largest observatory, where he invited leading Eastern thinkers. The ruler's spiritual mentor, scientist and poet Omar Khayyam, was appointed to lead the project. Observing the heavenly bodies, Omar Khayyam managed to develop a calendar more accurate than the Gregorian calendar, compile a star catalog, as well as the *Malik Shah's Astronomical Tables* based on solar activity. The new chronological order made it possible to establish the correspondence of Nowruz to the day of the vernal equinox.[11] The result of these scientific observations was the book *Nowruznama*.

The tradition of celebrating the Eastern New Year on the day of the vernal equinox turned out to be so durable that even the Arabs who came and spread of the Muslim Hijri calendar,[12] could not eradicate the holiday, which had become established among many peoples. While the traditions of Nowruz underwent significant transformations during the period of Islamization, the main idea of the holiday – the awakening of nature and spiritual purification – remained unchanged. "Central Asia is where the Zoroastrian religion showed the greatest resistance to the spread of Islam, functioning as an area of Zoroastrian orthodoxy, untouched by the powerful influences of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity. Despite various attempts to revise this position, both historical and contemporary, it remains the most ancient center where Zoroastrianism developed into a complete religious system."[13]

Thus, the dates of the main religious holidays correspond with the most ancient, native folk calendar. "Turkmen rituals and beliefs related to magic, totems, animism, fetishism, shamanism, and Zoroastrianism have been preserved to this day. Islam did not displace all these manifestations from the Turkmen, they continued and continue to exist alongside or in combination with the Muslim ideology. In calendar rituals, these layers reflect the change of cultural standards and standards, representing a kind of node of cultural genesis, and pointing to the complex history of the people."[14]

The traditions of celebrating Nowruz in Turkmenistan are largely connected with pre-Islamic fire worship cults. As researcher V. I. Sarianidi notes, "Modern Turkmens profess Islam, but their beliefs, folk festivals, rituals and customs contain many pre-Islamic elements associated not only with the paganism of the ancient Turks, but also with the Zoroastrian cults of the inhabitants of the oldest Central Asian oases. This is how the unique genetic and cultural potential of the Turkmen people has developed over the millennia."[15]

The center of the Zoroastrian religion in Turkmenistan is the ancient country of Mouru-Margush, which is mentioned on the Behistun Rock in the inscription of the Achaemenid king Darius (1st millennium BCE). Lost among the sand dunes of the Karakum desert, the country of Margush was discovered in the middle of the 20th

10 Kösäýew M. Edebiýat barada söhbet. Aşgabat: Türkmenistan, 1992. – Sah. 226.

11 Baltaýew A., Jykiýew A. Nowruz – türkmen halkynyň milli baýramy. Aşgabat: Ylym, 2013.– Sah. 195.

12 Лобачёва Н. П. К истории календарных обрядов у земледельцев Средней Азии // Древние верования и культы народов Средней Азии. Москва, 1986. – С. 11.

13 Толстов С.П. Древний Хорезм. Опыт историко-археологического исследования. Москва: МГУ им. М. Ломоносова, 1948. – С. 286.

14 Глазунова Н.Н. Календарные праздники: на перекрестке цивилизаций. // Фольклорная традиция: фиксация и интерпретация. СПб: РИИИ, 2013. – С. 185.

15 Сариниди В. Маргуш. Древневосточное царство в старой дельте реки Мургаб. Ашхабад: Государственное издательское агентство Туркменистана, 2002. – С. 54.

century. “Ancient Greek historians, who discovered Central Asia during Alexander the Great's eastern campaign, began calling this country Margiana for the sake of pronunciation. In the Middle Ages, under the influence of the Arabic language, this territory began to be called Merv, and now it is the Mary Velayat (Mary region) of Turkmenistan. What unites these names is that they are all derived from the root “Marg,” or “Murg,” which is the basis of the name of the Murghap River (translated as “Water of Murg“), in the basin of which this country was located. It is significant that in the holy Avesta, among the Zoroastrian lands, the country of Mouru is mentioned, which scientists confidently identify with Margiana.”[16]

In the traditions of the Margush people, agricultural functions and faith in deities who provide crops come to the fore. The most revered Zoroastrian gods were the Sun God Mithra, and the Moon Goddess Anahita, the patroness of nobility. The religious buildings found in the territory of Margush (the temple of Mithras the Sun, the temple of fire, the temple of water, the temple of sacrifices and public meals), as well as the circle shape characteristic of cult altars, are identified with the cult of the sun. The God Mithra, in the ideas of the ancient inhabitants, acted as a companion of the sun, who had the ability to cause rain, regulate the cosmic order (day and night, seasonal changes), and promote fertility. The depiction of fertility scenes is typical on Margush seals.

Researchers associate ancient female terracotta figurines, found in large numbers in the territory of Turkmenistan, with Anahita, the Zoroastrian goddess of heavenly waters and fertility. Small terracotta sculptures found in Merv reflected a range of images and subjects related to local beliefs. According to researcher T. S. Vyzgo, “Local coroplasts reproduced the images of the main gods of the Avesta: the virgin goddess, the patroness of waters and the mother goddess, the patroness of the hearth.”[17] In this case, according to the ethnographer S. Demidov, we can only talk about “Zoroastrianism, which spread very early in Margiana, characterized in the Avesta as a ‘powerful, believing Asha.’”[18]

According to the religion of Zoroastrianism, fire is the source of all things, and is the most important resource given by the creator. Believing that the sun's rays could bring long-awaited grace, on the first day of the new year, the ancient people joyfully welcomed the warmth and light emanating from Mother Earth. “We can imagine how on special days, stipulated by tradition, many pilgrims from all over the country of Moura flocked to the temple city. They walked in family groups and drove sacrificial animals in front of them. After performing a ritual ablution, they handed over the sheep, goats, cows or camels to the priests, who lit the ritual hearths. While reciting prayers and reciting sacred texts, the priests prepared sacrificial meat. Then the pilgrims went to the square and sat around small bonfires.”[19]

The temple buildings of Margush are equipped with cult furnaces and round altars, on which ancient people performed sacrifices. The rituals were accompanied by prayers, which required “special concentration of mind and spirit”[20] from the pilgrims. The cult events represented the divine power, which was shared by all those who took part in ritual sacrifices and meals.

The idea of confrontation between the forces of good and evil is reflected in the cylindrical seals of

16 Сарианиди В.И. В поисках страны Маргуш. Москва, 1993. – С. 18.

17 Вызго Т. Музыкальные инструменты Средней Азии: Исторические очерки. М.: Музыка, 1980. – С. 33.

18 Демидов С. История религиозных верований народов Туркменистана (ред. А. Росляков). А.: Ылым, 1990. – С. 29.

19 Сарианиди В.И. В поисках страны Маргуш. М., 1993. – С. 95.

20 Бойс М. Зороастрийцы. Верования и обычаи. Москва: Наука, 1988. – С. 45.

the Margush people, made of stone and bronze. The stone seal from the temple of Togolok-1 is engraved with the ritual actions of musicians and acrobats dressed in monkey masks. The images of musical instruments – a huge drum, flutes and castanets – evoke associations with the art of Mesopotamia. "We have a celebration scene in front of us, where acrobatic performances are performed to the sounds of a tambourine. People with monkey heads who act as musicians are also known in the art of the Hittite kingdom, that is, in Anatolia."[21] The word "festival" in Hittite archives is associated with the concepts of "feast" or "banquet." Consequently, the Margush seals attest to the long-standing cultural and historical ties of these regions.

The tradition of placing religious fire altars in secluded places of temples, rather than exposing them to the public, has been preserved by modern Zoroastrians. "Only priests are allowed to see a burning fire in the altar. This has always been done, even in the depths of thousands of years, when the Zoroastrian faith itself had not yet developed into a coherent system. It was also done by the pagans who preceded the era of Zarathustra."[22] The cult sanctuaries found on the territory of Margush strongly indicate that rituals associated with Zoroastrian beliefs were widespread among local tribes.

Religious sites in the form of fire temples, characteristic of Zoroastrianism, were also discovered by archaeologists in the excavations of Old Nisa, one of the capitals of Ancient Parthia, the ruins of which are located near Ashgabat. The Parthian period represents a bright page in the history of the Turkmen ancestors. The emergence of the Parthian state in the 3rd century BCE was facilitated by favorable climatic conditions and an advantageous geographical location. The sacred fire was lit in honor of deified ancestral kings, whose clay statues were installed in the temples of Old Nisa, where magnificent ceremonies were performed.[23]

The Parthian rhytons – ceremonial drinking cups – are the main treasure of the Nisian excavations. Made of ivory, these banquet vessels, in the form of a curved horn were intended for religious libations over an altar. The rhyton friezes are decorated with magnificent carvings depicting sacrificial rituals, the gods of Greek Olympus, and figures of priests and musicians. The rhyton trunk features figures of fantastic creatures.

"By themselves, the motifs of the rhyton decoration – whether they are fantastic polymorphic creatures – a winged lion, a strange bull-boy, a flying elephant, or the theme of a sacrificial procession, an exuberant Bacchanalian dance, or a group of 'Orientalized' Olympians – are somehow connected with the mythological images of the Parthians, who adopted some aspects of Greek ideology, reworked based on local cult beliefs."[24] According to the researchers, the rites of marriage of the gods depicted on the rhytons embody "the magical act of fertilizing the earth, lighting fire and religious libation, which is associated with the worship of dying and resurrecting nature, offering a sacrificial animal to the deity."[25] Academician V. M. Masson also notes that the monuments of Parthia and Margiana "reflect the Zoroastrian pantheon, as well as the use of the Zoroastrian calendar. Most likely, we can talk about the universal Zoroastrianism of the Parthians. The Nisian documents also mention a priest of the

21 Сарианиди В. Маргуш. Древневосточное царство в старой дельте реки Мургаб. Ашхабад: Государственное издательское агентство Туркменистана, 2002. – С. 269.

22 Сарианиди В. Маргуш. Древневосточное царство в старой дельте реки Мургаб. Ашхабад: Государственное издательское агентство Туркменистана, 2002. – С. 253.

23 Кошеленко Г.А. Культура Парфии. Москва: Наука, 1966. – С. 21–22.

24 Массон М.Е., Пугаченкова Г.А. Парфянские ритоны Нисы (под ред. В. Струве). Ашхабад, 1959. – С. 243.

25 Вызго Т. Музыкальные инструменты Средней Азии: Исторические очерки. Москва: Музыка, 1980. – С. 28–29.

'temple of fire.'"[26]

Zoroastrianism remained the official state religion during the reign of the Sassanids (3rd – 7th centuries). In this era, Zoroastrian cults gained a special status. The celebrations associated with Nowruz were considered a time of national rejoicing and were celebrated here on a large scale. People dressed up in spring clothes and held lavish receptions, honored guests and sang songs. "And most of all, they sang the songs of Fahlabad (Barbad). And there was Fahlabad from the population of Merv. And in his songs, there was praise for the king."[27] Barbad, the famous musician of the Sasanian king Khosrow II Parviz (7th century), is credited with a number of works dedicated to Nowruz: "Bady Nowruz" ("Wind of Nowruz"), "Sazy Nowruz" ("Melody of Nowruz"), and "Nazi Nowruz" ("Smile of Nowruz").[28]

The cult of fire is partially preserved among the Turkmens at the present time. Upon entering a room where a fire is burning, a custom of greeting it has been preserved. An oath was given to the hearth. It is forbidden for members of the Emreli tribe to pour water onto the fire, while for the Yomuds of Dashoguz Velayat, a cleansing fire is lit before entering a new house. In the villages of Lebap, a bride and groom walk around a campfire three times. "Charcoal and ash were also believed to have purifying and protective magical properties and act as an amulet. A triangular bag of ashes was sewn under children's collars to act as a talisman (a symbol of the Zoroastrians)."[29]

Special properties were attributed to fires lit before the onset of Nowruz. This tradition was known by various names by different ethnic groups: by the Yomuds – "Gara charshenbe" (Black Wednesday"), by the Alili – "Akhyr charshenbe" ("Last Wednesday"), and by the Saryks of the Yoloten Etrap, "Shaman ot" ("Bonfire of Shamans"). The Shamanic ritual, which traces its origins back to the time of the fire worshippers, is still very popular today. On the eve of Nowruz celebrations, bonfires are lit, over which people of different ages and genders, as well as women with children in their arms, jump. It is believed that by jumping over a bonfire, a person gets rid of sin and diseases. The participants wish each other a year of grace, harmony, and protection from the elements and adversity. Previously, old wooden dishes were thrown into the fire, and it was believed that they would take troubles and misfortunes with them.

Along with fire, water was an indispensable attribute of the rituals accompanying Nowruz. In the past, people's livelihoods were entirely dependent on nature. The Turkmens determined whether the year would be fruitful, favorable, or arid based on various criteria. Various beliefs were associated with the first days of the new year. For example, rain on the eve of the new year promised a fruitful year and good luck in all endeavors. Such rain was called "Nur" ("Grace of Heaven"). People were even happier about snow, comparing the beauty of the girls with the snow of Nowruz. Warm weather in the early days of Nowruz foreshadowed a difficult and dry year for agriculture and animal husbandry.

The oldest ritual in the folklore of the Turkmen is "the rite of causing rain," the origin of which was associated with the dry climate of Turkmen lands. People believed in the ability of shamans to control the weather and cause rain. Researchers recorded various forms of the rite, the names of which also differed: among the Yomuds and Geoklens, the rite

26 Массон В.М. Культурогенез Древней Центральной Азии. СПб.: СПбГУ, 2006. – С. 141.

27 Иностранцев К.А. Сасанидские этюды. СПб., 1909. – С. 82.

28 Гуллыев Ш. Легендарный музыкант из Мерва // Ашхабад, 1973, №. 3. – С. 148.

29 Глазунова Н. Календарные праздники: на перекрестке цивилизаций // Фольклорная традиция: фиксация и интерпретация. СПб: РИИИ, 2013. – С. 188.

was called “Syutgazan” or “Burkut baba” (Burkut divana); among the Akhal Velayat, it was known as “Tuytatyn,” “Kossem,” or “Chemche gelin.” Relics of the rite, in the form of a children's game, were identified in the late 20th century. This entailed a group of children walking around yards with a scarecrow, singing a song, and receiving gifts for it.The lyrics of the song are given in a study by N. N. Abubakirova:

“Suit-Gazan with rain stone
Not a brown stallion.
What does Suyt Gazan need?
Raindrops are needed.
It's going to rain, it's going to open the road,
For Suyt Gazan to come.
I'll cook some food,
Won't you try it, Suyt Gazan?” [30]

The text, which once had a magical function, lost its meaning over time, while many words fell out of use. This resulted in children not knowing their original purpose. The book by V. Uspensky and V. Belyaev *Turkmen Music*, contains two samples of the children's song “Yagysh yagara geldi” (“It's Raining”), which was dedicated to spring rain. The uncomplicated lyrics of the song are organized in the form of a countdown:

“It's time for the rain to fall,
It's time to milk the sheep,
It's time to sprinkle water on tamdyr,
The guy ran away, the girl chased him away.
Blow my hair, blow it.
If you don't disperse them, cut them!”[31]

Along with the oath given to fire and hearth, the Turkmens also gave an oath to water. Saint Nukh was considered a guardian of water. Out of respect for him, it was forbidden to take water from the river after dusk. If there was such a need, then a special request was made to the water guardian:

“Hello, water guardian,
Wash my face.
There are guests at our house,
Let me get some water!” [32]

Historian A. Dzhikiev tends to interpret the phrase “Suyt Gazan” as a “milk cauldron.”[33] At the same time, the Oghuz Turkmens used the term “Gazan” to address the ruler, so this phrase can also be interpreted as “dairy master.” “There was a cult of milk in the cattle breeding environment. Isn't that why the white color, the color of milk, is still considered favorable among all Central Asian peoples, driving away troubles and misfortunes? Wishing a good journey, the Turkmens say: “*Yolun ak bolsun*!” (“May the road be clear!”).[34]

In Turkmen beliefs, the deity Mamaka commands clouds, while Burkut Baba is considered the “guardian of rain.” Therefore, among the Geoklens, the rite of causing rain is also called “Burkut Baba.” In the ideas of the ancient Turkmens, the “master” of the rain was endowed with the properties of a fool, which is reflected in his name, “*divana*.” As a result of Islamization, Burkut Baba began to be recognized as a Muslim saint, the helper of Allah, but power over rain remained his main characteristic. “In the legends, Burkut is depicted as a typical Sufi saint. His name includes the word divana, meaning “wanderer,” “beggar.” The Turkmens explain that

30 Абубакирова Н. Обряды вызывания дождя. Игровые формы и мифологические корни // Механизм передачи фольклорной традиции. СПб.: РИИИ, 2004. – С. 157.

31 Успенский В., Беляев В. Туркменская музыка. Т. 1-2. (под редакцией Ш. Гуллыева). Алматы: Фонд Сорос-Казахстан, 2003. – С. 467.

32 Gurbanowa J., Ýakubowa B. Türkmen halk saz döredijiligi. Aşgabat: Türkmen döwlet neşirýat gullugy, 2012. – Sah. 18.

33 Джикиев А. Традиционные туркменские праздники, развлечения и игры (на материале Южного и Восточного Туркменистана). Ашхабад: Ылым, 1983. – С. 19.

34 Абубакирова Н. Обряды вызывания дождя. Игровые формы и мифологические корни // Механизм передачи фольклорной традиции. СПб.: РИИИ, 2004. – С. 157.

Burkut is called a divana because he often traveled, had no family or real home, and he gave away to others what people gave to him. But vagrancy and living off charity were characteristic of the followers of many Sufi orders, so the Turkmens confused the concepts of *divana* and *galander* (a follower of the order of mendicant dervishes)."[35]

Asking for the mercy of Heaven, Burkut Baba, the lord of the rain, was offered a sacrificial lamb or goat kid, in hopes this would bring abundant rains and a good harvest. In the villages of western Turkmenistan, there was a ritual to tie a goat to a tree and leave it for two or three days. The plaintive bleating of the animal was believed to reach Burkut who would then send rain to earth. Even a very meager rain on the days of Nowruz brought people sincere joy, and filled their hearts with hope for a successful year. A positive attitude was very important, and therefore the slightest sign was interpreted as a good omen and a blessing from above. In some villages, there was a ritual of pouring water over each other with wishes for abundant rains and rich harvests.

According to the orientalist G. Potanin, the character of the thunderbird, a mythological creature that controls rain, thunder and lightning, is associated with shamanic beliefs and that his image is, does in fact, represent the first shaman. The consonance of the name of "Burkut" with "Bürküt" (golden eagle) among the Turkic and Mongolian peoples, suggests a totem.[36] Historians Rashid al-din and Abulgazi report that ongons (totems) in the form of an eagle, considered the ancestor of shamans, were widespread among the Oghuz tribes. People believed that by throwing a magic stone in the sky, shamans could raise clouds and cause rain.

The rain spell rite spread among many peoples, and forms of this pre-Islamic rite continued, changing and adapting to new living conditions. The ritual often combined animistic, shamanic, and Muslim beliefs of many generations of people. "Incantatory songs, closely related to mythical, pagan, and animistic beliefs developed in ancient times, remnants of totems and shamanism, constitute one of the ancient layers of songmaking. Their content was most often an appeal to the forces of nature, the elements, or mythical patrons. They are closely related to the spells of the forces of nature (causing rain, stopping an eclipse), and include healing songs of healers, as well as spells of *baksy-shamans*. The main organizing factor in the musical structure of these songs is a clear metrorhythm and tempo that accelerates towards the end, which is typical of the ecstatic genres shamans used in various kinds of rituals."[37]

The inhabitants of modern Turkmenistan celebrate the resurrection of nature with great reverence. In preparation for the holiday, people beautify their homes, put their yards and gardens in order, sew festive clothes, prepare traditional dishes, and visit each other with gifts and good wishes. Swings are often installed, swinging on which, according to researchers, symbolizes "an act of sexual orientation towards the fertility deity."[38] The rituals and ceremonies performed on the eve and during the Nowruz celebrations turn the entire preparation process into a colorful, large-scale event.

The main decoration of any celebration, especially on Nowruz, is the cheerful laughter of children. Dressed in bright clothes, on which bells are sewn to protect from the evil eye, children resemble beautiful spring flowers, and are the most grateful spectators of any festive celebrations, whether it is performances by folk musicians, or tasting traditional dishes. On Nowruz days, children gather in a noisy crowd and arrange exciting competitions, mostly held outdoors.

35 Басилов В. Культ святых в исламе. Москва: Мысль, 1970. – С. 25.

36 Потанин Г. *Громовник по поверьям и сказаниям племен Южной Сибири и Северной Монголии.* М., 2011. – С. 52.

37 История музыки Средней Азии и Казахстана (Сост. и ред. Т. Соломонова). Москва: Музыка, 1995. – С. 94–95.

38 Штернберг Л. Я. Первобытная религия в свете этнографии. Ленинград, 1936. – С. 44.

The most popular children's game for Turkmen boys is Ashik Oyny (The Dice), which utilizes animal bones. Examples of bones used for the game from various animals have been found across the territory, speaking to the history and sacredness of the game. Indeed, there are many metaphors, proverbs and sayings associated with it in Turkmen folklore. For example, in an effort to emphasize a person's kindness or skill, our ancestors would say they are "like a golden Ashik" or "like an Ashik of swift-footed deer." Among other pearls of oral creativity are riddles, such as: "It weighs no more than an Ashik, and casts a shadow from a camel." The game is widespread throughout Turkmenistan and its conditions and rules vary.

