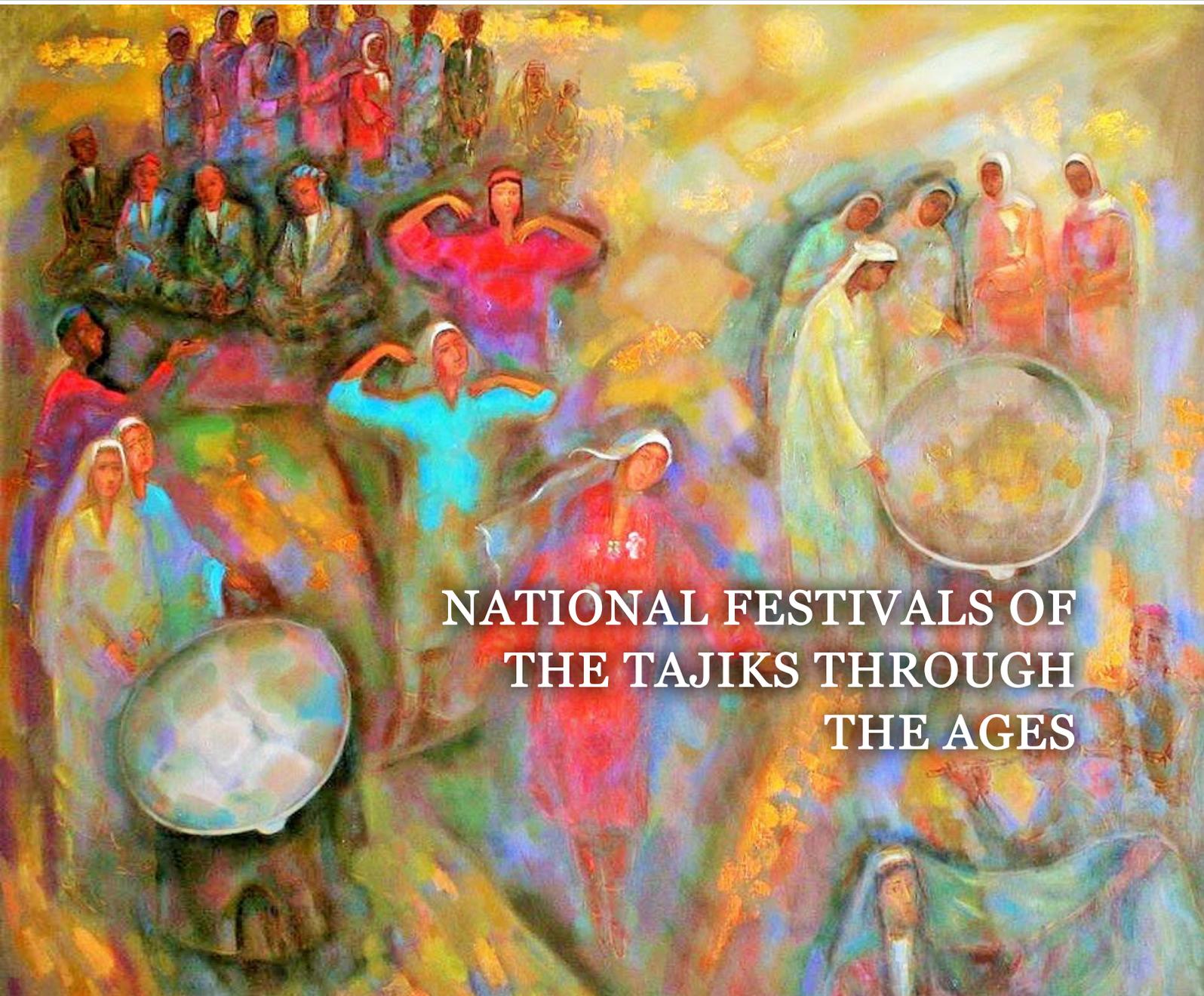




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# NATIONAL FESTIVALS OF THE TAJIKS THROUGH THE AGES

Larisa Dodkhudoeva  
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Mumina Shovalieva





## **Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #4**

### **NATIONAL FESTIVALS OF THE TAJIKS THROUGH THE AGES**

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#### **Abstract:**

Following cultural traditions that date back to ancient times, today's practice of celebrating Sada, Nawruz and Mehrgon (Mehregan) is based on the very principles that together form the fundamental spiritual values of the Tajiks and other neighboring peoples. In this article, the authors argue that these festivals have survived for centuries and still retain their sacredness in modern-day Tajikistan. The traditions practiced during these festivals are closely connected with the sociocultural and moral orientations of Tajik society, and the preservation of a particular ethno-cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Nawruz (Navruz), Sada, Mehrgon, the Tajiks, society, lifecycle, tradition, sacredness, equinox, spirituality, culture, festival.