To store the dice, mothers sew *torba* for their "players." These are small bags made of camel wool. Often, the dice were thrown into a basin containing a boiling solution, in which silk or woolen threads were dyed. This allowed the dice to acquire any possible shade. In the eastern regions of Turkmenistan, dice were sewn into the corners of wedding blankets or to the ends of *alaja* – colorful ropes woven from camel's hair, which were then tied to a bride's dowry. A die was also tied to one end of an embroidered women's shawl, which would then be given to a bride after her wedding as a sign of good wishes for happy motherhood.[39] All these rituals have become firmly embedded in the everyday life and traditional symbols of the Turkmen people.

The game Ayterek-Gunterek is intended for children aged 10 to 15. Having divided into two teams, the players, holding hands, position themselves against each other and sing the lines of song in turn:

"Ayterek – Gunterek!"
"Which one of us do you need?"
"The loudest!"
"Who is it?"
"A girl named Aina!"

Then, the player whose name was called would attempt to break through a link in the row of rivals holding hands. In case of success, a participant from the losing team is taken to join the winning team. The game teaches children team spirit and is a festive feature of the spring holiday.

The special charm of Nowruz is given by traditional gatherings, of men and women separately. Colorful descriptions of noisy feasts of brave Turkmen horsemen contain folk *destans* (epic works). Such feasts were known back in the days of the Oghuz *beks*. Turkmen men's parties are called *dengene* or *geshdek*. They were thoroughly prepared for, with money raised to purchase food and sweets for the festive table. A steward would be specially appointed to distribute tasks for the organization of the celebration. Young men under the age of 20 would be separate from the adult men.

The traditional games of Pechiz or Yuzuk Bukdy are a favorite pastime of men at such gatherings. Pechiz requires its own field and chips. Yuzuk Bukdy (Find the Ring) is also known as "Ketche-ketche" or "Cheke-cheke." It is more often played by elders.

Before Yuzuk Bukdy starts, a prize pool is determined and the game results are predicted. The number of participants can reach up to fifty. The players are divided into two groups and sit in rows opposite each other. Participants are shown an object that one team needs to hide and the other to find. It can be a ring, a coin or a pebble that can be discreetly hidden in the palm of the hand. The player of the first team, clutching the ring in the palm of his hand, approaches each member of his team and brings his hands to the palms of his partner with the same gesture. It is almost impossible to notice who the ring was given to.

The opposing team then comes into play. The players begin to test each player of the team in which the ring is hidden, checking their pulse

39 Baltaýew A., Jykıýew A. Nowruz – türkmen halkynyň milli baýramy. Aşgabat: Ylym, 2013.– Sah. 248.

at the temples, monitoring their facial movements and looking for tension in their gaze. Assessing their rivals, they consult with one another, pointing out the smallest of details until the tension reaches its peak. Members from the observing team approach a player who they believe has the ring. In most cases, the ring is found, although there are times when even the most experienced players make mistakes. If a mistake is made, the person who did have the ring immediately and happily presents it, and the game ends with the victory of the team that hid the ring. The winners are awarded a prize, after which they proceed to a festive meal.

Children and teenagers do not participate in this game. Rather, they learn the nuances of the game from their elders, by observing their patience and ability to make well-considered decisions.

For teenagers and young people, exciting entertainment during the days of Nowruz is provided by the game Yaglyga Tovusmak (Get a Shawl). It is a competition of agility and jumping ability. On top of a high pole, prizes are hung – bright scarves, sashes, and pieces of cloth. Players need to accelerate and jump high enough to reach the prizes. All this happens under the sparkling remarks of the audience, egging on the participants. Gradually, players are eliminated. The name of the most successful young man is solemnly announced. French traveler Henry Gulibeuf de Blockville, who visited the Turkmen lands in the middle of the 19th century, noted the peculiarity of Nowruz practices among the local population: "Funny games are being started with hanging a handkerchief from the top of a *yurt* (tent). The fun smoothly turns into fights of the *palvan* heroes, horse racing and marksmanship competitions. Then the pilaf is ripe, and after it they serve fragrant tea, during which everyone listens to the songs of the *bakhshi-destanchi* (epic story-teller)."[40]

A common pastime for young men in the days of Nowruz was the game Altyn Gabak (Golden Pumpkin), which is an archery competition. This game has been recorded in many sources devoted to the history of the Turkmen. Since ancient times, the bow and quiver of arrows have symbolized unity, courage and bravery in the worldview of the Turkmen. References to golden bows and arrows are found in many folk epics and destans. Only real heroes could pull a tight bowstring. Gyorogly appears to have been an incomparable shooter, and an undaunted defender of his native land and the Turkmen people. The bow and arrow were the main attributes of the centralized power of the state founded by Oguzkhan. The ancestors of the Turkmens were confident in the sacred power of this symbol, capable of scaring away evil spirits and attracting health and good luck.

According to legend, the ancestor of the Oguz, Oguzkhan, married two girls: one who descended from the sky on a blue ray and is associated with the element of light, and another who was found in a hollow tree, and is associated with the elements of water, earth, and sky (three heavens – lower, middle and upper, according to Marr's terminology). Three sons were said to have been born from each wife, and the first three would receive the names Sun, Moon, and Star, while the latter three would be named Sky, Mountain, and Sea. Twenty-four grandchildren would then be born from these sons – said to be the ancestors of Oghuz families. Oguzkhan hid a golden bow and three golden arrows on the steppe and sent his sons to hunt. The three eldest sons found the bow, which their father broke into three pieces, giving them each one, while the younger ones found the three arrows. Then Oguzkhan addressed his sons: "The peoples who lived before considered the bow to be Khan, and the arrows to be ambassadors. Similarly, now, after my death, the people should choose the worthiest khan (of those who found the bow), while the rest should be content with their subordinate positions."[41]

40 Blokville G. Türkmenleriňkide ýesirlikde. Aşgabat: Altyn guşak, 1992. – Pp. 54.

41 Толстов С.П. Древний Хорезм. Опыт историко-археологического исследования. Москва: МГУ им. М. Ломоносова, 1948. – С. 296.

During Nowruz, special archery competitions were held. In the past, the game Altyn Gabak existed in two forms, walking and equestrian. In the latter version, while controlling their horse at full gallow, a player had to shoot an arrow at a target. The target range was determined according to the age and skill level of the contestants. Young shooters had the opportunity to shoot at nearby targets, often a pumpkin (hence the name of the game). Experienced *mergens* (shooters) could hit targets at a longer distances, which for them, would often be a horse or camel bone. The most difficult target was a gold or silver coin attached to a board. Shooting at the target was carried out in strict order, with those who missed being eliminated from the game until only one player was left. The target could be positioned at a distance of up to 100 meters, giving daredevils the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. The game was supervised by referees appointed from from among honored elders. Big prizes fueled passions. The competition helped to foster courage, endurance and dexterity in young people.

The celebration of Nowruz in Turkmenistan is not complete without spectacular fights between palvans (wrestlers). Goresh, a type of traditional wrestling martial arts, hones courage in young people, and strengthens their will and ingenuity. Descriptions of fights between wrestlers are common in Turkmen epic art. Using various distracting maneuvers, palvans try to weaken their enemy's position, and put him on his back. The secrets of Goresh skill – called Chilish – are carefully preserved and passed on from mentor to pupil. Winning a fight was considered a matter of prestige. The training of wrestlers began from the age of adolescence. In the past, the wrestling techniques of the *chopan-palvans* (shepherd wrestlers), tall and stocky nomads, were particularly difficult to defeat.

Famous young wrestlers would be notified a few days before the Nowruz celebration. Numerous spectators would gather to watch the spectacle. Prizes were awarded in the form of a ram, bull or camel. Palvan heroes, who had never known defeat, enjoyed special prestige in society. Wrestlers who had reached a respectable age were seated in the front rows, and before the start of the fight, in recognition of their past achievements, their names would be announced and gifts presented to them. The experienced wrestlers were the first to meet, the biggest prizes were awarded, and then the competition continued with the participation of young wrestlers.

A. N. Samoilovich colorfully described the Goresh struggle, which he witnessed during a trip to Turkmenistan in 1909: "It was the turn of the spectacular fights of the palvan-wrestlers. The audience surrounded the wrestlers in a tight ring. The men sitting in the first row of the audience circle squatted down or bent their legs in the oriental way, while the audience watched them standing up. The third row consisted of riders. By the fourth row, the circle was noticeably thinning, but was made up of particularly curious spectators who watched the performance of the heroes sitting astride tall camels. The judges and elders took special places of honor – they had to carefully observe the course of the fight. There was also a special herald – *jarchi*. The young wrestlers entered the arena accompanied by experienced mentors who, even in the last seconds before the fight, tried to give the students useful advice, support and encourage them. And then, the very process of struggle began, complex and uncompromising: the palvans, holding each other by the sashes tied over scarlet robes, tried not to miss the most important moment of fleeting weakness committed by their opponent, in order to seize it and immediately lay him down. Everything happened instantly. The herald announced the names of the lucky winners over and over again."[42]

42 Самойлович А. Н. Отчёт о командировке в Туркменистан в 1907 гг. // Рукописный фонд библиотеки им. Салтыкова-Щедрина в Санкт-Петербурге. – С. 28.

Horse racing is another essential activity of the spring holiday in Turkmenistan. The traditions of horseback riding among the Turkmens have their roots in the culture of the ancient Huns.[43] Turkmen *seyis* (horse breeders) have been perfecting their craft for centuries, thanks to which the gene pool of purebred Akhal-Teke horses has been preserved. Turkmen horses are popularly called "heavenly steeds" for their extraordinary beauty and grace. They are the glory of Turkmen horse breeding.

Equestrian competitions held on Nowruz are widespread. Such competitions have been held on a large scale, with a large crowd of spectators and connoisseurs. The traditions of horse racing that have formed over the centuries include a whole set of strict rules and regulations. Riders from neighboring villages were invited to participate in the races. The expansive scale of new year celebrations required significant prizes, in the form of a fattened bull or camel. Nowadays, cars are raffled off as prizes at the races.

Often, Turkmen *bakhshi* (singer), *dutarchi* (dutar player) or *destanchi* (epic teller) were invited to men's gatherings, to perform epic tales about the exploits and great power of folk heroes to the music of the *dutar* and *gijak*. Time spent in a man's company and with friends makes one appreciate the importance of life in a new way, and improves the mood. Games, funny jokes, and music enhanced the appeal of men's evenings, which lasted until the early hours of Nowruz. Sometimes men from neighboring villages were invited. Unspoken etiquette demanded reciprocal hospitality. Thus, such meetings contributed to a spiritual rapprochement between the inhabitants of neighboring villages and strong friendship ties were formed. In addition to entertainment, such meetings servied educational purposes, contributing to the formation of spiritual and moral ideals in the minds of young people, norms of behavior in society, and the assimilation of traditional etiquette.

During Nowruz celebrations, Turkmen girls spent their festive leisure time in their own way. Young girls and women, in beautiful outfits decorated with traditional embroidery and silver jewelry, went out to mass celebrations, gathering in the evening for fun games and singing folk songs.

On the night before Nowruz, girls performed the traditional rites of fortune-telling, Monjukatdy (throwing beads). The origins of this tradition date back to the pre-Islamic period. "A considerable part of the archaeological rarities identified in the territory of the oldest historical and cultural complexes of Turkmenistan are elegant necklaces made of stone, bones and shells. The archaeological site, where such finds were especially frequent, was named Monjukly-depe (Mountain with Beads). It is located on the territory of the Altyn Asyr Etrap of the Akhal Velayat. The history of the Monjukli-depe monument dates back to the Jeytun civilization (6th – 5th millennia BCE), as evidenced by the flint tools found here and ceramics characteristic of the Jeytun culture. The collected archaeological material suggests that girl's fortune-telling songs, Monjukatdy, were most widespread in the southern and western regions of Turkmenistan.[44]

These songs were in harmony with the fragrance of flowers and the atmosphere of early spring. For the divination ritual, a bowl of water was required, into which each participant threw her own special bead, pebble or ring. The ceremony was accompanied by the singing of verses, such as:

"Nowruz came that night,
The girls draw lots.
Whose lot comes out,
her reward is a cockerel.
The moon is clear and bright,
Girls are the toys of fate,

43 Baýramow K., Gulnyýazow R. Türkmenleriň atly oýunlary. Aşgabat, 2003. – Sah. 47.

44 Baltaýew A., Jykiýew A. Nowruz – türkmen halkynyň milli baýramy. Aşgabat: Ylym, 2013.– Sah. 230.

Every year on the night of Nowruz
The lover finds his love." [45]

The first participant, having performed a verse, would take one bead out of the water. The owner of the removed bead became the "addressee" of the spoken quatrain and, in turn, had to perform her own verses addressed to the next participant. The themes associated with these fortune-telling songs of were health, marriage, and wealth. The quatrains reveal secret girlish dreams and hopes for a happy fate. The game has not lost its relevance even today.

A popular genre of girl folklore is the cycle of game songs, Lale. Each song is characterized by a specific method of performance. For example, during the performance of the song "Damak Lale" (*damak* means "throat"), girls make light blows with their fingers on their throats. The songs "Egin Lale" (*«egin* means "body") and "Ayak Lale" (*ayak* – "leg") are accompanied by body movements, in "Dodak Lale," the lips are involved, while in "Enek Lale," the chin is involved. The lyrics of Lale mostly relate to love.

Among the oldest rites of the spring festival are the song and game genres Yymmyl and Khymmyl – khyarov, which are widespread mainly in the western regions of Turkmenistan. During their performance, the women, making characteristic gestures, continuously utter exclamations of "Khymmyl – khyarov!" or "Yymmyl!" These exclamations, which have no lexical meaning, are defined by researchers as alexic (meaningless) choruses. Once upon a time, these movements and exclamations probably had magical meanings, but would over time begin to exist only as elements of girls' game songs.[46]

Nowruz, being one of the brightest and therefore beloved holidays among the people, occupies an important place in the history and culture of the Turkmen. Its implementation reveals the desire for life, light, and creation. The idea of the holiday is widely reflected in Turkmen classical poetry. The theme of the resurrection of nature and the flowering of the steppe has become a source of inspiration for many classical poets including Makhtumkuli, Mollanepes, Andalib, and Zelili. While singing Nowruz, the poets used the brightest colors and metaphors in their creations, creating majestic hymns to the beauty of their native land. The poetic lines of Makhtumkuli Fragi in his poems "Novruzdan Seni" ("I'm looking for your face in the bloom of Nowruz"), "Bu gun" ("Today"), and "Duman peyda" ("In the spring haze"), transport the reader to a world of pristine beauty and harmony. Many of these poems, dedicated to this amazing time of love and flowering, have acquired a new quality in the art of Turkmen folk musicians – *bakhshi* and *sazanda*.

If the monuments of material art appeared to us as they might have before the eyes of those long ago, it would be clear that the song, dance, and musical and poetic heritage of the Turkmen have undergone constant and diverse modifications over time. The celebration of the arrival of spring is impossible to imagine without folk dancing. The pearl of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Turkmen is the "Kushtdepdi Rite of Song and Dance," which was included in the UNESCO Representative List in 2017. It involves thrilling and energetic dance movements performed with great enthusiasm by young, middle-aged and elderly people alike. The dance originates from *dhikr*, the worship practices of shamans and dervishes common among many peoples of Central Asia. The choreography consists of circular movements, which clearly resembles the ritual dances of the Sufis. Unlike the meditative practice of Sufi communities, Turkmens used dhikr for spiritual purification, thus combining religious purpose with local pre-Islamic elements, the attributes of which have been preserved in modern performing arts.

45 Короглы Х. Туркменская литература. Москва: Высшая школа, 1972. – С. 18.

46 Гуллыев Ш. Туркменская музыка (Наследие) // Автореф. дис. ... доктор иск. Ташкент, 1998. – С. 16.

Dhikr was most actively utilized by the Western Turkmen tribes. Its main focus was the healing of the mentally ill by exorcising evil spirits. All the movements of the ritual had a functional purpose, which was especially evident in the collective performance. Having a beneficial effect on the energy field, the rite was understood to help get rid of various diseases. Elements of this once-existing act of treatment, starting from an initial meditative prayer and ending with an ecstatic climax, have been preserved in the practice of modern Kushtdepdi. The dance includes six parts that have retained their names from dhikr: "Oturma gazal" ("Sitting gazal"), "Bir depim" ("One step"), "Uch depim" ("Three step"), "Divana," "Sedrat," and "Zem-zem." Each part has its own set of body movements and rhythmic formulas, which together form a single cycle.

The action opens with the Oturma gazal – a solo vocalization, reminiscent of ritual crying, close to prayer, since the names of God (Allah) appear in the texts. It is performed by a *gazalchy* (singer), at which point all the participants sit on their heels (hence the name). Gradually, the performers rise and begin a leisurely movement in a circle, which indicates the beginning of the Bir depim section. In this section of the dance cycle, and also in the next (Uch depim), all participants, moving in a circle, periodically simultaneously turn to the center and perform a step with their right foot. At each turn, one step (Bir depim) or three steps (Uch depim) are performed. "In the parts of Divana and Sedrat, a collective circular movement is also performed with footsteps and exclamations of "*Kusht, kusht, kushtdepdi*!", representing the oldest elements of the practice. The final Zem-zem is the culmination of the cycle. Continuously repeating the syllables "*zem-zem*," the participants make jerking movements with their hands and gradually compress the circle they form. The movements and shouts become sharper and more intense, and the hands of the participants rise to the sky, giving thanks to the God."[47]

Over time, the functional basis of the dhikr gradually faded away. At the beginning of the 20th century, the ritual began to be filled with new content and acquired the function of a talisman. Of particular importance in the rite is the magical power of words, with spells uttered against the evil eye and blessings for good deeds and well-being. While retaining its ancient components – singing, circling, and characteristic gestures and exclamations, the genre's cultural and moral qualities have intensified.

In modern life, the Kushtdepdi dance has become a calling card of Nowruz. It is also performed at celebrations related to the creation of a family, the birth of a child, the building of a new house or the purchase of a new boat in the Caspian regions. Here, in the Balkan Velayat, Kushtdepdi is traditionally performed at the moment a new carpet begins to be woven. The dance is widespread in all regions of Turkmenistan. Clear rhythms and exclamations of joyful merriment capture all participants of the dance, regardless of age and gender. Participation of representatives of all generations in the dance symbolizes the eternal continuation of the human race and creates a feeling of joy, purification and well-being.

The fertility cult characteristic of Nowruz is reflected in the dance Gurjak oyny (Doll Dance). This ritual was actively practiced until the end of the 20th century in the villages of the Sakar and Sayat Etraps of the Lebap Velayat among the Turkmen tribes of Arsary, Sakar, Eski and Bayat. Myths and rituals associated with the cult of fertility and expressed in the form of a game dance are found among various peoples, which indicates certain patterns of primitive thinking and ancient cultural contacts.

In the Gurjak oyny ritual, as well as in the performance of the cult dances Eschederaz and Uly gyz (Big Girl), the performer, covering their

47 Курбанова Д. От зикра до Куштдепди: трансформация и новая жизнь древнего жанра // Тюркская культура: общие истоки и особенности развития. Алматы: КазНАИ им. Т. Жургенова, 2023. – С. 280.

upper body and head with a huge turban, remained anonymous to all those present. He would appear suddenly, in the midst of celebration, and, having fulfilled his role, disappear again unnoticed. "No one knew the performer of this mysterious dance by sight; those initiated into the secret remained silent. When asked if anyone had tried to find out the identity of the performer of Gurjak oyny, the informants replied negatively, since everyone knew that this should never be done. All this suggests that this rite is an extremely ancient relic and is probably under the protection of some kind of religious taboo."[48] Being a part of mass festive entertainment, the dance of the cult of fertility, Gurjak oyny reveals elements of an archaic cult theater, representing an example of a relic of culture of the distant past.

An important song and dance genre of the Turkmen is the Chapak or Chapak-Karsak dance, which is firmly established in modern musical folklore. Chapak (Clap Your Hands) is found in the Sayat and Khojambaz Etraps of the Lebap Velayat and is performed by women and girls at festivals and weddings. However, initially, the dance was a ritual symbolizing a fight with the enemy. The ceremony, which consists of bouncing and overhead clapping movements, could last until the performers reached complete exhaustion. Historically, it is understood that women used the ritual to help their husbands and brothers on the battlefields to maintain their strength of mind and win.[49]

The Chapak dance consists of several parts: Chepbekey, Chemche-kashyk, Khushdeki, Hekke-bokush, and Zhamly oyun. In the Sayat Etrap, the genre is called Esgi-Chapak (Old Clap). The names of its different parts are also slightly different: Chapak, Karsaki, Chemche-kashyk, Hekke-bokush, Sallana, Chepbe karsaki. Each part is characterized by a certain rhythmic formula and characteristic body movements. The dance is accompanied by a *deprek* (musical instrument similar to a tambourine), which is also played by women.

The tradition of female performance on *dep, deprek* or *doyra* (customary instruments) exists in a number of regions of Turkmenistan. In Lebap, during Nowruz celebrations, women gather together and cook a ritual dish called *semeni* (sumelek) from sprouted wheat throughout the night. The ceremony is accompanied by songs and dances which are themselves accompanied by a percussion instrument. The postures of the performers and the way they hold the tambourines in their hands resemble the ancient dancers depicted on the friezes of the Nisian rhytons.

Regarding the Parthian dancers, T. Vyzgo writes: "It is noteworthy that women play tambourines. It is possible that this instrument was associated with the ancient cult of the moon, with the rituals performed by its priestesses. Nisian rhymes indicate that the tambourine was used to accompany ritual dances, and sometimes the dancers accompanied themselves."[50] In general, the Parthian tambourine can be considered the prototype of the Turkmen *dep*.

The day known as "Black Wednesday," which preceded Nowruz ("Gara charshenbe"), was considered the most difficult day of the year. For this reason, women baked traditional bread cake (*chapady*) to treat their relatives and neighbors. The tradition of gathering at a lavishly covered *sachak* (or *dastarkhan* – feasting table) contributed to the spiritual unity of people. The Turkmen *sachak* is distinguished by an abundant festive menu. Indeed, the traditional collective meal goes beyond the boundaries of everyday eating, moving into the plane of the spiritual need to share moments of bright happiness with family and friends.

Festive Nowruz cooking has sacred meanings.

48 Эсенов Ч. «Гурджак ойны» – пляска культа плодородия // Этнографическое обозрение 1998, № 2. – С. 57.

49 Эсенов Ч. Туркменский фольклорный танец (истоки и эволюция) // Автореф. дис... канд. иск. Ташкент, 1994. – С. 12.

50 Вызго Т. Музыкальные инструменты Средней Азии: Исторические очерки. Москва: Музыка, 1980. – С. 32.

The magic of the number seven is reflected not only in Turkmen proverbs and sayings (for example, "Measure seven times, cut once"), but also in the setting of the festive table. To this day, residents of Dashoguz and Lebap Velayats observe the tradition of serving seven exquisite dishes of national cuisine as the basis of the festive menu. As a rule, the iconic dishes of Nowruz are most often prepared without meat. The main ingredients in them are cereal grains and dairy products. These dishes include: *semeni, pilaf, masheve* porridge, *koje, danik,* milk noodles and homemade noodles with white beans, traditional pies stuffed with vegetables and herbs, and more. The fact that preference was given to dishes cooked without meat confirms the fact that the ancient inhabitants of the region were engaged in agriculture. This way of life contributed to the accumulation of experience in communicating with nature, realized in the spiritual mentality of the people. The earth was perceived as the source of life and all its benefits, and therefore, a caring attitude towards it was indispensable for existence.

Semeni is not just a festive dish. Practices around it are special rituals that formed in line with ancient beliefs around Nowruz. As a symbol of the festive Nowruz table, tasgint it represents bright hopes for health and good luck in the new year. The history of the delicacy's origin is filled with legends and parables. Scientists associate the origin of the ethnonym "*semeni*" with the name of the plant "*haom-sem-sem*"mentioned in the Avesta. Among the Turkmens, this plant represents a symbol of life and eternity. The petals of the Sem-sem flower was added as an incredient to the dish, which how it got its name.[51] The *Sem-sem* flower also appears in the epic *Gorkut ata* (in which Bugach Khan's mother heals her son with the juice of the *sem* plant), as well as in works of classical poetry.

Traditionally, semeni was prepared jointly by several families, and its preparation had a sacred meaning. The care of the young shoots that would go into the dish was entrusted to respected women as it was believed that the creative power of Nowruz brings warmth and kindness, akin to the life-giving of maternal beginnings. The greens of the young sprouts were then kneaded in a wooden bowl. Its juice was then mixed with water, and flour and sugar were added while it cooked until tender. The thickening mass had to be constantly stirred. Hence, four women would stand around the boiling pot at once, stirring the dish from all four sides. This process provided an opportunity to partake in the sacrament of Nowruz.

The process of preparing the dish is reflected in the folk art of the Turkmen, including riddles and proverbs: "I saw a stone chewing like a ruminant, I saw an amazing dish cooked without salt" (semeni is cooked without salt). If neighbors or others came by, they would traditionally wish: "May the seed turn out sweet!", to which the craftswomen would respond:

"How are your sweet words!
How are your kind words!
Thanks to Allah!
We can cook!
Semeni is a blessed dish,
There it is - the sacrament!
Come and taste it!"

The cooking of the shoots would begin in the evening, and go throughout the night. At dawn, the cauldron would be tightly covered with a lid and left until morning. The surface of the dish would then be covered with a thin crust, which had formed amazing patterns. This phenomenon is associated with a legend about Ashe-Patma, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammed and patroness of women, that said she would come to taste the cooked dish at dawn, hidden from human eyes. The patterns represent her trail, which is perceived as a blessing from Heaven, symbolizing abundance. According to legend, Saint Patma, who was expecting a child, was the first on earth

51 Baltaýew A., Jykiýew A. Nowruz – türkmen halkynyň milli baýramy. Aşgabat: Ylym, 2013.– Sah. 270.

to prepare semeni. Thus, women who participate in the cooking process are honored.

Another iconic dish of Nowruz is *Suitli ash* – a type of milk porridge – which is also popularly called the "Dish of Saint Patma." Suitli ash is prepared with pleasure for all Muslim holidays including Gadir gije (night of omnipotence), Ak goyun (Age of the Prophet), and Lechek toy. Other traditional dishes are made from mash peas. These include *masheve* (porridge), mash soup, and pilaf made from mashed beans. Homemade noodles are considered to be Patma's favorite dish. In the eastern regions of Turkmenistan, a special celebration – Unash-toy – is even held. To prepare the dish *Suitli bulamak*, flour is fried in oil until golden brown. Water is then added, and it is brought to a boil to thicken.

The preparation of *pishme* (sweet dumplings) in the house is a significant sign of ceremonial holidays. Indeed, flour products are abundant in Turkmen cuisine. These include *churek, gatlama* (puff pastry), *chelpek* and *chapady* (thin bread cakes), *kulche* (small bread cakes), and *gutabs* (pies with various fillings). The menu of national cuisine also includes fermented dairy products such as *chal* and *agaran* (made from camel milk), *suzme* and *gatyk* (made from cow's milk), *gurth* (dried cheese), and *peynir, sykman*, and *sargan* (varieties of cheeses). Children are joyed by *patrak* (fried corn kernels) and *kak* (dried melon). It is also difficult to imagine a Nowruz sachak without green tea, with the addition of mint, dried flowers or the leaves of camel thorn.

A sacrificial animal is often slaughtered on Nowruz, and the *Nowruz yarmasy* dish is prepared from its meat in large cauldrons. Sources attest to the centuries-old history of cooking this iconic meal with wheat. Dried candied fruits and raisins are also added to the porridge and served with special honors. Lamb meat and ground *jugara* seeds are used to make *Nowruz koje*. In combination with *gatyk* (yogurt), this dish is called *Gatykly koje*. *Danik* is wheat porridge with meat and vegetables, which popular in the southern regions of Turkmenistan. Other traditional dishes on Nowruz include *dograma* (broth with the addition of chopped *churek*, meat and onions), *chekdirme* (rich meat gravy), *chorba* (meat soup), *shule* (porridge), *ishlekli* (layered meat pies), *dolma* (cabbage rolls), *buglama* (fried meat), *borek* (dumplings), and *tamdyrlama* (lamb baked in the traditional oven *tamdyr*).

Pilaf is a symbol of abundance, and it occupies a special place in the traditional cuisine of the Turkmen. Pilaf is always a welcome dish, but it is prepared with special care on Nowruz. The secrets of cooking pilaf have been perfected over the centuries. There are several varieties of pilaf, which may be prepared with fish (beluga or sturgeon), beef, lamb, or chicken. Fish pilaf, with its exceptional taste, is a characteristic dish of the Turkmen of western Turkmenistan. A written source from the late 19th century describes how pilaf is served in Mary: "A very appetizing rice float was served, flavored with fat and mixed with pieces of yellow sweet carrots, which abound in Merv and the entire valley east of the Caspian Sea. Boiled with fat and rice, these carrots taste very good and are much sweeter than red carrots..."[52]

Guests and neighbors are invited to the ritual meal, after which they offer a prayer of thanks and wish the audience health, peace, and blessed rains. Sacrificial food is usually distributed to those who come to the cemetery on the days of Nowruz to honor the ashes of their ancestors. Commemorating the dead with kind words and making pilgrimages to places of worship is another timeless tradition of Nowruz. These days, it is customary to help neighbors and loved ones, visit the lonely and the elderly, and treat them with gifts from the festive dastarkhan. Turkmen hospitality, as well as national traditions and rituals performed during the days of the Eastern

52 Bereketli türkmen saçagy. I kitap. Aşgabat: Türkmen döwlet neşirýat gullugy. 2014. – Sah. 145–147.

New Year, indicate that Turkmenistan is alive with culture, the spiritual and moral foundations of which have long been to achieve harmony with nature.

Nowruz Bayramy is on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The common rites and rituals of Nowruz bring the countries and peoples of the East closer together. The eternally young Nowruz lives in the hearts of people, and its ancient traditions are saturated with new content.

All necessary conditions exist in our country to carefully preserve the unique traditions of Nowruz celebrations. The modern era in Turkmenistan is marked by the slogan "The Era of Power and Happiness." This is a qualitatively new stage in the formation of the centuries-old history of the Turkmen people, which has opened up significant opportunity for the popularization of their rich ancestral heritage throughout the world.

As the national leader of the Turkmen people Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov notes, "Nowruz is the oldest national holiday of the Turkmen. This bright date is ingrained in the hearts of our people and symbolizes the beginning of the new year. It has its origins in the depths of the philosophy of life and the worldview of our glorious ancestors and has been an important component of the spiritual life of the Turkmen Peoples for centuries. In the new historical era of the development of the Turkmen state, Nowruz occupies a worthy place in the calendar of significant dates, acquiring a completely new content and sound."[53]

Among the main priorities of the modern era is ensuring the comprehensive spiritual and cultural progress of the Turkmen people, and the careful restoration, preservation and enhancement of their rich cultural heritage, of which rituals, traditions, games and oral folk art are an integral part. Nowruz, which came from the depths of time, is a messenger of peace and goodness.

53 Baltaýew A., Jykiýew A. Nowruz – türkmen halkynyň milli baýramy. Aşgabat: Ylym, 2013. – Sah. 2.

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# TRADITIONS AND CEREMONIES OF NAVRUZ IN UZBEKISTAN

Adham ASHIROV

## Introduction

Various festivals, carnivals, and folk celebrations hold significant importance for the study of the history of human society. From the earliest periods of human history, people have structured their lives around natural cycles of harvest, hunting, rainfall, drought, and seasonal temperature changes. As humanity progressed and developed a worldview and understanding of nature, annual calendars based on the moon, sun, zodiac signs, animals, and phenological observations began to emerge.

The turning points during the sun's annual movement – such as the spring and autumn equinoxes, as well as the summer and winter solstices – served as cyclical markers. These specific days were celebrated through unique festivals and ceremonies. Undoubtedly, it is from such phenomena that the distinctive calendar holidays and celebrations of each nation have evolved.

Festivals reflect the history of human society, the spiritual world, and the connection of communities in specific geographic regions with time and space. They also represent the relationship between nature and humanity. Most importantly, they embody philosophical reflections on the contrasts between good and evil, light and darkness, warmth and cold, and life and death – concepts that are deeply intertwined with both nature and human existence. Furthermore, festivals are one of the most ancient and significant manifestations of human culture. In this regard, Uzbek calendar-based festivals and folk celebrations stand out for their unique characteristics.

For Uzbeks, it has become traditional to hold seasonal ceremonies and holidays during specific times of the year: in spring, before the start of the labor season (Navruz, Flower Festival, Tulip Festival, Shox Moylar or "Oil Horn Festival"); in summer, before harvesting (Water Festival, *choy momo* or "grandmother wind," wind calling); in fall, after harvesting (threshing floor, Melon Festival, Grape Festival); and in winter, when herder-farmers have more leisure time (*qorkhat* or "snow letter," *yasan-tusan* or "dressing up," *gap-gashtak* "gatherings," *kurultai*). Among these

seasonal holidays and rituals, Navruz stands apart due to its history, essence, timing, richness of colorful traditions, participants, and connection with place and time.

## History of Navruz

Among the peoples of the East, the first day of the solar year is called Navruz (Persian: نوروز - "new day"). This day is celebrated as a spring festival, marking gratitude for the end of winter, the arrival of spring, and the commencement of agricultural activities. The solar calendar followed by Eastern peoples, including Uzbeks, begins with the spring equinox (March 21st) and has been celebrated as a new year festival, known as "Yilboshi" (referred to as "Navsard" among the Sogdians, and "Novsorji" or "Navruz" among the Khorezmians). The grand festival of Navruz, still celebrated with great enthusiasm today, took shape from the earliest conceptions of space and time. According to the worldview of that era, the year was divided into winter and summer. The onset of warm days, following a long period of cold and famine, was greeted with unique joy and celebrated through grand festivities. Moreover, many spring rituals among Uzbeks are celebrated in connection with Navruz. For instance, among the Uzbek people, a number of rituals and ceremonies are traditionally associated with the celebration of the Navruz, including: *loy tutish* (mud holding), *oxir chorshanba* (last Wednesday), *qozon to'ldi* (pot is filled), *sumalak sayli* (sumalak festival), *ashshadarozi* (dancing and playing), *sumalak beviti, kadi sindirdi, varrak uchirish* (flying kites), *halinchak uchish* (swing ride), *shoxmoylar* (horn oil), *darveshona* (spiritual gatherings), and *xudoyi* (communal feast).

Navruz was shaped by the mythological perceptions of the ancient ancestors of Turkic and Iranian peoples. Moreover, this festival has continuously drawn strength and inspiration from the various achievements of human civilization over the centuries. It is difficult to find a festival older than Navruz in human history. According to archaeologists, its roots trace back to the Neolithic period (6th – 4th millennia BCE).[1]

Indeed, the celebration of Navruz marks when humans first began to reflect on the Earth and its place in the cosmos. In other words, it took shape when the earliest scientific and geographical understandings of Earth emerged.[2] Initially, celebration of Navruz was customary among sedentary farmers, and later, through them, it became a tradition among semi-sedentary and nomadic Turkic peoples as well.[3] Festivals emerged alongside agricultural activities, which held great significance in the lives of various groups.[4]

## Descriptions of Navruz in Written Sources

Numerous written sources provide extensive information about Navruz. For instance, the renowned Eastern scholar Abu Rayhan Beruni wrote: "Navruz is the first of the six days during which God created all beings. Just as the Sun and the Moon are the two eyes of the heavens, Navruz and Mehrjon are the two eyes of time."[5] According to this great scholar, in the East, Navruz coincides

1 Ртveледзе Э. Наврўз-бахт ва фаровонлик байрами. // Мозийдан садо, 2003, №1, p.14.

2 Бўриев О. Асрлар бағридан келган шодиёна. // Наврўзи олам бугун. –Т.: Ўзбекистон, 1989, p.15.

3 Миролимов Ш. Наврўз. // Ўзбекистон миллий энциклопедияси. 6-жилд. –Т.: «Ўзбекистон миллий энциклопедияси» Давлат илмий нашрыиёти, 2003, p.237.

4 Кармшева Д. Х. Земледельческая обрядность у казахов. // Древние обрядў верования и культы народов Средней Азии. –М.: «Наука», 1986, p. 49.

5 Абу Райхон Беруний. Қадимги халқлардан қолган ёдгорликлар — Тошкент.: "Фан", 1968, p.254.

with the period that begins with the first drops of spring rain, which give way to blooming flowers, and blossoming trees which then bear fruit, as well as animals mating and birthing offspring, and plants sprouting and reaching full maturity. Therefore, Navruz has been considered evidence of the beginning and creation of the universe.[6]

When Al-Ma'mun asked Ali ibn Musa ar-Ridha about Navruz, he replied: "Navruz is a day venerated by the angels because they were created on this day. It is also esteemed by the prophets because the Sun was created on this day, and kings revere it as it marks the first day of time."[7]

In Firdawsi's *Shahnameh*, it is emphasized that the death of the legendary hero – the brave and honest Siyavush (the son of Kaykovus, and son-in-law of Afrasiyab), and the people's respect for his death, underlie Navruz:

"Qaygakim to'kilmish Siyovush xuni,
Ko'kka bo'y cho'zdi bir daraxt shu kuni.
Barglarida go'yo uning chehrasi,
Mushku atr go'yo uning chehrasi.
Daraxt ko'm-ko'k turar hatto qishda ham,
Tagida podshohga tutishar motam."

"Where Siyavush's blood was spilled,
A tree stretched its branches to the sky that day.
In its leaves, as if his face,
The fragrance and musk, as if his face.
The tree stands evergreen, even in winter,
Beneath it, mourning for king." [8]

Siyavush is known in the Avesta by the name Siyavarshan. In the Zamyad Yasht (Yasht 19), verse 77, the theme of Kay Khusraw avenging his father Siyavarshan is mentioned.[9] According to legends, in the 12th century BCE, Siyavush founded the state of Khwarezm. He built a remarkable city in Turan, which was called Kangdiz or Kantu Siyavakhsh.[10] According to Narshakhi, "the people of Bukhara composed extraordinary songs about the death of Siyavush... The fire-worshippers of Bukhara, each man, would sacrifice one rooster in his honor at that site each year before sunrise on Navruz."[11]

The connection between the Navruz festival and Siyavush lies in the fact that, in ancient Eastern mythology, Siyavush was regarded as a symbol of nature, in dying and then reviving. According to Zoroastrian mythology, the day Ahura Mazda achieved victory over Ahriman after a prolonged struggle also coincides with Navruz. Celebrations of Yilboshi, in a sense, were a festivity marking the symbolic "resurrection" of nature in spring after its "death" in autumn. This mythical event, which arose from ancient, philosophical, and astral ideas about nature's dormancy and revival, and the lengthening of daylight hours after the equinox, was celebrated with great enthusiasm in ancient times.

The medieval Chinese historian Wei Jie provided the following information about the Navruz celebrations of the ancient people of Samarkand:

The first day of the sixth month is considered yilboshi (the beginning of the year) for them. On this day, both the king and the people wear their new clothes and have their hair and beards cut. They gather in a field near a grove of trees on the eastern side of the city to celebrate the festival. For seven days, skilled

6 Абу Райҳон Беруний. Қадимги халқлардан қолган ёдгорликлар..... P.253.

7 Абу Райхон Беруний. Танланган асарлар. Қадимги халқлардан қолган ёдгорликлар — Т.: "Фан", 1968. P. 253.

8 Фирдавсий А. Шоҳнома. Форсийдан Ш.Шомуҳамедов таржимаси. Муҳаррир Миртемир. –Т.: Адабиёт ва санъат нашриёти, 1975. p.707.

9 Авесто. Тарихий-адабий ёдгорлик. Асқад Маҳкам таржимаси. –Т.: «Шарқ», 2001. p.222.

10 Асқаров А.А. Қадимги Хоразм тарихига доир баъзи бир масалалар. // Ўзбекистон этнологияси: янгича қарашлар ва назарий методологик ёндашувлар. – Т.: 2004. p.77.

11 Абу Бакр Муҳаммад ибн Жаъфар Нуаршахий. Бухоро тарихи. // Мерос. –Т.: Камалак, 1991. 98. p.104.

> archers participate in contests, shooting arrows from horseback at predetermined targets. On the seventh day, a gold coin is designated as the target, and the archer who hits it flawlessly earns the right to reign as king for one day. They hold the sky deity (Kök Tengri) in high regard and express their reverence toward it. It is said that the divine deity perished in the seventh month, and because the deity's bones were lost, worshippers of this deity wear black clothing at the beginning of that month each year. They walk barefoot through the fields, weeping as they search for the deity's ashes. On the seventh day, the festivities of yilboshi celebration come to an end.[12]

Mahmud al-Kashgari, in his *Diwan Lughat al-Turk*, provided information about the 12-year animal cycle, months, weeks, and days, and about Navruz, including examples of folk songs related to this topic.

> The Turks assigned the names of twelve different animals to twelve years... The nomadic and non-Muslim Turks named the months according to the four seasons. They grouped every three months under a single name. This is how they tracked the passing of the year. For example, the first spring month after Navruz is called "oghlaq ay" (young month), followed by "uluq oghlaq ay" (great young month), as the moon grows larger during this time. The next month is called "uluq ay" (great month), as it falls in the middle of summer when milk and the earth's bounties are abundant.[13]

In Alisher Navoi's *Tarikhi Muluki Ajam*, the Navruz festival is described as having been established following the great achievements of Jamshid. Referencing the extraordinary tower built by Jamshid called the Chihil Minar, he reported: "When the construction of this building was completed, and the sun entered the precise equinoxal point, Jamshid sat on the throne in this edifice, spreading justice and its echo throughout the world and named that day 'Navruz.'"

In conclusion, based on the study of written sources about Navruz, it can be inferred that this festival originated from cosmological and natural laws as it is tied to the sun's entry into the Aries constellation, the moment of the equal length of day and night, the gradual lengthening of daylight, the revival of nature, and the arrival of spring. These events provide the foundations for celebrating Navruz as the most important nature-based festival in any society.

## Has Navruz been repressed?

The ancient festival of Navruz, which has withstood the trials of millennia, was, in more recent history, and specifically during the Soviet era, removed from the list of official celebrations in Uzbekistan. In the 1930s, due to the communist party's anti-religious policies and repression, Navruz, along a number of Uzbek national values and members of the national intelligentsia, was denounced as an outdated religious holidays. At that time, the eradication of national holidays had emerged as a distinctive form of colonialism. The party leaders aimed to impose foreign customs and traditions that were alien to the Uzbek nation and incompatible with its national and spiritual values. Through various means and methods, they tried to sever the nation from its deep-rooted heritage. However, beginning in the 1960s, increasing attention was once again given to Navruz, and it began to be widely covered by mass media. Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, the customs and rituals associated with Navruz, cherished by Uzbeks for centuries, were once

12 Жўраев М. Эзгуликка эш бўлган айём. // Ҳуррият, 2003, 19 March.