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## Introduction

Human culture is often characterized by an array of absolutes and shrines, which act as a means through which we are supposed to understand the power of nature, and through which we come to accept man's place in the universe. The Tajiks have three main national festivals: Sada, Nawruz and Mehrگون. All three have their roots in Iranian mythology and entail various special customs. Spanning all the way back to the very origins of the Tajiks as a people, these festivals have long held historical significance. The times of year at which the festivals are celebrated are also important, with Nawruz being the vernal equinox, Mehrگون being the autumn equinox, and Sada marking 50 days before Nawruz. These festivals, particularly Nawruz and Mehrگون, reflects nature's cyclicity, with everything fading in autumn before blooming again in spring. The values, power, beauty, and philosophical foundations contained in each of these festivals have timeless significance. Essentially, they represent and honor the notions of eternal movement and the continuation of life.

According to prominent Russian cultural studies scholar Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975)<sup>1</sup>: for events to become festive, something from a different sphere of being, from the spiritual and ideological sphere, must accompany them. They must receive a sanction not from the world of resources and necessary conditions, but from the world of higher goals of human existence, that is, from the world of ideals. A genuine national season festival, a festival of formation, change and renewal, was hostile to any perpetuation, completion and end. It looked into the "unfinished future" and was a necessary counterweight to a gloomy everyday life, when life for some time escaped into the utopian freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Through the generations and indeed the centuries, Sada, Nawruz and Mehrگون have been celebrated by the Tajiks, through which the archaic character, semantics, and symbolism of settled agricultural cults has all been preserved. These three festivals are ultimately based on the idea of an eternal struggle between good (*neki*) and evil (*badi*), between light (*roshan*) and darkness (*toriki*), and the common theme across all three of them is the close connection between man and nature, and the former's dependence on, and ultimately worship of, the latter. Centuries of practice have systematized a collective practice of Sada, Nawruz and Mehrگون festivals, embodied in the most concise, concentrated form in symbols that have been transmitted through the ages in the form of rituals, music, paintings, festive ceremonies, and etiquette. The festivals, according to written sources, were practiced among farmers in the Middle East before the adoption of Islam. Much of what was associated with these celebratory rituals was later recorded in the Avesta, which codifies the foundations of Zoroastrianism, as well as many medieval written works including the following: *Nawruz-name* (Nawruz tractates) and *Solnoma* (The Book of the Year) by Hakim at-Tirmizi (755-869); the tractate *Asar ul-Baqiya* (Monuments of the Past Generations) by Abu Raikhan Biruni (973-1004); *Nawruz-name* (The Book of Navruz) by Omar Khayyam (1048-1131); and *Siyasat-name* (The Book of Politics) by Nizam al Mulk (1018-1092). The lives of ancient farmers (agriculturalists) were based on the sun's cycle, the highest sacred force, by which the Tajiks and their ancestors measured their life-

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1 Russian philosopher, literary critic and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions (Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism) and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s. Works: Bakhtin M. M. (1968) *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Bakhtin M. M. (1975) *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*, (Russian) Moscow: Progress. Retrieved 2020-04-02.14.20.

2 Bakhtin M. M. The work of Francois Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. – Moscow, 1990. – P. 165.

cycles. Such correlations were embodied in complicated ritualism, including folk rituals in palaces and other folk ceremonies, dedicated to Sada, Nawruz and Mehrگون.

## Sada

*Sada*, which celebrates the discovery of fire, according to medieval sources took place 50 days before the onset of Nawruz (the spring equinox) while Mehrگون occurred on the day of the autumn equinox. Coinciding with the harvest, the latter was celebrated on different days between September 23 and October 22 (according to the Gregorian calendar). In the minds of believers, this trio of folk festivals have long been perceived as a symbolic embodiment of deified spirits, their main protectors and patrons, all of whom have special sacred powers.