13 Маҳмуд Қошғарий. Девону луғотит турк. Volume 1. –Тошкент, "Фан" 1960, p.330,332.

more restricted.[14] In 1985, the Navruz celebration was even banned as a religious festival, and in its place, an artificially created holiday, called "Navbahor" was introduced. However, in a short period, the people restored Navruz as a symbol of their national identity, and since March 1991, Navruz has been celebrated as a national holiday in Uzbekistan, and officially declared a public holiday. Furthermore, during the 4th session of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Abu Dhabi from September 28th to October 2nd, 2009, Navruz (as "Nowruz") was added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Additionally, the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly, on February 23rd, 2010, adopted a resolution declaring March 21st as the "International Nowruz Day."

In Uzbekistan, Navruz is celebrated annually as a state holiday. Prior to the celebration, a special presidential decree is issued, and the day is designated as a public holiday across the country. Based on the decree, a special organizational committee is established to oversee preparations and arrangements for Navruz national celebrations, and a detailed program of events is created. In the lead-up to the holiday, the main streets, squares, and parks of Uzbekistan's cities and villages are decorated in a traditional style.

Festive events associated with Navruz include large-scale concert programs, exhibitions of handicrafts, traditional sports competitions, and agricultural and book fairs. Open pavilions are set up for visitors to sample springtime dishes. In recent years, celebrating Navruz with special slogans and in a festive procession style has become a growing tradition. For instance, in 2024, Navruz was celebrated as a nationwide festival in Uzbekistan under the slogan, "May the world be filled with light with you, Navruz!".

The largest Navruz celebration in the country is held at the New Uzbekistan complex in Tashkent, featuring performances by various artists and folklore ensembles dedicated to Navruz. Additionally, during the holiday, elderly people and individuals residing in care facilities such as "Mehribonlik" (Kindness), "Sakhovat" (Generosity), and "Muruvvat" (Benevolence) homes, as well as those listed in social protection registries or in need of assistance, are also visited. Various charitable activities are conducted as part of the celebrations.

## Phenological Knowledge Associated with Navruz

Among Uzbeks, special preparations were traditionally made in anticipation of Navruz. Attentive individuals with a keen eye for changes in nature, paid close attention to natural signs. Some, for instance, watched for the return of birds that had migrated to distant lands, and, observing their appearance, then made various predictions about the upcoming year's weather. As for other examples, in the village of Sijjak in the Tashkent region, the blooming of the spring flower known as the "*navruzgul*" was considered to mark the beginning of the new year,[15] while in villages around Turkestan, the new year celebration, called "Yilboshi Bayrami," was determined by the arrival of a bird called the "*navruzak*." The Uzbek-Qipchaqs living in Northern Fergana, also marked the arrival of the new year with the arrival of the navruzak, also called the "navruz sparrow." Predictions about the upcoming year were also made by observing the physical characteristics of this bird. For example, it was believed that if the bird's wings were white, the year would have low precipitation, whereas yellow or dark-coloured wings

14 Ўзбекистоннинг янги тарихи. Third book. // Compilers Н.Жœраев, Т.Файзуллаев. –Т.: «Шарқ», 2000, p. 404.

15 Ўзбекистоннинг янги тарихи. Third book. // Compilers Н.Жœраев, Т.Файзуллаев. –Т.: «Шарқ», 2000, p. 404.Жўраев М. Ўзбек мавсумий маросим фольклори. – Т.: Фан, 2008. P. 104.

indicated abundant rainfall. Additionally, a white spot on the bird's head was taken as a sign there would be plentiful dairy and significant rainfall in the coming year. Conversely, a black spot was interpreted as an indicator of the opposite conditions. If the bird's legs were blue, it was believed to be a sign of a bountiful agricultural harvest.[16]

Among Uzbeks, predictions about the climate for the new year were traditionally based on the weather conditions on the day of Navruz, whereas Azerbaijanis believed that the first day of Navruz predicted spring conditions, while the second day predicted the nature of summer, the third day autumn, and the fourth day, the upcoming winter.[17]

## *Hashar*, and Customs of *Ziyarat*

Among Uzbeks, organizing *hashar* (collective cleaning and maintenance) plays a significant role in preparations for Navruz. During hashar, activities including landscaping, street cleaning, tree planting, irrigation canal digging, road and bridge construction, and the general organization of public spaces are carried out. The social and practical significance of hashar is immense. It fosters community unity, as it brings together individuals of different ages, including neighbors, to collaborate and demonstrate mutual respect. Most importantly, areas designated for Navruz festivities – squares, parks, theatres, and recreational sites – are prepared for the celebration, while local pilgrimage sites and cemeteries are cleaned.

The modern adaptation of hashar is its organization as a nationwide communal effort on the eve of the Navruz holiday, conducted at a republic-wide scale. In Uzbekistan, the Saturday preceding Navruz is designated as the "Umumxalq Hashar" (Nationwide Hashar) through a government resolution. On this day, communal *hashar* events are organized across various state institutions, enterprises, educational institutions, and neighbourhoods. Funds raised on this day are transferred to charities. Additionally, various organizations, educational institutions, and enterprises, along with their surrounding areas, are also cleaned, landscaped, and beautified. This custom helps instill virtues of cleanliness, tidiness, and orderliness in young people. Furthermore, as part of the "Yashil Makon" (Green Nation) project, new trees are planted. For example, in 2024, an ecological hashar, titled "Green Nation." was organized in dedication to Navruz. During this hashar, efforts were focused on beautifying and greening every city, district, street, and neighbourhood across the country. In addition to hashar, it is a widespread tradition among Uzbeks to *ziyarat* (visit) the elderly, teachers, the sick, and those in needs, in the lead-up to Navruz. On such occasions, our ancestors strived to show kindness, generosity, and compassion to orphans, widows, and the less fortunate, while grievances and disputes were set aside. Material assistance and charitable gifts were also provided to those in need, including orphans and individuals with disabilities.

Overall, in the various ceremonies and traditions held in Uzbekistan, two primary aspects can be observed: respect and reverence for the spirits of ancestors, and the vivid celebration and glorification of nature's revival.

## Navruz Celebrations and Customs

In ancient times, the Navruz holiday was predominantly celebrated among sedentary agricultural communities. According to their beliefs, this day was not only a time for rest,

16 Саримсоқов А. Ўзбек тақвимий маросимлари. Тошкент,.2015. Р.75.

17 Джавадова Э.Ю., Джавадов Г.Д. Народный земледельческий... – Р. 129–130.

fun and entertainment, but also regarded as a festival of labour. Specifically, it was on this day that farming, gardening, and flower planting commenced. For this reason, the renowned medieval historian Narshakhi referred to this celebration in Bukhara as "Navruzi kishavorzon – the festival of peasants."[18] On this day, diligent farmers would traditionally bring their ploughs to the fields to plant the first seeds into the soil. Before beginning to plough, they anointed the horns and yokes of their oxen with oil. According to the elderly, this ritual embodies a magical intent: to ensure that the oxen remain strong, resilient, and tireless throughout the year.

Farmers in Fergana performed a ritual of generously sprinkling water on fertile land on the day of the festival, asking the Creator for sufficient moisture throughout the year.

On the day of Navruz, everyone woke up early and with good intentions. People discarded their old clothes, opting for new and clean attire, while girls dressed in outfits suited to the spring season and wore *sochpopuk* (hair adornment) in their hair. Young men and women would also prepare new clothes and footwear, and stay awake through the night to share fairy tales, stories, epics, and poetry. The celebration of Navruz was marked by singing songs, playing various games, and embracing joy and happiness. Young men and women exchanged bouquets. Conflicts were paused during Navruz, grievances were set aside, and people aspired to foster peace and good neighborly relations. Families visited one another, checking in on parents, relatives, and neighbours. The sick were cared for, the needy received assistance, and the graves of the deceased were visited and tidied. If someone passed away during the festive days, funerals were postponed, and mourning ceremonies were not held. There was a tradition during Navruz of releasing prisoners and pardoning offenders. Homes and streets were cleaned and sprinkled with water. On the first day of Navruz, traditional games and competitions, such as *ulak-kupkari*, horse racing, wrestling, and ram and rooster fights were organized. Families often spent time outdoors, enjoying nature during events like the Tulip Festival or the Flower Festival.

According to Navruz traditions, groups of young women would gather and go on outings during the festive days, enjoying swings, known as *halinchak*, in the gardens.[19] The swings were typically tied to the branches of apricot trees, and those riding them would attempt to swing as high as possible, striving to pluck a flower or unripe apricot from the highest branch. It was believed that whoever succeeded in this endeavour would see all their wishes fulfilled.[20] There was also a cultural belief that swinging on the halinchak would absolve a person of their sins.

In ancient times, swinging on the halinchak was believed to hold magical significance, and people thought that the higher one could swing, the more abundant the harvest would be, and the more prosperous and fertile the community would become. This belief was shared by many cultures around the world.[21]

According to the ethnographer T. Kilichev, on the third day of the Red Flower Festival in Khorezm, young women organized a *sorinjoq* (swing) game in one of their families'courtyards. Young men also gathered here, and initiated a playful apple-throwing game with the swinging girls.[22] Even betrothed girls,

18 For further details, see: Наршахий Бухоро тарихи Тошкент, Фан, 1966. p.24.

19 The practice of halinchak has existed among Turkic peoples since ancient times. For further details, see: Маҳмуд Кошғарий. Девону луғатит-турк. – Тошкент, 1963. 3.v. – P. 390.

20 Сафаров О. Ўзбек халқ болалар поэтик фольклори. – Тошкент, 1985. – P. 92.

21 Мусакулов А., 2003.–№3–4

22 Қиличев Тошкент, 1988. p.24–25.

accompanied by their sisters-in-law, participated in the swing activity. In such cases, the groom-to-be would arrive with his friends, bringing ten to twenty apples. When the bride-to-be was on the *sorinjoq*, the prospective groom would offer a *yuz ko'rim* or *hayitlik* (gift), and gently toss her an apple. Other young men also participated by tossing apples to the girls on the swing, aiming at those they had affection for.

Sometimes, if a young man threw an apple to a girl who did not have reciprocal feelings, she would dodge it, and let the apple pass by. In other cases, girls would catch the apple, and then playfully toss it to the young man they favored.[23]

The custom of apple throwing during festivals and celebrations was associated with the idea of fertility and regarded as a magical practice intended to ensure an abundant harvest in the coming year. The tradition of halinchak emerged as a unique custom marking the transition from the end of winter to the joyful arrival of spring. Its connection to Navruz suggests the ancient origins of this game, highlighting its deep historical and cultural significance. Additionally, in almost every village, girls adorned their hair with tassels made from willow branches. According to folk beliefs, the green willow branches symbolized the awakening of nature, the arrival of spring, and the commencement of agricultural activities. They were considered a symbol of happiness, prosperity, good fortune, and health for the family.

Overall, among all the peoples who celebrate Navruz, similar customs and traditions associated with the holiday are found. These include nature-oriented practices such as lighting fires, sprinkling water on each other, and ritual bathing; spiritual observances like fortune-telling and drinking water infused with dried apricot pits or blessed with prayers; and ceremonial traditions like the *qozon tuldi* ritual and customs involving dyed and boiled eggs. Social elements include visiting hilltops, cemeteries, or sacred sites as pilgrimage, paying calls to neighbors, and honoring parents. Communities also enjoy festive activities where young women participate in swinging, and people organize outdoor celebrations featuring traditional games like ulak-kupkari and kurash outside the city.

In Khorezm, prior to celebrating Navruz, special gatherings were held where a festival chairperson and organizers were appointed. In these meetings, organizers discussed the schedule of festivities, including the arrangement of performances, outings, and competitions. According to the traditions of the Kashkadarya region, if rain or other circumstances prevented the celebration of Navruz on the designated day, that day was called a "*kuni bekor*" (wasted day), and the celebration would be postponed to the following day.

In a beautiful location in the Fergana Valley, the village of Vodiy, the Navruz celebration is incomplete without the Navruz flower (*boychechak*). Young people climb the mountains to gather the flower, returning in the evening with armfuls of blooms. Many inhale its fragrance and gently rub it on their faces as a gesture of reverence and hope, saying, "Navruz has come, blessings have come, thank you for bringing us to these days, may there be peace and security, may we reach the next year and the next spring safely and whole."

## Folk Games of Navruz

Among the Uzbeks living in the Fergana Valley and Surkhandarya, potters crafted a variety of figurines, often depicting mythical creatures such as *ajdarho* (dragons) and *qular* (a type of bird) in the form of clay whistles. On Navruz day,

23 Жўраев М. Ўзбек мавсумий маросим фольклори. – Тошкент.: Фан, 2008. – P. 133.

children played with these whistles, filling the air with their sounds. Among Uzbeks, it has long been believed that whistling can summon wind and rain. For this reason, whistles shaped like dragons were blown on Navruz as a symbolic act expressing hope for an abundant and fruitful year ahead, marked by ample rainfall. The celebration takes place in large public spaces designed to accommodate thousands of people and features traditional games and performances by clowns and entertainers. Such performances are called "Katta Masxarabozlik" in Fergana, "Chavqi" in Bukhara, and "Qatorli o'yin" in Khorezm.

## Navruz Dishes

The ancient ancestors of the Uzbek people sowed seven types of seeds on the eve of the holiday and predicted the coming year by watching their germination. On the day of Navruz, seven types of dishes were traditionally prepared. These included *ko'k somsa, ko'k chuchvara, halim, ko'k osh, do'lma, sumalak,* and others. Among Uzbeks, it has become a well-established tradition to prepare various dishes from spring greens, such as ko'k somsa, ko'k chuchvara, *ko'k patir, ko'k varaqi, and ko'k manti*. This is because these dishes were specifically prepared at the end of winter, a time when the body's nutrient reserves were depleted, and they served to strengthen health. These dishes are rich in various vitamins, making them particularly beneficial. The preparation of green dishes typically involves two main stages. The first is gathering the greens, and the second is cooking the dish. During the first stage, children from families planning to prepare these dishes head to the fields and small streams to collect greens. From the fields, they gather medicinal plants such as *jag-jag* (achambiti), *otquloq* (dock), *beda* (medicago), and *ismaloq* (spinach), while from small streams, they pick *yalpiz* (mint). Gathering greens is a unique ritual in itself. Young girls invite their friends to join, during which they chat, sing songs, share riddles, and compete to see who can collect the most greens. Urban residents, on the other hand, typically purchase these greens from the market.

Among Uzbeks, it was customary to set the Navruz table with *sharbat* (juice) made from various dried fruits, as well as decorated eggs, and other delicacies. During Navruz, bustling markets are organized, and the most exquisite dishes are prepared. According to the traditions of Surkhandarya, a special Navruz dish called halim is prepared. It is worth noting that in Uzbekistan, sumalak is typically prepared by women, while halim is cooked by men. The primary reason for this division is that preparing halim is considered more labor-intensive than making sumalak. While sumalak is made in all regions of the country, halim is prepared only in certain regions and cities. For instance, in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Surkhandarya, neighborhood men gather at the *mahalla guzari* (local community center) to cook halim together as part of the Navruz celebrations.

The centerpiece dish of Navruz festivities however, is sumalak, traditionally prepared by women. The process of making *sumalak* has evolved into a unique ritual. The sumalak cooked on Navruz is specifically referred to as "Navruz Sumalak." Elders stir the sumalak while praying for longevity for themselves and their families, while young women and brides-to-be stir it while wishing for happiness and prosperity in their lives. According to elders, it is believed that good wishes a person makes while stirring sumalak will be granted by Allah. On this day, a variety of delicious dishes, such as somsa and chuchvara, are also prepared using various herbs.

According to renowned scholar Abu Rayhan Beruni, there was also a tradition on Navruz morning to lick three spoonfuls of honey before speaking. On this day, people exchanged sugar and sweets as gifts, symbolizing wishes for a sweet life. Indeed, eating sweets on Navruz was one of the most important customs. Flowers were also given as presents, signifying the wish for beauty, and people sprinkled water on each other

to express hope for an abundance of water and a bountiful harvest in the coming year.

## Conclusion

Navruz is not merely the celebration of a specific date; it is a festival deeply rooted in nature itself. It marks the equinox, signaling the lengthening of days and heralding a period of continuous labour. After the long, harsh winter, the appearance of the sun in the sky and the sprouting of greenery on the plains become a true source of joy for our people. This is because, during the late winter months, when the previous year's grain reserves and food supplies are nearly exhausted, Mother Nature demonstrates her benevolence, offering signs of brighter days ahead. Even the elders, who have safely reached these days, feel a renewed sense of vitality and energy.

In summary, Navruz marks the beginning of the spring season, specifically the celebration of the vernal equinox. In other words, Navruz is closely tied to the science of astronomy. Concepts such as “Hamal,” “Burch” and “Yilboshi,” mentioned in traditional narratives, are directly linked to the Earth's movement within the solar system and the measurement of time. Most importantly, Navruz symbolizes renewal, a new day, and a new life. It represents an enduring cultural value and serves as a symbol of purity, joy, spirituality, and unity. Thus, this spring festival continues to be a source of national pride, self-awareness, and solidarity for the Uzbek people.

# 3

# Contemporary Significance of Spring Festival to Celebrate the New Year, and Regional Cooperation

# FESTIVALS AND TRADITIONS AROUND KOREAN SPRING EQUINOX: NOWRUZ IN KOREA

Sang-Cheol KIM

## Nowruz Events in Contemporary Republic of Korea

The spring Nowruz festival originated from communities in the ancient Zoroastrian civilization regions. The area where the Republic of Korea is currently located was far from these Zoroastrian regions during ancient times. Given this geographical and cultural distance, no local Zoroastrian tradition was established in Korea. Only a few official records prove connections and exchanges between ancient communities in what is now Korea and the territories of ancient Persian Empires and their neighboring regions, including what are now Central Asian (or Central Eurasian) territories.

Due to this background, the tradition of celebrating Nowruz, the spring equinox new year, in modern South Korea, emerged in the 1990s when exchanges between Korea and the former Soviet Union countries began in earnest. As a result, Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik ethnic groups from these regions migrated to Korea and formed communities. That said, even before the formation of these Central Asian communities in Korea, a Nowruz celebration was held annually at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, co-hosted by the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and previously the Embassy of Iran) in the Republic of Korea and the Department of Iranian Language (currently Persian-Iranian Studies). These celebrations emerged due to active economic exchanges between the Republic of Korea and Iran since the 1970s. Therefore, students who attended this university were aware of this spring equinox new year tradition, but the majority of ordinary Korean citizens had no chance to experience and enjoy the Nowruz festival before the influx of migrants from Central Asian countries.

Even now in broader contemporary Korean society, Nowruz celebrations are perceived as unfamiliar cultural events held only in limited communities. Therefore, those who enjoy these events are still primarily people from countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, or Iran, who are residing and working in Korea. Other participants include those

related to people from these countries through international marriages, the study of the languages and cultures of these regions, or Koreans involved in exchanges with these countries.

## Korean Traditional Seasons, Festivals and Rituals

The origins of the Korean people encompass elements of both northern nomadic civilizations and southern agricultural civilizations. However, according to ancient records and writings, modern Korean people developed through a settled agricultural civilization. Throughout history, traces of exchange with northern nomadic communities have been variously documented. This exchange is the result of the geographical positioning of the Korean Peninsula as a junction between continental and maritime powers in East Asia. In ancient Korean history, particularly during the Three Kingdoms period (삼국시대 Sam-guk-si-dae), Chinese Confucianism was actively adopted. Indeed, when Confucianism flourished in Chinese dynasties, co-temporary Korean dynasties also actively embraced it and reflected it in their governance. Therefore, even when non-Han Chinese dynasties ruled China and Confucianism waned there, it remained fundamental to Korean governance and society. This was especially the case from the Goryeo period, through to the end of the Joseon Dynasty. Consequently, ancient Chinese festivals and seasonal customs were introduced and practiced in ancient Korean society.

## Lunar Calendar and the 24 Solar Terms / Seasons

Like many other East Asian countries, in the pre-modern period, Korea traditionally followed a lunar calendar, as opposed to the solar calendar followed by the West. Unlike the solar calendar, which is based on the Earth's rotation around the sun, the lunar calendar uses the phases of the moon to calculate months and dates.

The Korean lunar calendar includes twenty-four solar terms, or short seasons, called Jeolgi. These Jeol-gi split the year into according to weather and climate, with each "season" spaced approximately 15 days apart. The observance of these Jeolgi was highly important in Korea for predicting agricultural cycles, guiding farming activities, and observing other seasonal rituals.

The cycle begins in winter with Sohan (Small Cold) around January 6th. Though its name suggests moderateness, Sohan actually marked what Koreans traditionally considered the coldest period, with temperatures continuing to drop until reaching Daehan (Great Cold) around January 21st.

As winter wanes, Ipchun (Beginning of Spring) arrives near February 4th, signaling a crucial transition in the agricultural calendar. Families would perform special rituals to ensure farming success in the coming year, and many hung rectangular signs bearing the Chinese characters for "start of spring" above doorways as talismans for good fortune. Woosoo follows in mid-February, marking the beginning of spring rains vital for early planting.

By early March, Gyungchip announces nature's awakening as hibernating creatures emerge, followed by Chunboon at the spring equinox (March 21st), when day and night achieve perfect balance. The progression continues with Chungmyung in early April when skies brighten noticeably, and Gokwoo in late April, when spring rains nourish the growing grain.

Summer's arrival is officially marked by Ip-ha around May 5th, a busy period when farmers would weed their fields while women traditionally tended to silkworms. Soman follows in late May, during which grain developed visible growth, and Mangjong in early June notes when grain

develops its distinctive "bearded" appearance. The summer solstice, Haji (around June 21st), represents the year's longest day when the sun reaches its northernmost position. This important marker traditionally coincided with barley and wheat harvests.

As summer intensifies, Soseo (early July) signals rising temperatures, culminating in Daeseo (late July) when full summer heat envelops the peninsula. By Ipchoo (early August), autumn begins to approach, marking the thirteenth jeolgi. Weather conditions on this day were carefully observed as predictors for autumn conditions that would affect harvest outcomes. Cheo-seo follows in late August as summer heat gradually lessens.

Early September brings Baek-ro (White Dew), named for the distinctive dew-like appearance of acacia flowers that form on the ground during mornings when hot and cool air alternate. Choo-boon marks the autumnal equinox on September 22nd, with day and night again in perfect balance. As temperatures continue falling, Hanro (Cold Dew) arrives in early October, followed by Sang-gang in late October when the first frosts appear.

Winter officially begins with Ip-dong in early November, signaling the onset of the year's harshest period. This crucial time prompted families to prepare kimchi to sustain them through winter. Tradition held that kimchi prepared within five days before or after Ip-dong would develop the most delicious flavor. Winter progresses through Soseol (Little Snow) in late November, Daesol (Major Snow), and finally Dongji (Winter Solstice) in late December, completing the annual cycle.

Though contemporary Korean society no longer relies on these solar terms for agricultural planning, they remain culturally significant, offering valuable insights into traditional Korean life and its intimate connection with seasonal rhythms.

## Traditional Holidays, Rituals and Celebrations

The lunar calendar is also used for the observation of many Korean traditional festivals, including Seollal (설날, Lunar New Year), Jung-wol-Daeboreum (first full moon), and Chuseok, which are the main holidays of the year. Since the late 19th century, Korean society has shifted from the lunar calendar to the solar calendar. However, traditional holidays and customs based on the lunar calendar are still observed. Some of these holidays and customs are described below.

*Seollal (Lunar New Year)*. Seollal welcomes the new year. Families gather to eat *tteokguk* (rice cake soup) and perform *sebae* (a deep bow to elders), as well as make wishes while gazing at the full moon, and enjoy various games such as *yut-nori* and *neol-ttwigi*.

*Jeong-wol Dae-bo-reum*. The second important holiday after Seollal, Jeong-wol Dae-bo-reum, is the day when the first full moon of the year rises. Various customs related to the fortune of the new year are practiced at this time in many places. As Jeong-wol is the first month of the year, families use it to plan for the year ahead. On Dae-bo-reum, which falls on January 15th, people perform divination rituals. According to ancient descriptions, Jeongwol was the month when the three elements of heaven, earth, and humanity united, and people serve to achieve their goals, and all tribes harmonized according to the will of heaven.

On Dae-bo-reum, people rise early in the morning to bite into hard-shelled fruits called *bu-reom*, and then throw them into the yard (*bu-reom-kki*). They believe this will prevent boils in the year ahead. People also cook and eat *ogok-bap* (five-grain rice), drink "ear-quickening wine" and greet the moon at night, making wishes for the fulfillment of their desires, and predicting the year's farming. It is said that if the moonlight is white, there will be a lot of rain. If it is red, there will be a drought. If the moonlight is clear, there

will be a good harvest. If it is cloudy, there will be a poor harvest.

*Hansik.* Hansik occurs on the 105th day after Dongji, on April 5th or 6th. On this day, people visit the graves of their ancestors and perform memorial rituals.

*Dano.* Dano occurs on the 5th day of the 5th lunar calendar month.

*Chuseok.* Also known as "Hangawi," Chuseok is celebrated on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month. Traditionally, families gather to play *yutnori* and *neolttwigi*, and perform ancestral rites on this day.

*Dongji.* Occurring in November or December of the lunar calendar. It is the last seasonal term of the year. People make and eat red bean porridge and share rice cakes.

*Jung-wha-jeol*. Occurring on February 1st of the lunar calendar, this day marks the beginning of the agricultural year and is originally a festival from the ancient Chinese Tang Dynasty.

*Meo-seum-nal*. Also known as "home-servant day" and occurring on either February 1st or July 7th of the lunar calendar, this day was similar to what Labor Day is today. On this day, masters gave their servants a day off and hosted a feast. When it falls on February 1st, it is also called "Ha-ri-adret-nal."

*Bok-nal*. Bok-nal (복날) refers to the three hottest days of the year, which include Cho-bok (초복), Jung-bok (중복), and Mal-bok (말복). These days occur between July and August each year and are collectively called Sam-bok (삼복). Unlike other seasonal markers, these days do not correspond to specific solar terms but instead follow a counting system based on Gyeongil (경일), which are specific days that occur every 10 days in the traditional Korean calendar.

Cho-bok is the third Gyeongil after Haji (하지, summer solstice), Jung-bok is the fourth Gyeongil, and Mal-bok is the first Gyeongil after Ipchu (입추, beginning of autumn). While Bok-nal typically spans 20 days from Cho-bok to Mal-bok, the period between Jung-bok and Mal-bok can sometimes extend to 20 days, which is referred to as Wol-bok (월복). When Haji falls on a Gyeongil, that day is counted as the first Gyeongil in the sequence.

The Sam-bok period coincides with the hottest time of summer, with Cho-bok typically falling between July 11th and 19th, between the solar terms Soseo and Daeseo. According to the Chinese historical text *Records of the Grand Historian* (사기, Sagi), the Sam-bok period originated in the second year of Duke Deok of Jin. After the Jin and Han dynasties in China, Sam-bok became highly regarded, with courts distributing meat to officials. In Korean tradition, people consumed nutritious foods like *samgyetang* (ginseng chicken soup) during these days to restore energy and compensate for the loss of appetite during the intense summer heat.

*Mal-nal*. This is the day of the horse, which falls in October of the lunar calendar.

*Gang-sin-il*. This is the day when the heavenly gods are believed to descend, and also occurs in October of the lunar calendar.

*Nap-il*. Also known as "Nap-hyang-il," "Nap-hyang-nal," "Napyeong," or "Nap," this is a day for offering sacrifices to the gods of heaven and earth for agricultural activities.

Until the end of the 19th century, all seasons and festivals in Korean society were based on the lunar calendar system, which as noted above, divides the year into 24 Jeolgi. All practices related to agriculture or daily life, public ceremonies, and festivals were based on the lunar calendar. The traditional new year was celebrated not as a transition from winter to spring but as an event related to preparations for the farming activities of communities. According to the traditional Korean lunar calendar, the new year started approximately one to one and a half months later than the

Gregorian calendar, which is commonly used in modern society. Thus, the spring-related seasons were more finely divided.

## Traditional Korean Small Seasons, Holidays and Cultures of Spring

The traditional new year among Korean people is characterized by celebrating the change of seasons from winter to spring, and the beginning of full-scale agricultural preparations based on this. In this way, traditional Korean spring customs and community practices differ from those of Nowruz, the culture and rituals of which have been inherited from the Zoroastrians of the pre-Islamic ancient Persian Empire.

From the perspective of agriculture, the first half of the year consists of preparing, planting and nurturing crops, and the second half focuses on harvesting and celebrating yields. From this perspective, Nowruz-related observances in Korea correspond to the first half of the traditional agricultural cycle. According to the traditional lunar calendar used by Korean communities, spring encompasses six minor seasonal periods from Ipchun to Gokwoo.

The lunar new year celebration, Seollal, occurs on January 1st, the first day of the lunar calendar year. Already introduced above, during Seollal, families perform ancestral rites called "*charye*," offering food and liquor to ancestors before sharing these offerings among family members. Other traditions include "*se-bae*" (bowing to elders) and playing traditional games. Se-bae is a traditional ceremony where children and younger family members bow to their elders to show respect and wish them a long life. Some Koreans also choose to wear traditional Korean clothing (hanbok) during Seollal, especially to perform se-bae and other ancestral rites. A special breakfast of *tteok-guk*, a traditional Korean soup made with sliced rice cakes, is also served on this day, while traditional folk games like *yut nori* (a board game) and *neol-ttwi-gi* (an outdoor game) are played. Families also gather to catch up with distant relatives, who often travel home for the holiday, and exchange well-wishes and hopes for the new year.

The first six minor seasons beginning with Ipchun correspond to to the Nowruz celebration period, marking spring in Korea's traditional lunar calendar:

Ipchun (February 4th) marks the start of spring and was considered highly significant, with rituals performed to ensure successful farming. As earlier noted, the Chinese characters for "Ipchun" were traditionally written on rectangular signs hung above doorways to bring good fortune.

Woosoo (February 19th) announces the beginning of spring rains. This is followed by Gyungchip (March 5th) which signifies when hibernating creatures, particularly frogs, awaken to resume their activities.

Chunboon (March 21st) coincides with the spring equinox and the date of Nowruz. Traditional Korean beliefs hold that swallows begin flying on this day, and daylight hours gradually increase.

Chungmyung (April 4th) marks when the weather brightens, and coincides with Hansik (한식 – Cold Food Day), an important traditional observance. Hansik always follows or coincides with Cheong-myeong-jeol (청명절), falling around April 5th-6th of the solar calendar. This is an ideal time for planting trees, which is why April 5th is now designated as Sik-mok-il, or Arbor Day in Korea.

Hansik originated from ancient practices where communities created new fire each spring, prohibiting old fire during a specific period beforehand. Another origin traces to a Chinese custom where fire was forbidden on days with severe weather, so people ate cold food instead. Hansik is a major traditional holiday alongside Seollal, Dano, and Chuseok. On this day, people perform ancestral rites with offerings of alcohol,

fruits, and rice cakes, and visit ancestral graves to make repairs and plant trees. A saying holds that rain on Hansik day promises a good harvest. For farming households, this day marks the beginning of the full agricultural season. The practice of visiting ancestral graves on Hansik reportedly began during China's Tang Dynasty and was introduced to Korea during the Silla period. During the Goryeo Dynasty, Hansik was considered one of the most important holidays, when officials could visit ancestral graves and prisoners received amnesty. In contemporary Korea and among ethnic Koreans in former Soviet countries, this spring observance of visiting and tending ancestral graves remains culturally significant.

Gokwoo (April 20th) marks when spring rain falls on growing grain and signals the end of spring. Traditional belief holds that rainfall during this period promises an abundant autumn harvest. After Gokwoo, the seasons transition from spring to summer, and from the first to second half of the annual cycle. The weather becomes hot and humid, promoting the growth of rice, fruits, and vegetables for autumn harvest.

Due to Korea's rapid industrialization in the 1970s, many traditional agricultural customs have been transformed. Some are preserved as official holidays in modern Korean society, while others survive only as traditional cultural practices observed at the individual level, either as Confucian customs or as elements of folklore.

## Nowruz in 21st Century Korean Society

In 21st century Korean society three types of spring equinox new year celebrations are held separately official celebrations hosted by the Embassies of Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan; celebration parties featuring local traditional cultures; and community gatherings with participation of residents in Korea and ordinary Korean citizens at the municipal level.

The Persian New Year, Nowruz, is celebrated in Seoul and other areas influenced by Persian culture, with traditions including the Haft Sin tablecloth arrangement and visits to elders, family, and friends. A large gathering from the local Iranian community, officials, and friends assembles at a major hotel in downtown Seoul to celebrate the coming of Nowruz on March 21st, hosted by the Iranian Embassy in Seoul. The Iranian Ambassador gives a warm reception in his address to the crowds in both Iranian (Farsi) and English. For foreign guests, the ambassador provides a brief explanation of the traditional celebration's significance and some customs associated with Nowruz. The Azerbaijani Embassy in Korea conducts similar annual celebrations.

Korean communities of Uzbek and Kazakh residents celebrate this spring new year somewhat differently, mainly through events organized by local Uzbek or Kazakh communities at the municipal level where these residents live and work in concentrated districts or towns. As the numbers of residents and temporary visitors from these countries increase, some Korean governmental agencies and provincial authorities also hold cultural events and celebrations.

In 2019, a grand exhibition opening was organized within the framework of the International Cultural Festival “Navruz in Seoul” at the prestigious KF Gallery in the South Korean capital. The ceremony was attended by representatives from public, political, and academic circles of the Republic of Korea, as well as heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations accredited to the country. This festival is organized annually by the Secretariat of the Forum for Cooperation of the Republic of Korea and Central Asia together with diplomatic missions of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, with support from Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and the Seoul City Hall. The exhibition presented photographs, books, art objects, folk

crafts, and other exhibits demonstrating the rich centuries-old culture and traditions of the peoples of Uzbekistan and Central Asia, along with videos about the tourism potential, history, and heritage of the region.

In Korea, Kazakh communities are prominent in southeastern provinces, particularly in Ulsan, where many Kazakh students study and work in major industrial companies. Currently, more than 30,000 Kazakhstanis reside in Korea, and the Kazakh diaspora is expected to grow as negotiations continue between Astana and Seoul regarding work visas for Kazakh citizens. After a three-year hiatus due to coronavirus restrictions, Nauryz celebrations resumed in Ulsan, organized by Kazakh students. With the resumption of human resource exchanges and increasing influx of students from Kazakhstan, the tradition of celebrating Nauryz in southern Korea continues to spread to the Korean community, with active participation from ordinary Korean citizens.

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, when relations between Korea and Central Asian countries began, the initial focus was on the influx of Koreans into Central Asia. However, as relations between Korea and Central Asia have become closer, the scale of human movement from Central Asian countries to Korea has recently grown. This trend is expected to continue due to the mutual dependence and complementary economic development between Central Asia and Korea.

On the theme of the tradition of celebrating the spring equinox new year, Korea had already established close relations with Iran in the 1970s. This is evidenced by Tehran Street in Seoul, Korea, and Seoul Street in Tehran, indicating that official exchange relations have been maintained for a considerable period. However, the Persian spring equinox new year tradition, which can be considered a symbol of Persian traditional culture, has not been well known in Korean society. It began to become familiar to a small number of ordinary Koreans as diplomatic and exchange relations developed between Korea and Central Asian countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, and as communities of residents from these Central Asian countries formed in Korean society.

In the early stages of exchanges between Korea and Central Asia, Koreans and Korean companies entering Central Asia had a very limited understanding of local traditional culture and customs. This resulted in numerous problems stemming from cultural misunderstandings while promoting various businesses and projects. However, as relations between Korea and Central Asia have developed over more than a generation, people from Central Asian countries have been entering Korea for study, work, and through international marriages. These individuals are becoming members of Korean society, which is rapidly transforming into a multicultural society.

Understanding the traditional culture and customs of Central Asia is now presented as an important task for Koreans in creating and maintaining a multicultural society that includes new legal Korean citizens from Central Asia as neighbors. In this context, understanding Nowruz, a representative holiday of Central Asia, is expected to contribute significantly not only to the development and deepening of relations between Korea and Central Asia but also to the expansion of relations between Korea and neighboring civilizations of Central Asian regions from civilizational perspectives.

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9 "Как казахстанцы отметили Наурыз в Южной Корее." 25.03.2024. (https://24.kz/ru/news/social/item/644085-kak-kazakhstantsy-otmetili-nauryz-v-yuzhnoj-koree)

# HOLIDAYS CELEBRATING THE NEW YEAR AND SPRING: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NOWRUZ AND SEOL

Si-Nae YUN

## Introduction

The beginning of a new year is a special period for humankind. It is a symbolic time to plan a new year, reflect on the past, and wish for good fortune and prosperity. These rituals to welcome the new year have been established as important cultural traditions around the world and have appeared in a variety of forms, reflecting the worldview, values, and identity of each society. In this regard, it is a meaningful study to compare and examine new year rituals in order to offer insights into both cultural universality and uniqueness simultaneously.

Nowruz and Seol have been traditional new year holidays and spring festivals for centuries in Eurasia and the Korean Peninsula, respectively. They are significant cultural heritages that reflect the historical experiences and cultural identities of their respective societies. These two holidays have many things in common, such as harmony with nature and a spirit of community, but they are also different with respect to their origins, rituals, and specific customs. Thus, this study aims to identify the cultural significance and social functions of Nowruz and Seol through their comparison and analysis, and to assess their sustainability in the future based on these findings.

Beyond simply identifying the characteristics of the two holidays, this study examines the cultural elements shared between Korea and Eurasian countries and contributes to promoting mutual understanding through this. In particular, it aims to explore the potential that Nowruz and Seol could serve as mediators to strengthen cultural exchanges and solidarity between Korea and Eurasia, and further to provide an opportunity to discuss the potential of using them as shared cultural heritage between regions.

## Origins and Background of Nowruz and Seol

Nowruz – meaning “new day” in Persian – is both the first day of the new year and a

spring festival based on the Persian calendar. It corresponds to the 21st of March of the solar calendar, but is celebrated on the 22nd of March in some countries such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Nowruz is recognized as a crucial period symbolizing the renewal of life and prosperity, as from this day, the days grow longer and nature begins to revive.

The origins of Nowruz are deeply related to Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion. Zoroastrianism regarded light as sacred and included a ritual to celebrate the spring equinox, when day and night become equal in length, marking the end of the long and dark winter. This tradition spread to neighboring regions as the Persian Empire expanded. Today, over 300 million people across a broad geography, including Iran, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East, celebrate Nowruz. Nowruz has been passed down for thousands of years across diverse ethnicities and cultures. In 2009, the importance of Nowruz was recognized, and it was inscribed to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Furthermore, the 21st of March was officially designated as "International Nowruz Day" at the UN General Assembly in 2010, recognizing its significance as a global cultural celebration.

Meanwhile, the lunar calendar (or more precisely, the lunisolar calendar) has traditionally been used in Korea. Because of this, many holidays and rituals in Korea are celebrated according to the lunar calendar, causing the dates of holidays to vary each year when converted to the Gregorian calendar, which is based on solar calculations. Since the lunar calendar is based on the cycle of the moon, it is easy to determine dates based on the moon's phases, but it is difficult to accurately track seasonal changes as it does not reflect the movement of the sun. Thus, Korea introduced "solar terms," which were created based on the sun's movement and which would become widely used.

Solar terms refer to the 24 divisions of the year based on the sun's movement, commonly known as the "24 solar terms." Each solar term lasts an interval of about 15 days and has a distinct name. However, since the 24 solar terms were established based on the climate of the northern regions of China, their application to Korea's climate resulted in some differences. To address this, Korea compiled agricultural books suited to its own environment. The 24 solar terms were then actively used, leading to the development of customs and practices corresponding to each term, which became an important part of traditional Korean culture.

Nowruz coincides with the "vernal equinox" among the 24 solar terms. The vernal equinox falls around the 20th or 21st of March in the Gregorian calendar, and some time in February in the lunar calendar. In Korea, people would begin preparing for farming in earnest around this period, plowing the fields and foraging for newly sprouting wild herbs. There was also a custom of observing the weather during the vernal equinox to predict the success or failure of the upcoming harvest. As the days started to get longer and the warm spring weather continued, Koreans considered this time the true start of spring but did not celebrate it as a separate holiday. This is because Korea has its own distinct new year holiday and spring festival.

Korea's new year is observed on the first day of January of the lunar calendar, which usually corresponds to some time in January or February of the Gregorian calendar. It is called "Seol" or "Seollal," meaning the first holiday of the year. It is believed that the term originated from the sense of unfamiliarity people experienced with the arrival of the new year.[1] Although still falling in cold season, Seol was a day to celebrate the arrival of spring and wish for well-being and an abundant harvest in the new year, with various rituals and

1 임재해. 한국민속학과 현실인식. 서울: 집문당. 1997. pp. 208–209.

customs centered around these themes.

In this way, Nowruz and Seol share crucial commonalities as the first day of the new year and a holiday to celebrate the arrival of spring, based on the traditional calendar system of each region. Both holidays also involved rituals to pray for blessings and prosperity in the new year. They also served as a time for communities to unite, fostering harmony and solidarity before fully engaging in the work of the new year, after enduring the long winter. Therefore, although there are temporal and spatial differences between Nowruz and Seol, there are both similarities and unique aspects in the ways they are celebrated and commemorated.

## Purification Rituals: Preparing for a Fresh Start

Before Nowruz and Seol, various purification rituals were performed in both regions to welcome the new year in a purified environment. Preparations for Nowruz began in the last month of the Persian calendar. To cleanse themselves of the remnants of the past year, people not only cleaned their homes and yards but also worked with their neighbors to tidy up surrounding areas, such as neighborhoods, waterways, and graves. They also cleaned their bodies and prepared new clothes for Nowruz, paying attention to personal hygeine. In some areas of Central Asia, people fumigated their homes inside and out with smoke from burnt branches of juniper (*Juniperus*) or wild rue (*Peganum harmala*) to ward off evil spirits.

Purification rituals involving fire were also prominent. In Iran and neighboring regions, a ritual was conducted in which people made a bonfire and leaped over the flames on the eve of the new year. They believed that by performing this ritual, they could cleanse themselves of sins and illnesses accumulated over the past year and ward off misfortunes and disasters in the next.[2] Other regions of Central Asia also had fire-making rituals, originating in beliefs that fire has the power to purify. These rituals symbolized the cleansing of the body and surrounding environment, and making a fresh start while hailing the new year.

Seol also began with a variety of preparations. While Seol itself lasts just one day, the period from Dongji (winter solstice) to the 15th day of the lunar first month, Jeongwol Daeboreum (the first full moon of the year), is collectively known as the Seollal holidays (Lunar New Year's holidays). During this period, various rituals and customs were practiced. Dongji falls around the 22nd to 23rd of December on the Gregorian calendar, marking the longest night of the year. As the days gradually lengthen after Dongji, Koreans regarded it as the start of the new year and called it "Little Seol." In this way, it came to mark the beginning of Seol preparations.

Since ancient times, when there was an event to celebrate or a need to ward off disasters, Koreans have prepared food with red beans. For example, red bean porridge was prepared during Dongji to expel evil spirits before the new year's arrival. They believed that the red color of the beans symbolized the energy of *yang* (positive) and had the power to repel spirits associated with the energy of *yin* (negative). In addition, they would display images of chickens, symbolizing the brightness of dawn, or of dragons and tigers, which represented fear, at the front entrances of their homes in order to prevent misfortune.[3]

On the eve of Seol, an important tradition among Koreans was to purify themselves by taking

2 Khalesi S., & Javidnejat P. "Good and Evil in Ancient Persian Festivals: An Analytical Psychological Approach". R. Franks & S. E. Meindl (Eds.). The Real and the Reflected: Heroes and Villains in Existent and Imagined Worlds. Oxford: Inter–Disciplinary Press. 2012. p. 8.

3 강욱. 민속문화: 설날의 세시풍속. 한국지방재정공제회. 지방재정과 지방세. 제25권. 2010. p. 204.

a thorough bath and preparing new clothes to welcome the new year. In addition, they burned trash around the house to eliminate evil spirits and bad luck.[4] This fire-based purification ritual reached its peak not before Seol but on the final day of the Seollal holiday period, Jeongwol Daeboreum (the first full moon of the year).

## Strengthening Family and Community Bonds: Rituals and Festive Foods

Nowruz and Seol were also significant holidays that reinforced familial and communal bonds through shared meals. Nowruz foods vary by region, but an emblematic dish common across many contexts is *samanu* (variously known also as *samanak, sümelek, sumanak, sumalak, sümölök*). In Iran and some other regions, people traditionally prepare seven foods starting with the letter "s" to welcome Nowruz. This custom is referred to as "Haft Sin," meaning "seven S's." Samanu is one of these foods. This dish symbolizes joy and hope for the new year and embodies the cooperative spirit within the community. The preparation of samanu takes several days, and starts with the germination of wheat. The sprouted wheat shoots are then boiled in a big pot for a while, requiring continuous stirring to prevent the bottom from burning. During this process, members of the community prepare the dish through cooperation. Once completed, it is shared with everyone, including those who did not participate in the cooking process. Thus, the process to prepare samanu was a significant ritual to foster amity and solidarity within the community.

In Iran, parts of Central Asia, and among the Parsi community of India, it was believed that on the eve of Nowruz, the spirits of ancestors visited the homes of their descendants. To honor this, people would light fires and perform rituals with their families and communities. These practices originated from the Zoroastrian ritual of Frawardigan (also known as "Hamaspathmaid-yem").[5] The tradition was to offer food to the spirits of the ancestors and to pray for a bountiful harvest in the coming year. Uzbek people called this tradition "*qozon to'ldi,*" meaning the pot is filled to the brim with food. A variety of spring foods, including samanu, would be prepared on the table and shared with community members following the ritual. This was a crucial social custom to strengthen community solidarity.

In Korea, on the morning of Seol, families gathered at the house of the eldest son, prepared food to offer to their ancestors, and performed a ritual to commemorate them. It was an important tradition to express gratitude and respect to the ancestors while simultaneously praying for peace and a bountiful harvest in the coming year. The tradition of ancestor veneration not only reinforced familial bonds beyond mere ritualistic practice but also fostered intergenerational solidarity, akin to the eve rituals of Nowruz in terms of significance. Traditionally, Koreans ate *tteokguk* (rice cake soup) as the first meal of Seol. Tteokguk is a dish made by slicing long white rice cakes and boiling them in a broth. The exact origins of the custom of eating tteokguk remain unclear, but its symbolic meaning can be inferred from the white rice cakes. Since white symbolizes purity and new beginnings in Korean tradition, eating white tteokguk represents the desire to welcome the new year with a clean and pure heart.[6] Additionally, the process of making long rice cakes carries the meaning of wishing for the longevity of family members. The shape of the thin slices of the round rice cake resembles a coin and represents wishes for wealth and abundance. Therefore, the tradition of having tteokguk on Seol was also a practice to wish for health, longevity, and prosperity.

4 최운식 외. 외국인을 위한 한국, 한국인 그리고 한국문화. 서울: 보고사. 2009. pp. 307–310.

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6 황혜성. 우리가 정말 알아야 할 우리 음식 백가지 1. 서울: 현암사. 2005. p. 278.

## Festivals of Harmony and Community

Nowruz and Seol were holidays during which joy was shared, transcending social status, gender, and age. People visited relatives, friends, and neighbors, exchanged new year's greetings, and wished each other good health and luck for the new year. In addition, they exchanged gifts and enjoyed traditional games together while taking time to strengthen the bonds between generations and communities.

During Nowruz, maintaining harmonious relationships with relatives, friends, and neighbors was regarded a crucial determinant of luck in the new year. It was also believed that conflicts and disharmony would bring about misfortune.[7] Accordingly, people endeavored to resolve ongoing disputes and exercise forgiveness, welcoming the new year with a positive atmosphere. These values were, in fact, reflected in various social practices. During Nowruz, people visited each other's homes, exchanged compliments, donated to those who were facing difficult situations, and practiced a spirit of solidarity and coexistence within the community by helping orphans, patients, and senior citizens living alone. Elders also shared the joy of the new year and wished for future happiness, presenting gifts such as money, new clothes, and sweet treats to children. In addition, various traditional sports and folk games were actively held through festivals for the entire community to participate in. Depending on the region, there were a wide variety of competitions and games such as traditional wrestling, horseback riding, archery, cockfighting, ram fighting, kite flying, and swing riding. These events provided an arena for intergenerational and cross-class interactions. In such a tradition, Nowruz held the meaning of an inclusive and harmonious festival in which every member of society could get along without being excluded.

Koreans also regarded Seol as a significant time to embrace the new year with a renewed mindset and foster harmony. It was an important custom to wipe misfortune and negative energy from the past, liquidate debts to ensure a good start, and resolve conflicts between family members and neighbors. During Seol, it was customary for people to visit relatives and elders in the neighborhood and bow respectfully for the new year (*sebae*). In return, the elders treated the visitors with drinks and food and presented them with gifts such as money and snacks for children, given with words of blessing. This custom is rooted in traditional social and cultural values that emphasize familial and communal bonds. During Seol, various folk games were also played. Beyond the simple function of entertainment, these games held ritual significance in that members of the community shared the joy of the new year, warded off bad luck, and wished for a bountiful harvest. *Yunnori*, one of the most representative games of Seol, is a traditional Korean board game. The game served both as entertainment and as a method to predict fortunes for the coming year, with the board symbolizing farmland and movements of pieces, representing seasonal changes. Kite flying was another traditional activity, mainly enjoyed by men. This activity held ritual significance, with participants flying kites and then deliberately cutting or burning the string to release them to the winds. This symbolic act was believed to carry away misfortunes and bring good luck for the coming year.

Jeongwol Daeboreum is the last day of the Seol holidays, and marks the first full moon of the lunar year. It usually falls in February but occasionally in March, according to the lunar calendar. The moon symbolized abundance and prosperity in an agricultural society. With its perfect round shape and brighter light, the full moon was regarded as even more sacred. Accordingly, many important rituals were performed, acknowledging the symbolic meaning

7 신규섭. 축제 문화의 원형: 노루즈(신년제)의 상징체계. 세계문학비교학회. 세계문학비교연구. 27권. 2009. p. 72.

of the moon. In particular, rituals and games using fire prevailed. People piled up straw and pine branches on a hill or the top of a mountain, lit a fire, and greeted the moon with smoke.[8] Children lit a fire on a long stick, spinning it round and round, and set fire to field banks. People enjoyed other games, such as tug-of-war or torch fights with neighboring villages, where participants competed against each other. The fire-related folk games played on this day served several functions including expelling demons using the purifying power of fire and activating the fertility of the earth. They were also thought to predict the next year's harvest based on the size of their flames, while offering the practical benefit of driving away harmful insects and rats from the fields, and thus helping to prevent crop damage. The tug-of-war and torch fights served as festive events that strengthened the internal unity of the community through competition between villages.[9]

Additionally, a communal ritual was held to offer prayers to the guardian deity of the village in order to wish for good health and a bountiful harvest for the year. This ritual was an important social ceremony in pursuit of well-being and harmony of the community. In addition, the traditional music troupe of the village visited each house and performed a ritual by playing folk musical instruments to expel evil spirits and wish for good fortune. These rituals and games were integral aspects of traditional society, fostering unity within the village community and reinforcing mutual ties among its members.[10]

Thus, as traditions evolved within settled communities, Nowruz and Seol not only marked the arrival of the new year but also symbolized prosperous and auspicious beginnings, and commemorated the transition to spring. The two holidays served as significant social and cultural events in which entire communities came together in harmony to wish for happiness and prosperity in the coming year, and thereby also functioned as key occasions to reaffirm shared communal identities. Moreover, various traditional rituals and games were performed even before the holidays began to make these times more meaningful, all of which embodied the shared desire to honor nature and to wish for luck and prosperity in the coming year. Above all, a fundamental commonality between Nowruz and Seol is that these activities were conducted in solidarity between all members of the community. Through this, it is clear that Nowruz and Seol played important roles in facilitating unity and solidarity within communities, and encouraging peace and harmony.

## From Repression to Revival

Nowruz and Seol are rituals that welcome the new year based on a traditional calendar system in each respective region, and both continue to be significant public holidays today. However, the two holidays share a common experience of having faced existential crises in the face of intense historical political repression.

The suppression of Nowruz was particularly pronounced in Central Asia. The first time Nowruz faced suppression occurred with the spread of Islam to Transoxiana around the 8th century. At that time, although Nowruz was purely a festival to welcome spring and did not directly conflict with Islamic principles, Arab rulers saw it as a tradition that could potentially strengthen solidarity among locals and encourage resistance, which led to its prohibition. However, as Nowruz was deeply ingrained in the lives of the people, it was impossible to eliminate the

8 강욱. 민속문화: 정월 대보름의 세시풍속. 한국지방재정공제회. 지방재정과 지방세. 제1권. 2008. pp. 267–269.

9 한국민속대백과사전: https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/topic/%ED%9A%83%EB%B6%88%EC%8B%B8%EC%9B%80. (2025. 2. 14)

10 디지털달성문화대전: https://dalseong.grandculture.net/dalseong/dir/GC40801529. (2025. 2. 14)

festival completely. As a result, people adopted pragmatic strategies to continue celebrating the festival through the integration of Islamic characteristics. For instance, efforts were made to incorporate Islamic elements, such as referring to Nowruz as "Eid," or associating traditional dishes like samanu, with Bibi Fotima. These cultural adaptations laid the groundwork for Nowruz to later be classified as an "Islamic religious ritual," which subsequently led to its second prohibition.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Bolshevik government implemented a policy to reject religion. Regarded Nowruz as an Islamic religious ceremony, they prohibited it. Thus, Nowruz was removed from the list of national holidays in Turkestan, and the first day of January of the Gregorian calendar was designated the official new year for the Soviet Union. The Soviet government banned the official commemoration of Nowruz for nearly 62 years, from 1926 to 1988. This was because the Soviet government recognized that Nowruz represented not just a simple festival, but also a cultural and spiritual bond among the peoples of Central Asia. Despite the prohibition however, the people continued to commemorate Nowruz in secret. After the death of Stalin in 1953, some holidays were unofficially permitted, but large-scale events were still restricted as they could stir up nationalist sentiments. In 1985, after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Nowruz regained its original name which had been replaced by the moniker "Spring Festival." In 1988, a large-scale public celebration of Nowruz was held for the first time in 60 years in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Subsequently, Nowruz festivals were officially held in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. These spectacular celebrations marked a historical moment that reaffirmed the enduring presence of Nowruz. In constrast, in Uzbekistan, which had been particularly proactive in reviving Nowruz, the holiday was regarded as a "dangerous tradition" by some communist officials, who banned it again. However, Nowruz continued to survive in the lives of the people despite these political pressures. Eventually, Nowruz was declared an official national holiday of Uzbekistan in February 1989, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, even though Nowruz went through many crises of suppression and prohibition, it was a traditional holiday that was continuously passed down through generations, having maintained strong vitality in the lives of the people all the way through.

Seol in Korea also experienced multiple instances of suppression and transformation throughout the hardships faced by the Korean people. Seol continued to be an important holiday after the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1896, but full-scale repression began after Japan's invasion and annexation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910. The Japanese Empire denigrated the lunar calendar as superstitious and imposed the use of the solar calendar on Koreans as part of its policy to eradicate Korean traditions. In this process, Seol was prohibited because it was a national holiday based on the lunar calendar and promoted the national values and identity of the Korean people. In its place, Japan designated the first day of January of the solar calendar as the new year and named it "Shinjeong," meaning "new Seol," while referring to Seol by the lunar calendar as "Gujeong," a term that implied it as outdated in comparison. Indeed, only Shinjeong was designated as an official holiday. In addition, Japan forced businesses to operate on Seol in an effort to stop the people from commemorating the day. They also made arrangements for exams to take place on the day, to prevent absenteeism in schools. As the long-standing traditions of the Korean people proved difficult to eradicate, even stricter prohibitive measures were imposed from the 1930s onward. Traditional practices such as bowing for the new year and memorial services for ancestors during Seol were banned, while mills which made rice cakes were shut down. Even more extreme measures followed including forcing labor on Korean people. The official abolition of Seol represented not merely the loss of a tradition, but also the erosion of the Korean people's national identity and sovereignty. This

led to even stronger resistance to Shinjeong,[11] and Koreans did not give up celebrating Seol in secrecy. Undaunted, they prepared ancestral rites in the morning and bowed to their ancestors before going to school and work, despite extreme control and regulation by the Japanese Empire. Koreans insisted on celebrating Seol during the period of Japanese colonial rule not just to preserve their customs, but also to express resistance.

However, ironically, Seol was not restored as a national holiday even after liberation. Promoting industrialization and urbanization in the 1970s, the government labelled the lunar calendar as an "artifact of the past." The government officially designated the first day of January of the solar calendar as the Seol holiday and reinforced this by law, encouraging it socially as well.[12] However, most people continued to observe the lunar Seol – Shinjeong had not been able to replace the deeply rooted holiday. The government did not reinstate the lunar new year until 1989, officially designating the first day of January of the lunar calendar, and the days before and after it, as national holidays. This stands as a testament to the resilience and lasting significance of traditional culture.

## Adapting to Modern Times: The Evolution of Nowruz and Seol

In this way, Nowruz and Seol have persisted in the lives of the people as cultural traditions with centuries of history, despite intense external suppression and change. They remain significant and meaningful holidays for people today. However, there are some differences in how these two holidays are sustained due to changes in social structures, the ways of life of modern societies, and urbanization.

Nowruz continues to play a role in strengthening community solidarity and serves as a symbol of cultural diversity, reflecting a variety of traditions and customs. Many countries designate Nowruz as a holiday and encourage citizens to enjoy the festival together. Public events are also actively organized, such as street performances, large-scale parades, and traditional music and dance activities. Additionally, Nowruz was put on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, leading to international efforts for its protection and preservation. These elements contribute to making Nowruz not only a family-centered holiday but also an important social event celebrated by the entire cultural community. On the contrary, Seol has gradually transformed into a small-scale family event in modern Korean society. With industrialization and urbanization, many people have left their traditional hometowns and moved to large cities. As family members have scattered across the country, Seol has transformed into a nuclear family-centered holiday. At the same time, as the country has transitioned from an agricultural society to a modern one, many traditional customs of Seol have disappeared. Furthermore, holiday-related stress – stemming from economic pressures, conflicts among family members, and women's shifting social roles – has increased, leading more people to gradually simplify holiday traditions, and use the remaining time for family travel or personal rest.

These differences likely result from a complex interplay of social, economic and cultural factors. For Nowruz, large-scale events, emphasizing community ties, continue to be held thanks to various national policies. In contrast, in Korea, after undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, a lifestyle centered on individuals has emerged. A cultural shift has taken place, prioritizing personal leisure over family-centered activities. Thus, Seol has also naturally

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12 박환영. 도시생활 속의 세시풍속. 중앙대학교 한국문화유산연구소. 중앙민속학. 제11호. 2006. p. 56.

transformed from a community event to a small-scale family event. Nevertheless, this does not mean the extinction of Seol. Seol still serves as a crucial opportunity to strengthen solidarity between family and community today. Even though ancestral rites have been simplified, people are adapting to new ways of celebrating, such as eating *tteokguk* together, exchanging greetings online instead of visiting in person, and presenting gifts. In addition, the young generation reinterprets the meaning of Seol in a modern context, spending the holiday not only in traditional ways with their families, but also through travel or volunteer activities. These changes may differ from the traditional characteristics of Seol, but the core values of family unity and community spirit remain intact through the stream of time. Therefore, it could be seen that these changes do not tarnish the meaning of Seol, but rather show the possibility of coexistence between modern values and traditions.

## Conclusion

This study compares Nowruz and Seol, analyzing both their commonalities and distinct characteristics. As a result, it was found that Nowruz continues as a large public event that highlights community ties, whereas Seol in Korea has gradually become more family-centered, reflecting individualistic tendencies. These differences have been shaped by diverse factors, such as social and cultural backgrounds, economic transformations, urbanization patterns, and the spread of modern values. In spite of these differences, the essential values and functions of the two holidays remain firmly established as important cultural elements in their respective societies.

First, Nowruz and Seol play a role as crucial turning points for both individuals and communities to prepare for the future while celebrating the start of the new year. The ceremonies and festivals held to welcome the new year go beyond simple traditional customs – they function to strengthen the psychological stability of individuals and enhance social solidarity.

Second, Nowruz and Seol act as important mediators guaranteeing continuity between generations. Customs around new year's greetings and the preparation of traditional foods serve as a means of preserving the identity of specific peoples and cultures, and through which traditional values and ethical norms are passed to the next generation.

Third, Nowruz and Seol serve the function of strengthening social solidarity. Various events are held to strengthen community, national and even global solidarity through International Nowruz Day. And while Seol has shifted to an event centered around the nuclear family as individualism has strengthened, it still serves as an important opportunity to strengthen bonds within families and societies.

While Nowruz and Seol have evolved differently over time, they share a common emphasis on preserving tradition and community values. The two holidays are crucial assets reflecting the history and culture of their respective societies and are carried on in various forms, adapting to the modern era. Indeed, traditional holidays can be more sustainable if they can adjust flexibly to social change, rather than being rigidly maintained in a fixed form. This means that traditional holidays are not just legacies of the past, but can also serve as cultural platforms linking the past, present, and future.

Therefore, the changes seen by the two traditional holidays can be understood as processes of development into new forms in which both traditional and modern values coexist, rather than as the fading of tradition. Through these changes, it is expected that the core values and cultural significance of these holidays will not weaken, but will instead evolve into even richer cultural assets. At the same time, the common values shared by Nowruz and Seol seem to play a positive role in broadening mutual understanding and fostering cultural exchange between Korea and Eurasian

countries. Thus, these two traditional holidays are anticipated to serve as pivotal foundations for developing sustainable relationships through fostering cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation moving forward.

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# CULTURAL COMPARISON AND SIGNIFICANCE OF EURASIAN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: NOWRUZ

Aijarkyn KOJOBEKOVA

## The Cultural Effects and Creative Expressions of Nowruz

Nowruz, meaning "new day" in Persian, is far more than a seasonal festivity. It is a civilizational ritual of spiritual, cultural, and ecological significance. Observed for millennia across a vast region from the Balkans to the Indian subcontinent, Nowruz celebrates the awakening of life after winter's long slumber. Its timing at the vernal equinox – the moment when light and darkness are in perfect balance – has endowed it with a cosmological weight that transcends borders and belief systems. In ancient times, overcoming the harshness of winter was not merely symbolic; it was a material and existential trial. Food scarcity, illness, and isolation defined the colder months, and the arrival of spring represented a return to vitality, abundance, and hope. The memory of these ancient challenges lives on in the rich mythologies that accompany Nowruz – stories of deities or heroes who bring back light, conquer darkness, or restore order to a world thrown into chaos.

Nowruz, observed across a vast expanse of Eurasia, is one of the most vivid examples of shared intangible cultural heritage. While celebrated in culturally distinct societies – from Iran to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of the Indian subcontinent – it retains a common philosophical essence: the cyclical renewal of time and life. This festival bridges regional differences through shared symbolic languages of rebirth, purification, and community cohesion.

At its philosophical core, Nowruz affirms the deep human yearning for continuity, rebirth, and balance. It is not merely a marker of seasonal change but a sacred pause in the calendar that invites reflection on the cyclical nature of existence. As winter recedes – often a period historically marked by hardship, hunger, and isolation – Nowruz heralds the reawakening of the natural world and the promise of new beginnings. The alignment with the vernal equinox, when daylight overtakes darkness and equilibrium is restored in the heavens, transforms the festival into a ritual of cosmic reconciliation. It reminds humanity that harmony is not a static state, but

a recurring opportunity – a balance that must be ritually enacted and spiritually embraced with each return of spring. Conceptually, the equinox represents the reconciliation of opposites: light overcomes darkness, life triumphs over dormancy, and hope displaces despair. In agrarian societies, this balance held deep existential meaning; the equinox meant the land would awaken, crops could be planted, and communities could thrive once more. This sacred transition is expressed through symbolic acts and creative traditions. In Iran, Persian miniature paintings depict the mythic figure Jamshid ascending his crystal throne on Nowruz, a metaphor for enlightenment and order returning to the world. In Central Asia, epics like the *Manas* and *Dede Korkut* weave narratives of heroism and renewal around the spring season. In Azerbaijan, theatrical games performed in town squares often feature allegorical characters who "defeat" winter, dramatizing the social and cosmic shift.

Across Eurasia, music and dance express the collective rhythm of revival. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, ritual songs praise the greening of nature, while dances mimic the blossoming of flowers and the flight of birds. In Kurdish and Caucasian cultures, group dances become communal acts of defiance against darkness and sorrow. In these expressions, aesthetic forms are not mere entertainment – they are embodiments of philosophical truths: life returns, again and again. Popular proverbs also echo this deep belief in life's continuity. In Persian, one hears: "*Har rouz-e to Nowruz, Nowruz-et pirouz*" ("May every day be your Nowruz, may your Nowruz be victorious"), invoking a wish for perpetual renewal. In Kazakh tradition, it is said: "*Köktiem keldi - köñil aşıldy*" ("Spring has come – the soul has opened"), suggesting a direct link between seasonal and spiritual renewal. Poets, too, have long embraced Nowruz as a muse. The great Persian poet Hafez writes: "Springtime has arrived, and the roses are in bloom; come, let us celebrate what is eternal in the moment." This verse, like many others, distills the idea that Nowruz is not only a seasonal marker but a philosophical opportunity – to begin again, to shed old burdens, and to align one's soul with the world's rebirth.

Thus, while the external manifestations of Nowruz differ from painted eggs in Afghanistan to bonfires in the Caucasus, the inner meaning remains remarkably consistent: spring is life's return, and Nowruz is its sacred celebration. Across Eurasia, this shared heritage testifies to the common human desire for renewal, balance, and joy. Despite diverse expressions, the symbols – light, fire, greenery, music, and communal gathering – echo a universal story: the cyclical triumph of life over death, and the eternal promise of new beginnings.

## The Concept of Value: From Micro-Behaviors to Macro-Symbols

Across Eurasia, Nowruz operates simultaneously at micro and macro levels of cultural meaning, creating a spiritual and symbolic bridge between the individual and the cosmos. At the micro level, the festival initiates a series of actions that are simple on the surface but deeply profound in intention and symbolism. House cleaning, for example, known in Persian as *khaneh tekani*, is not only about physical tidiness – it is a spiritual exercise in renewal, aimed at removing not just dust but the stagnation of past regrets, resentments, and emotional burdens. In this act, the home becomes a metaphor for the soul, and its purification echoes the larger cleansing of the world through the return of spring.

Similarly, acts of forgiveness and reconciliation are widely practiced during Nowruz, particularly among families and neighbors. This is not simply a social courtesy, but a moral imperative grounded in the idea of harmony – mirroring the cosmic balance of the equinox. In Central Asia, the collective preparation of *sumalak*, a sweet paste made from sprouted wheat, is perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of micro-ritual ascending to macro-symbolism. The preparation requires stirring in large

cauldrons over many hours, often accompanied by singing, storytelling, and laughter. The sprouted wheat symbolizes rebirth and nourishment; the long preparation time represents patience and community endurance. The ritual becomes a performance of resilience and unity, qualities essential for collective survival and moral flourishing. Cooking and sharing food with others, especially with the poor or elderly, is another widespread Nowruz practice. This act transcends hospitality; it reaffirms the sacred bond between abundance and responsibility, between personal joy and communal care. Lighting candles or jumping over fires, found in Iranian, Kurdish, and Turkic traditions, links the individual body to the cosmic element of fire – understood as a force of purification and spiritual renewal.

At the macro level, these behaviors are encoded in civilizational symbols. The Haft Sin in Iran, the Haft Meva in Tajikistan, and other analogous displays across Eurasia are not just festive decorations. They are cosmograms – spiritual maps representing the moral and metaphysical structure of the world. Each item carries symbolic meaning: garlic for protection, vinegar for wisdom gained through hardship, apples for beauty and health, wheatgrass for fertility and rebirth. These symbols are not abstract; they are concrete reminders of how moral life must align with cosmic patterns.

In Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, Nowruz is also celebrated with deeply symbolic and spiritually resonant rituals that reflect the micro-macro connection. In Kyrgyzstan, community gatherings often include traditional games like *kök börü* and *oordo*, along with storytelling and poetry contests that reaffirm intergenerational continuity and cultural pride. The act of planting trees or releasing livestock to graze anew is symbolically tied to renewal and a return to natural rhythms. In Kazakhstan, people prepare *nauryz kozhe*, a seven-ingredient soup that embodies abundance and the harmonization of nature's elements. Sharing this dish is more than culinary hospitality – it is an invocation of unity, blessing, and renewal. In Uzbekistan, the preparation of sumalak reaches its most elaborate form, involving entire neighborhoods in its making. It is common to write wishes on slips of paper and place them near the cooking cauldron, signifying the transference of hope and intention into the food itself. Children often participate in these rituals, ensuring the continuity of meaning across generations. Musical performances and public festivals in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara transform streets into spaces of spiritual celebration, where movement, color, and sound act as metaphors for rebirth and harmony.

What binds the micro to the macro is the principle of correspondence: as one purifies the home, the society is purified; as one nurtures the hearth, the world is nurtured. Through this ritual mirroring, Nowruz instills a spiritual consciousness of interconnectedness. It reminds communities that human actions, no matter how small, participate in a larger sacred order. In this way, Nowruz becomes a pedagogy of presence inviting individuals to see their everyday actions as part of a cosmic choreography, linking their lives to ancestral wisdom and the eternal rhythms of nature.

## Nowruz as a Living Symbol of Mobility, Togetherness, and Belonging

Nowruz is more than a static cultural observance – it is a lived symbol of movement, rootedness, and social renewal. Its celebration across villages, cities, and diasporas is shaped by both mobility and tradition. The festival unfolds in waves of physical and symbolic movement: people return to ancestral homes, visit elders, travel long distances to be with family, and gather in sacred or communal places. This physical journey reflects an inner return – toward kinship, memory, and spiritual realignment with the rhythms of nature and society.

In many Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, mobility has historical resonance through nomadic traditions. Nowruz becomes a time when these nomadic

legacies are honored through open-air festivities, yurt gatherings, and games that recall seasonal migrations and communal solidarity. In Kazakhstan, for instance, horse games and music gatherings reflect ancient practices tied to spring renewal. Togetherness is a cornerstone of the festival. Across Uzbekistan, for example, public squares are transformed into sites of collective joy through concerts, street theatre, and processions. Elders recite blessings, children perform dances, and artisans showcase heritage crafts – all affirming the community's intergenerational cohesion. In Iran, families gather around the Haft Sin table, symbolically uniting their hopes for health, justice, beauty, and abundance. In the South Caucasus, communal picnics and bonfires unite neighborhoods, echoing ancient rites of fire and rebirth.

What makes Nowruz spiritually profound is its simultaneous rooting in place and openness to movement. It is celebrated not just within national borders, but across diasporic communities around the world. Even in exile or migration, Nowruz becomes a cultural anchor, reaffirming the bond between identity and memory. For many, celebrating Nowruz in displacement is a powerful act of resistance against cultural erasure and an affirmation of belonging. This togetherness is not only emotional but ethical. Hospitality, generosity, and presence are values enacted during Nowruz that reaffirm social responsibility. Philosophically, Nowruz teaches that the return of spring is also a return to right relations – between individuals, between generations, and between humans and nature. The Sufi tradition, for instance, interprets Nowruz as a moment when the human heart is asked to become like the freshly tilled earth – open, receptive, and ready to cultivate love and truth.

Thus, whether celebrated in a mountain village, a bustling city, or a migrant apartment in Europe, Nowruz carries the same ethical and symbolic weight. It restores movement not just through space, but through memory and spiritual belonging.

## Cultural Expression and Perceptions Across Eurasia

How people perceive and articulate Nowruz reveals deep-seated cultural worldviews and spiritual orientations. While expressions vary across regions, they are united by an awareness that time is sacred, nature is cyclical, and human beings must live in alignment with both.

In Persian poetic and mystical traditions, Nowruz is intimately aligned with divine wisdom (*hikmat*) and cosmological balance. Great poets such as Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Saadi portrayed Nowruz as a moment when the divine breath revives the sleeping earth, and the order of creation is renewed. In these traditions, the beauty of nature during Nowruz is seen as an outward reflection of inner spiritual awakening. In Turkic cultures, particularly in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and parts of Kazakhstan, Nowruz is viewed through the lens of harmony with nature and the endurance of community. Songs and poems are often infused with images of the steppes blooming, animals returning to pastures, and ancestral spirits smiling upon the land. In Kyrgyzstan, the celebration includes invocations for peace and health, often recited in poetic form during public gatherings or over festive meals. In the South Caucasus, especially in Azerbaijan and parts of Georgia, Nowruz has become a cornerstone of national identity and cultural survival. During Soviet times, public celebrations were discouraged, but many communities kept the tradition alive through whispered stories, songs, and rituals performed in private. Today, these same acts are performed with pride in public squares, affirming cultural resilience and sovereignty.

Language plays a powerful role in expressing these perceptions. In Tajikistan, the blessings shared during Nowruz often carry Sufi undertones, such as: “May your soul bloom like the garden in spring,” or “Let the seeds you plant in this season return as wisdom.” In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, spoken blessings or well-wishing phrases

during Nowruz frequently reference ancestors, emphasizing the continuity between past and future generations. In Kazakhstan, people might say something like "*Tielek tereñden bolsyn*" ("May your wish come from deep within") or "*Nauryz kutty bolsyn*" ("May Nowruz be blessed"). In Kyrgyzstan, during a shared meal or ritual, elders often recite "*Ata-baban koldosun*" ("May your ancestors support you") or "*Berekelduu jyl bolsun*" ("May it be a prosperous year"). A common Kyrgyz expression – "*Zhashoo kyzyl jazy menen keldi*" ("Life returns with the red spring") – illustrates how nature's transformation is a metaphor for personal and collective renewal. In Afghanistan, poetic contests and oral storytelling remain central to Nowruz, with storytellers reciting historical epics and moral fables that link the present to a noble past. In Pakistan, particularly among the Shia Hazara communities, Nowruz is marked with floral symbolism and visits to shrines, reinforcing the idea of spiritual rejuvenation.

Across all these contexts, Nowruz remains a living archive of meaning. It is not just remembered, it is spoken, sung, danced, planted, and shared. Through its cultural expressions, the festival continues to transmit values of patience, hope, gratitude, and balance, affirming that to live in harmony with the earth is to live in harmony with each other.

## Tradition and Transformation: Merging and Integration

Nowruz's remarkable endurance across millennia lies in its fluid capacity to integrate old beliefs with evolving social and religious frameworks. Rather than existing in opposition to new systems of thought or faith, Nowruz has continuously absorbed and reflected on them, transforming into an inclusive, pluralistic celebration without losing its spiritual essence. This capacity for synthesis allows Nowruz to remain relevant in modern life while continuing to echo ancient cosmologies.

In many Islamic societies, from Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia, Nowruz has adopted religious layers while retaining its foundational symbols. Families may begin the day with visits to the mosque, offering Qur'anic recitations or prayers for prosperity and health in the year ahead. In some regions, religious scholars have emphasized the virtues of starting the new year with cleanliness, charity, and gratitude – core values of both Islamic teachings and Nowruz traditions. Far from being at odds, these spiritual systems have found resonance through shared ethics and mutual symbolism. At the same time, pre-Islamic traditions such as the veneration of fire remain powerfully present. The ritual of jumping over bonfires on the eve of Nowruz, seen in Iran, Azerbaijan, and parts of Central Asia, is a clear echo of ancient Zoroastrian beliefs where fire symbolizes purity, transformation, and divine presence. In Sufi traditions, this fire is reinterpreted as the flame of divine love – the burning away of ego and the awakening of the heart. The lighting of candles, torches, or hearths serves as both a physical and metaphysical act: to bring light where there was darkness, warmth where there was cold.

Contemporary urban celebrations also reflect this blending of past and present. In Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, and Dushanbe, city squares are adorned with yurts alongside modern stages for music concerts and theatrical performances. Youth engage in social media campaigns honoring ancestral values, often pairing traditional dress with modern aesthetics. In Kyrgyzstan, young people might post photos stirring sumalak while wearing AirPods – capturing the symbolic continuity in an age of technological fluency. Moreover, Nowruz is increasingly celebrated in secular and multicultural contexts. In diaspora communities, from Berlin to Toronto, it serves as a vehicle for cultural expression, intergenerational education, and solidarity. Schoolchildren in France may learn about Nowruz alongside Chinese New

Year, while government buildings in the United Kingdom host Nowruz receptions attended by parliamentarians and community elders alike. The inclusivity of Nowruz lies in its structure: it demands no single orthodoxy, only participation in the spirit of renewal, generosity, and joy.

This openness makes Nowruz not just a cultural heritage but a living, adaptive ritual. It merges the poetic with the practical, the ancestral with the contemporary, and the mystical with the civic. As such, it offers a powerful model for cultural resilience in a globalized world – one where difference is not erased but harmonized through symbolic and spiritual synthesis.

## The Traditional Calendar: Sacred Time in Eurasian Civilizations

The traditional Nowruz calendar is not merely a seasonal clock – it is a sacred map that aligns human life with the greater rhythms of the cosmos. Rooted in the solar cycle, particularly the moment of the vernal equinox when day and night stand in perfect equilibrium, this calendar reflects a deeply philosophical worldview: that time is not linear and mechanical, but cyclical, meaningful, and imbued with moral and spiritual significance.

Across the cultures of Eurasia, Nowruz marks the threshold between the dormancy of winter and the fertility of spring. In the ancient Persian calendar, the day of Nowruz begins the new year – a symbolic and literal reordering of life's priorities. The Zoroastrian calendar aligned cosmic events with ethical behavior, suggesting that to live in harmony with nature's order was also to live righteously. Similarly, in Sogdian and Bactrian traditions, the vernal equinox was viewed as a time when divine and earthly realms were most closely aligned. In Central Asian steppe societies, such as among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples, the Nowruz period was historically linked to the beginning of the nomadic cycle. Herds were released, pastures were reopened, and rituals such as the first milking of livestock were performed with offerings and invocations. These acts were not just practical, but they were spiritually charged acknowledgments of nature's generosity and the human responsibility to reciprocate with care. In agricultural communities across Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Nowruz signaled the beginning of sowing, irrigation, and planting. The act of sowing seeds during Nowruz carries deep symbolic weight: it is a ritual of faith, trust in the unseen, and hope for the continuity of life. People believed that blessings uttered during the Nowruz period would echo through the entire year, which is why blessings, poetry, and music are all interwoven with agrarian practice.

The temporal philosophy behind Nowruz suggests that time is alive and participatory. In many villages in Iran and Afghanistan, elders still refer to the Nowruz period as *zamane-ye no* (the new time), a moment when the universe "resets" and opens new moral and spiritual possibilities. Unlike modern calendars, which segment life into functional units, the traditional Nowruz calendar integrates ethics, cosmology, and daily life. In spiritual terms, sacred time is time that is ritually activated. The rituals of Nowruz – house cleaning, fire-jumping, tree-planting, recitations, music, and feasting – do not merely accompany time, they transform it. They mark a passage from the ordinary into the meaningful, from routine into renewal. Thus, the calendar becomes a spiritual technology: not simply a way to track days, but a device to remember who we are, how we are connected, and what we must become.

This sacred temporality is preserved even today. In urban celebrations, traditional calendars are referenced in speeches and poetry; in rural settings, planting and birthing cycles still align with Nowruz. It is a calendar that teaches patience and reverence, encouraging us to move not in haste but in rhythm with the world. It embodies what ancient Eurasian civilizations understood well – that time, when honored, becomes a vessel for both continuity and transformation.

## Philosophical and Spiritual Significance

Nowruz is not merely a historical observance or a celebration of seasonal change; it is a living spiritual philosophy encoded in ritual, symbol, and shared memory. It reveals an enduring worldview in which renewal is not just a natural event, but a moral and metaphysical necessity. The festival teaches that societies must be periodically cleansed, not just materially but spiritually. This cleansing is neither abstract nor dogmatic – it is performed through tangible, embodied practices that align the rhythms of the individual, the community, and the cosmos. One of the most profound philosophical principles embedded in Nowruz is the idea of cyclical time. Unlike the Western conception of time as linear and progressive, Nowruz presents a worldview in which life is a spiral – a continuous process of becoming, returning, and reawakening. In this vision, every spring is a return not only of the earth's fertility, but of ethical consciousness and cosmic alignment. Renewal is thus not incidental; it is a duty, a responsibility, and a gift.

The spiritual essence of Nowruz resides in its ability to elevate the ordinary into the sacred. Sweeping the floor becomes an act of soul-purification; planting a tree becomes a prayer for intergenerational continuity; eating together becomes a ritual of communion and equality. These actions embody a spirituality that is non-institutional but deeply ethical, affirming values of care, balance, gratitude, and renewal. This metaphysical understanding of Nowruz also invites reflection on the human relationship with nature. The festival teaches that the earth is not merely a resource but a mirror and partner in the human quest for meaning. The sprouting of wheatgrass, the lighting of fire, the greening of fields – all these phenomena are interpreted as signs from the natural world that it is time to align our inner states with outer realities. In this way, Nowruz becomes an annual meditation on the ecology of the soul. Importantly, Nowruz is not a festival of exclusion, but one of social inclusion. Its values such as kindness, generosity, resilience, and renewal are accessible to all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or language. Its resilience across centuries and empires lies in this capacity to remain spiritually resonant even as its cultural forms evolve. It speaks not only to memory, but to possibility; not only to heritage, but to hope.

Thus, Nowruz remains one of the most powerful expressions of Eurasian spiritual heritage. It offers a vision of life that is humble and expansive – rooted in tradition yet open to transformation. Through its poetic rituals and philosophical depth, it reminds us that to begin again is one of the most sacred human acts.

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# NOWRUZ IN TATAR CULTURE: TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION AND IDENTITY

Leila DAVLETSHINA

## Introduction

The holiday of Nowruz (Tat. Näürüz) is one of the oldest ritual calendar holidays, and has spread widely among the peoples of the East, including Turkic ethnic groups. Its original ritual orientation, associated with a dualistic worldview and the celebration of the spring equinox, has undergone significant changes over time, adapting to the religious, agrarian and cultural conditions of various regions. In the context of Tatar traditional culture, Nowruz is not only a calendar holiday, but also a symbolic space in which ideas about ritual transformation and the balance between personal and public are concentrated.

The relevance of addressing the topic of Nowruz is due to both the need to identify and analyze the local forms of traditional culture of the Tatars, and the modern tendency to revive elements of intangible cultural heritage. Despite the relative limitation of the scale of the celebration of Nowruz among the Tatars in comparison with the peoples of Central Asia and Iran, a significant layer of rites reflecting both common Turkic and unique regional features has been recorded in traditional culture. The study of these features allows not only for the reconstruction of elements of traditional rituals, but also for the tracing of mechanisms of transformation, syncretism and Islamization within the framework of the Tatar ethnoculture. Notably, Nowruz has been recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its transnational significance and cultural value.[1]

## Nowruz in the Context of Iranian and Turkic Traditions

The holiday of Nowruz, celebrated on the vernal equinox, has become widespread in the

1 UNESCO. (2009). *Nowruz, Persian New Year.* Retrieved from https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/nowruz–persian–new–year–00282.

Islamic world, despite the fact that it is not directly related to religious canons. The formation of the rite was influenced by the Iranian mythological tradition of the Zoroastrian era. It clearly expresses the motive of dualistic confrontation: the triumph of summer over winter, light over darkness, Ahura-Mazda (Harmaza) over Ahriman.

Over time, Nowruz travelled beyond the Iranian world and became widespread among Turkic-speaking peoples. The transmission of the rite occurred through long-term cultural contacts, trade, and religious and educational ties. The holiday was especially actively rooted among the Turkic-speaking Muslim peoples of Central Asia and Transcaucasia, and also influenced the traditional culture of the Tatars, whose ethnocultural history was formed in the space of interaction with the Islamic East. As Foltz notes, Iran's cultural influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus played a significant role in shaping local interpretations of Nowruz, integrating Zoroastrian, Islamic, and Turkic elements.

In the culture of the Turkic peoples, Nowruz acquired the features of a transitional rite, which marks not only the change of seasons, but also the renewal of the life cycle. Common elements were: purification rituals (ablutions, bonfires, and reconciliation), the cult of fertility (food, grain, and sprouts), and symbolism of a new beginning (new clothes, treats, ritual formulas). At the same time, each ethnic community gave the holiday unique features, forming local scenarios adapted to the cultural, religious and natural environment. For example, among Kazakhs, Nowruz is accompanied by the Nowruz küzhe – a soup of seven components. For Uzbeks, the holiday includes *sumalyak* and theatrical processions, for Turkmen – pilaf and horse racing. The Bashkirs have a cult of fire, water and ritual chants. Such practices, despite local specificities, are subordinated to one model – the symbolic transition from the old to the new, from winter to spring.

Among the Tatars, Nowruz took root during the time of Volga Bulgaria, probably dating back to the pre-Muslim era, but especially flourished at the intersection of Islamic and Turkic traditions. Its recognition as the beginning of the new year was reflected in the Bulgarian solar calendar, which was timed to coincide with the spring equinox. The first month in the calendar was called Nowruz. According to Sh. Mardzhani, the famous 19th century Tatar scientist, the Tatars used three number systems: *farsia khisaba* (Persian counting), *rum khisaba* (Roman counting) *and khumil* (Islamic counting).[2] This tradition is rooted in the era of the Samanids and Ghaznavids, and later persisted in folk agrarian practice, which is described in more detail below. Over time, the holiday adapted to the Muslim chronology (Hijra), but retained signs of the solar cycle and spring agrarian orientation.

Unlike the more significant forms of the holiday in Central Asia, Tatar Nowruz was preserved mainly as a local rite, deeply rooted in the folklore tradition. This is explained by both climatic features (harsh spring) and socio-historical context – the cross-influence of religious and folk traditions in Tatar culture in a geographical aspect. In the general Turkic context, Nowruz acts as a key element of the cultural code of the Muslim world. The Tatar tradition occupies a special place in it – as a link between the East and the North, between Islam and folk magic, and between song and ritual.

2 Mardzhani, Sh. (1885–1887). *A Storehouse of Information about the Affairs of Kazan and Bulgar* (Vols. 1–2). P. 14. Kazan. [In Arabic]

## Rituals, Symbolism and Ritual Poetry of Nowruz in the Tatar Tradition: Historical Perspective

The historical development of the Nowruz rite in the Tatar tradition demonstrates the stability of the basic symbols of spring renewal, as well as the dynamics of transformation influenced by the religious, social and regional context. From the first written evidence of the 18th century to modern forms of celebration, key elements can be traced: ritual rounds, performance of poetic texts, symbolic food, collective actions and sacralization of the springtime beginning of the year.

Until the 18th century, the beginning of the Tatar economic year coincided with the agrarian cycle and the spring equinox, which reflected the logic of the Bulgarian solar calendar. Until the middle of the 19th century, March was traditionally perceived as the beginning of the spring period and the agrarian cycle. The earliest evidence of Nowruz in the tradition of the Kazan Tatars is contained in the notes of I. G. Georgi – an academician of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, who visited the Volga region at the end of the 18th century.[3] He noted that the Tatars began the year in the spring, which correlates with the tradition of Bulgarian calendar numeration.

By the beginning of the 19th century, Nowruz was taking root in the daily practices of Tatar villages. A key ritual of the holiday included the visiting of houses, an activity in which madrasa students and children actively participated. *Shakirds* (students of Islamic religious schools), organized in small groups, under the leadership of a mullah or senior, visited the homes of fellow villagers, reciting ritual texts (Näürüz bäetläre) and offering good wishes for the coming year. In exchange, they collected treats – eggs, sweets, coins, and grain, to honor the mullah.

"Näürüz äitä, bez kildek,
Kotlyg jämaleŋezne kürdek,
Näürüz möbarik bad.
Batman Birsäŋ - Küp Bulyr,
Podauka birsäñ - az bulyr,
Pochyk birsäŋ - tamandyr,
Shadi bud, shadi bud." [4]

"We came to sing the praises of Nowruz,
We saw your bright face,
May the blessed Nowruz be.
If you give four pounds, there will be a lot,
If you give one pound, it will not be enough,
If you give two pounds, it will be just
Let there be joy, let there be joy!"

Poetic texts were recorded by hand in advance on long paper sheets, decorated with floral ornaments and then wrapped around a Näürüz tayagi (Nowruz rod) – a ceremonial scroll-like ritual object. There are two known specimens of such scrolls, which have survived to this day. One is stored in the Center for Written Heritage of the Institute of Language, Literature and Art named after G. Ibragimov of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan. It is 17 cm wide and 260 cm long. The second is stored in the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. The performers (*näürüzchelär*) selected *bäet* texts according to what they felt was appropriate for the audience at each particular house. For each version of the performance, there were pre-prepared texts and corresponding musical fragments.

"Vägaz khacky bish altyn,
Birsäŋ yarar ike altyn.
Karama yaltyn-yoltyn,
Näürüz möbarik bad.

"The price of preaching is five altyns,
We agree on two altyn.
Don't look around
May the blessed Nowruz be.

3 Georgi, I. G. (1799). *Description of All Peoples Living in the Russian State*. St. Petersburg: Ivan Glazunov. P. 10. [In Russian]

4 Rakhim, G. (2018). *Selected Works* (M. I. Ibragimov & A. G. Gainutdinov, Eds.). Kazan: Ikhlas. P. 250. [In Tatar]

Hai, Ish babai, Ish babai,
Mich bashynnan tösh, babai.
Bish tien akcha bir, babai,
Näürüz möbarik bad." [5]

Hey, Ish Babai, Ish Babai,
Get off the stove, babai.
Give five kopecks, babai,
May the blessed Nowruz be."

At the beginning of the 20th century, the tradition remained preserved in a number of regions (modern Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Western Siberia). The holiday was called Näürüz Äitü Yolasy, and included going house to house with good wishes, handing out treats and evening fortune-telling. Among the rhythmized formulas that accompanied the rounds, texts addressed to the owners were recorded:

"Näürüz, Näürüz,
Näürüz, khujalar!
Kotly, möbäräk bulsyn,
Tormysh tügäräk bulsyn,
Mal-tuarygyz artsyn,
Kolynnarygyz chapsyn,
Igennäregez bik uŋsyn,
Kükäy kebek tuk bulsyn,
Näürüz, Näürüz..." [6]

"Nowruz, Nowruz,
Nowruz, owners!
Let him be blissful, gracious,
Life passes in abundance,
Livestock numbers are increasing,
Foals gallop,
Crops ripen,
Will be full of grains,
Nowruz, Nowruz..."

Rites of purification were also an important part of the holiday. These included general cleaning of house, washing, repentance, and forgiveness of grievances and debts. Such actions symbolized the beginning of a new stage in the life of the family and community. In some areas, evening divination was practiced, in which girls participated. They threw rings into water, pulled objects out of it, or asked symbolic questions. These rituals aimed at predicting their fate, marriage, and health.

The festive table was central to the structure of the holiday. The basis was baked products of a rounded shape, perceived as signs of abundance and benevolence. Sometimes dishes were prepared from seven types of cereal, which correlated with ideas about the completeness of the world and the magic of numbers. At the same time, there was no rigidly fixed canon, as in the Iranian tradition – Tatar practice is characterized by flexibility and local adaptation.

In Siberia and the Urals, where spring arrived later, Nowruz was often perceived as a "new year" to open the agrarian cycle, and not as a triumph of spring warmth. Yet its symbolic fullness – the expectation of growth, hope, and thanksgiving – held steady.

The Tatar ritual model of Nowruz combines oral poetry, the symbolism of ritual food, sacred objects and collective actions aimed at restoring social and cosmic order. Such elements ensure the stability of the tradition, and its ability to adapt in different historical and cultural conditions.

## Local Forms of Nowruz: Ӓmäl/Ӓmil Among Siberian and Astrakhan Tatars

The holiday of Nowruz in the traditional culture of the Tatars acquired various local forms, among which the regional variations in Siberia and

5 Rakhim, G. (2018). *Selected Works* (M. I. Ibragimov & A. G. Gainutdinov, Eds.). Kazan: Ikhlas. P. 250. [In Tatar]

6 Mokhamatjanov, R. M. (1977). If you search you will find it. *Kazan Utlary*, (9). P. 157. [In Tatar].

the Lower Volga turned out to be the most stable, and have been been recorded by ethnographers. Under the names "Äməl" (among the Siberian Tatars) and "Äməl" (among the Astrakhan Tatars), the holiday has survived to this day.

Among the Tatars of Western Siberia, Äməl is perceived as the beginning of the calendar year, symbolizing the arrival of spring at the sacred level, regardless of climatic conditions. The rite, in fact, does not symbolize spring as such, but its approach. It speaks of the cosmic and the ritual, and not of the weather around the holiday.

Preparation for Äməl begins over a few days. Hostesses bake ritual pastries and special bread products – small cakes made from flour, sugar, butter and eggs – *tukats* or *külchä*, and prepare treats for children. In the morning, teenagers go out in groups, especially boys, and then make rounds of houses to pronounce of ritual sayings. These differ by region, but are united by themes of well-being, harvest and happiness in the family. For example: "*Sataka, satakany satyp al, kücheñ etsä, tartyp al*" ("Buy alms or tear them out of your hands if you have enough strength"); "*Äməl külchä, äməl külchä*" ("Amal bun, Amal bun"); "*Äməl külchä, sataka*" ("Amal bun, alms"), etc. Hostesses meet guests with treats, throw candy, buns, and coins from their porches, creating a ritual game where elements of offering and magical transfers of well-being are combined. Among the sayings pronounced by children and young men in response, ethnographers have recorded: "*Sataka, sataka! Yaña yil belän!*"("Happy New Year!"); "*Balalarygyz sau-sälamät bulsyn!*"("May your children be healthy!"); "*Khujagyzga mullyk, tynychlyk bulsyn!*" ("May the owners have prosperity and peace!").[7]

In some villages, collective festivities, horse racing, and cart riding were organized, especially among young men. Through this, the ritual holiday acquired a character of ritual competition. An important element was the prayer content of the holiday. In a number of villages on the day of Äməl, the Quran was read, memorial meals were held, cattle were slaughtered, and a shurpa was prepared, in memory of the ancestors. Those who went home and collected donations were also treated to this food, while the rest of the family had to taste it. At the same time, depending on the area, there was a custom of carring boilers to the field and eating there, as well as visiting the cemetery and reading the Quran. People would also try to spend the first day of the year visiting each other, which strengthened friendly relations.

Among the Tatars of the Astrakhan region, the holiday is preserved under the name "Äməl," and has a distinct, collective rural character. Unlike the Siberian traditional of going around individual homes, a general festival is organized, in which the residents of several villages collectively participate. The rite is preceded by children's calls: "*Irtägä äməl bäyräme!*" ("Äməl is tomorrow!").

Historically, Äməl was celebrated alternately in different villages, which formed the basis for a tradition of cross-village guest visiting on the holiday. On the day of the celebration, the villagers gather for a collective excursion to the steppe, where they traditionally prepare a ritual dish – porridge from sprouted wheat with the addition of pumpkin (Äməl botkasy) – which symbolizes fertility and well-being. Within the framework of the holiday, there was also a custom of slaughtering sheep and cooking pilaf, emphasizing the importance of the holiday as an act of collective sacrifice and hospitality. The completion of the ritual meal is usually accompanied by traditional competitions, including sports, wrestling and equestrian competitions, reflecting the ethnocultural elements of the celebration and surviving forms of folk entertainment.

7 Urazmanova, R. K. (2015). Traditional rites and holidays. In *History and Culture of the Tatars of Western Siberia* (pp. 446–454). Kazan: Sh. Marjani Institute of History, Artifact Publishing House. P. 448–449 [In Russian]

In addition to the collective meal, there also used to be a custom of slaughtering cattle, and of going to the local cemetery to read the Quran "so that the bread would be fruitful." After reading the Quran, the rite participants commemorated *auliya* (saints in Islam). This custom, dating back to the cult of ancestors, has been preserved in other territories of the Tatars, but most often it is carried out as part of field prayers or rites of rain.

The basis of this rite is the belief that the spirits of the ancestors, with due attention, help to regulate the daily life of a person, and also that they act as intermediaries between Allah and the people. On this day, it is customary to cook a festive lunch, not only in the field, but also at home. It is believed that if the festive tables are abundantly set, then the next year will be rich. At the same time, on this day, all villagers must visit and shake hands with one another, and with everyone they may meet on the street. All these actions are performed in order to ensure the following years are fruitful.

Both local versions of the rite preserve the key elements of the traditions of Nowruz: ritual rounds, benevolence, ritual food, and sacralization of the spring transition. At the same time, both rites demonstrate profound adaptation to environmental conditions and historical and cultural circumstances. Ämäl functions as a winter new year in Siberia, with a predominance of game and sacred-magical elements, while Ämil serves as a rural holiday, reflecting agricultural cyclicality and ritual commemoration. These local forms of the holiday emphasize the internal layering of Tatar traditional culture and its ability to maintain a stable structure through diverse expressions.

The rites of Ämäl and Ämil embody the values of unity, openness and continuity. The holiday strengthens family ties, involves all generations and symbolizes collective care. Acting together, sharing treats and visiting each other foster a sense of communal solidarity.

## Islamization of Nowruz and its Transformation in Tatar Culture

The historical fate of Nowruz in Tatar culture testifies to the process of religious reassessment and transformation. In the conditions of Islamization of the Volga Bulgaria, and later the Golden Horde and the Kazan Khanate, Nowruz was rethought and partially included in the Islamic calendar cycle. Muslim theologians tried to coordinate the folk rite with religious chronology, linking Nowruz with the system of solar-lunar reckoning.

The revival of the holiday in the 19th century is associated with the activities of the Tatar shakirds, who were educated in Bukhara, one of the most important centers of the Muslim East. It was they who were the main participants in Nowruz, linking the holiday with enlightened Islam and the cultural heritage of their ancestors.

This position contributed to the integration of the holiday into the Muslim community, especially in those regions where Nowruz was preserved as a collective agrarian practice. By the 19th to early 20th centuries, the Islamic components had intensified in the rites of Ämäl and Ämil, as expressed by the integration of Quran reading, the organization of memorial meals (shurpa from the head of a ram), and the arrangement of visits to cemeteries. In many villages, a festive meal begins with a memorial prayer, emphasizing the importance of connection with ancestors and the sacredness of food as a blessing from Allah.

However, the Islamization of the rite has not completely supplanted its magical foundation. Even in prayer structures, ideas about the benevolent power of words, and their active influence on economic well-being remain in tact. Many ritual texts contain syncretic formulas combining wishes, spells, and auspicious sayings rather than strictly religious quotations: "*Allah birsen mul uñysh, Khodai artyrsyn bal kortyn!*" ("May Allah give a rich harvest, May the Lord multiply your bees!")

Despite the anti-religious policy throughout the Soviet period, Nowruz persisted in a number of villages as a ritual new year celebration. While devoid of overt religious elements, it preserved essential structural components including well-wishes, food, and community rounds. After the 1980s, a new stage of transformation began: the return of the holiday to public space, accompanied by an increase in cultural rather than religious functions. Modern forms of celebration (especially in cities) include folklore elements, symbolic rituals, and costumed processions – and are rarely accompanied by Islamic prayers – evidence of the tradition's ongoing secularization.

Thus, the Islamization of Nowruz in Tatar culture represents not a denial of its pre-Muslim and agrarian foundations, but a phased adaptation to the Islamic spiritual world. Islamic principles built into the structure of the holiday have not undermined its logic, but enriched it with new ethical and sacred dimensions. This makes Nowruz an exemplary case of cultural resilience – a living tradition capable of adapting to external pressures while maintaining its capacity for internal renewal and modernization.

## Nowruz in the Republic of Tatarstan: From Ethnographic Tradition to Cultural policy

The modern transformation of Nowruz in the Republic of Tatarstan is an example of the meaningful return of a traditional holiday to the public and to institutional space. After decades of oblivion caused by anti-religious policies of the Soviet period, the first organized celebration of Nowruz in the form of a folklore and ethnographic event took place in Kazan in 1987. This event was a starting point for rethinking the holiday as part of the cultural heritage of the Tatar people.

Since 1992, in the context of the formation of national cultural policy, Nowruz began to acquire the status of an official cultural event. Celebrations began to be regularly held in Kazan and other cities, with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tatarstan, the Assembly of Peoples of Tatarstan, and municipal authorities. Since 2014, it has been included in the list of republican events funded as part of the implementation of state national policy. The central venues for these celebrations have included theaters, cultural centers, squares and parks. The most stable tradition has developed in Kazan, at the Kazan Hippodrome. Here, Nowruz stage performances, fairs, art exhibitions, presentations of national dishes, master classes, and reconstructions of rituals, have been organized.

Nowruz's role as a platform for intercultural dialogue has particular importance in modern interpretations of the event. The celebration involves the national cultural autonomy of not only Tatars, but also Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Turkmens, Kyrgyz and other peoples for whom Nowruz has symbolic significance. The holiday creates a unique cultural crossroads where diverse ethnocultural traditions converge, facilitating the exchange of rituals, gastronomic practices, traditional costumes, and musical and dance heritage.

Nowruz is used as a tool of cultural diplomacy, representing Tatarstan as a space of interethnic cooperation. Peaceful coexistence, intercultural exchange and the value of diversity form an atmosphere of open dialogue around the holiday. The involvement of schoolchildren, students, libraries, museums, theaters and public associations plays a special role in this process. Nowruz is integrated into educational formats, becoming the topic of project work, ethnographic expeditions, folklore reconstructions, competitions and festival programs. It serves not only as a representation of Tatar culture, but also as a creative platform for interethnic interaction, where new forms are born from cultural synthesis.

In this regard, in recent years, there has been an intensification of local initiatives: Nowruz is

included in school and museum programs, field holidays in villages, ethnofestivals, and excursions and research projects. Thus, it is possible to understand the holiday as embodying a dual model as aboth an urban public ritual, and as a local rite built into the context of a living heritage.

Nowruz in the Republic of Tatarstan today is not only a reminder of seasonal transition, but also a landmark element of ethnocultural identity and a symbol of intercultural unity, integrated into modern mechanisms of cultural policy and public dialogue.

## Conclusion

The holiday of Nowruz, dating back to the Zoroastrian tradition and widespread in the Turkic world, has become an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Tatars. Its local forms, such as Äməl among the Siberian Tatars and Ämil among the Astrakhan Tatars, reflect the synthesis of pre-Islamic agrarian ideas and Islamic rituals.

In the modern period, there has been an active revival of interest in Nowruz as a significant element of intangible cultural heritage, which emphasizes its role not only as a historical and ethnographic phenomenon, but also as a living tradition that can adapt to new cultural contexts and act as a symbol of ethnic identity and intercultural dialogue.

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Dr. Rustam MUZAFAROV graduated from Almaty Medical University (1983, MD in Public Health) and from Al Farabi Kazakh National University (1990, MS in Applied Mathematics and System Approach). He has been involved in the field of intangible cultural heritage since 2012 and currently serves as the Vice Chairman of Kazakhstan's ICH National Committee. Dr. Muzafarov has authored 59 publications, including a research monograph, and textbooks on public health and cultural heritage. He was the Deputy Representative of Kazakhstan to the UNESCO Executive Board (1997-1999), Chairman of the ICHCAP/ICHLINKS Executive Board (2019-2020), and Member of the Governing Board, Tehran ICH Centre for Central and West Asia (2012 – present).

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Mr. Dilshod RAHIMI received a PhD Degree from the Department of Folklore of the Rudaki Institute of Language and Literature (Dushanbe, 2003), and Masters Degree in Philology from the Tajik National University (Dushanbe, 1999). Fellowships: Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Minnesota University (2011), Visiting Scholar at the Ohio State University (2006). His previous professional experience: Head of the Center for Cultural Heritage of Tajiks (2022-2024), Director of the Research Institute of Culture and Information (RICI) (2020-2022), Deputy Director of RICI (2016 2020), Head of the Department of Folklore, Rudaki Institute of Language and Literature (2006-2016), Associate Professor of the Tajik State Institute of Arts named after M. Tursunzoda (2001-2006).

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Mr. Inheon SONG is a distinguished cultural heritage professional with over 20 years of experience in public service, specializing in the protection, management, and promotion of cultural heritage. He completed coursework for dual M.A. degrees in World Heritage at Konkuk University in Korea and the University of Turin in Italy. From 2018 to 2020, he worked in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Division, contributing to the safeguarding of living heritage and supporting UNESCO-related activities. He also participated in research on the Sustainable Development of World Heritage Properties with ICCROM, gaining valuable insights into sustainable management practices for heritage sites. Previously, he held several leadership positions within the Cultural Heritage Administration, including Director of the Royal Palaces and Tombs Services Planning Division. He currently serves as the Director of the World Heritage Division at the Korea Heritage Service.

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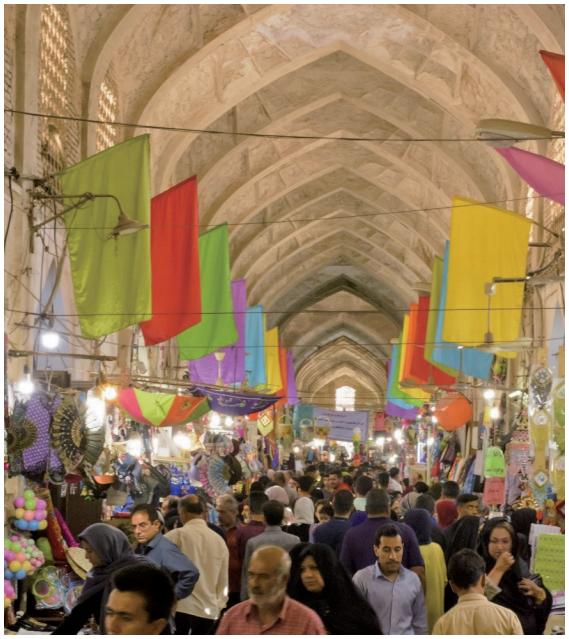

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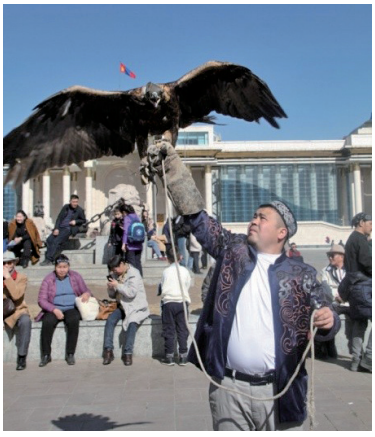

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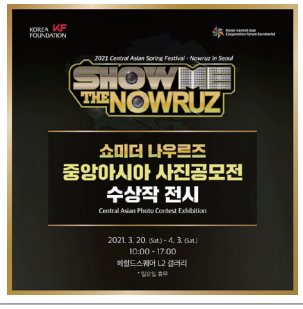


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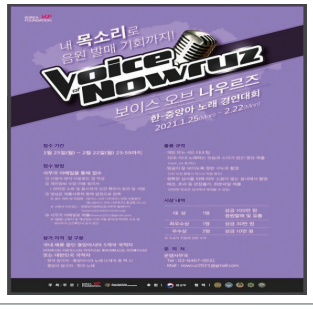


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