The etymology of the word *sada* is still unclear. Some Islamic authors believe that it comes from the word for the number 100 (referring to the 50 days and 50 nights before Nawruz) in Persian – *sad*. Others suggest that it refers to the five-month period of the Great Winter, while others maintain that the name of the festival is also associated with the legend of the children of the First Man or the first human couple.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of Sada, according to many scholars, is associated with the luminary and is directly related to the sun (*khurshed*) and fire (*otash*). The first mention of this winter celebration can be found in oral folklore, while written sources later indicate that with the advent of fire and the granting of holiness thereto, the Sada festival first appeared. On the one hand, people idolized the power and eternity of the sun, and the vitality of light and fire; on the other hand, the festival was a marker in the life of the farmer, who was constantly dependent on the cyclicity of nature. Traditionally, Sada is regarded as the “festival of fire,” and the sun has always been its primary symbol.

Starting out as a simple day of feasting on the calendar, Sada became part of palace ritual culture and acquired a visual appeal, as evidenced by the miniature of Tabriz craftsman Sultan Muhammad (1522-1540) kept today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City). It was painted for the manuscript of *Shah-name* (*Shahnameh*) by Firdowsi<sup>4</sup> and illustrates the chapter “Hushang,” which in particular states:<sup>5</sup>

A huge flame burned all night  
He sat with men in front of the fire all night  
They had fun over a bowl of wine.  
That festival is called the Sada iskon.

And further:

From fallow deer, onager and other fowl  
Bulls, and donkeys and sheep separated.

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3 Sada Festival – Encyclopaedia Iranica". 2009-08-15. Retrieved 2015-01-27. 2009-08-15. Retrieved 20150127. Foltz R. Richard Foltz, Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to the Present. – London, 2013.

4 The *Shahnameh* (Persian: شاهنامه, romanized: *Šāhnāme* pronounced. 'The Book of Kings') is a long epic poem written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi between c. 977 and 1010 CE and is the national epic of Greater Iran. Consisting of some 50,000 or couplets (two-line verses), the *Shahnameh* is one of the world's longest epic poems. It tells mainly the mythical and to some extent the historical past of the Persian Empire from the creation of the world until the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century. Modern Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and the greater region influenced by Persian culture (such as Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Dagestan) celebrate this national epic.

5 Ashrafi. Tajik miniature: from Behzad to Reizi-i Abbasi. – Dushanbe, 2-11. – P. 47.



Sultan Muhammad. The Feast of Sada. Tabriz, 1522-1540

The celebration of Sada as depicted in the miniature of Sultan Muhammad takes place around a fire, which represented the festival's primary symbol – the sun. In the center of the composition sits the grandson of Kayumars, Khushang, sitting below the First Man himself and the first king of the Iranian peoples, Kayumars (also *Gayōmart* (avest) or *Gayumars*), from the Pishdadian dynasty. The courtiers are also sitting down, and below them is a shepherd who is separating the sheep from the bulls.

The artist presented a colorful spring landscape, rather than the image of the cold winter's day on which Sada routinely occurs. Following the canon, which required that the painting had to be pleasing on the eye, he recreated a festive atmosphere, and demonstrated the solemnity of what was happening, with the legendary heroes enjoying a picnic outdoors and warming up around a big fire. In his composition, Sultan Muhammad was also able to masterfully synthesize the greatest achievements and traditions of the Herat and Tabriz miniature schools of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Following the adoption of Islam in Central Asia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Sada took on a new religious structure and became a part of ritual culture among representatives of the Muslim clergy, for example during a cycle of ceremonies called *Hut*. This celebration, which traditionally took place in the southwest of Tajikistan, was an ethno-identification of the ancient Sada festival, as evidenced by various ethnographic materials. For example, the famous ethnologist Rakhimov M.R. claimed that until the mid-1950s this festival still existed in hard-to-reach places of Vakhio Bolo under the name *Hut* and was celebrated on February 28 (Gregorian calendar).<sup>6</sup>

*Hut* retained the character of the ancient Sada. For instance, preparations would begin well in advance. In the fall, every housewife would melt butter and keep it in a separate jug (*ruganchima*) to be used later when a ritual dish called *ruganjushi* (milk or buttermilk flat bread covered with hot butter) would be prepared for the festival. Only on the eve of *Hut* would they offer the dish to their husbands. With the onset of the festival, from each house the women would bring to the mosque 50-100 pieces of thin flat bread (*chapoti*), which was the ritual bread. Some brought milk, buttermilk, and salt, as well as dishes, cutlery, and cauldrons.

For three consecutive days they would cook *ruganjushi* which was then eaten by the men who gathered in the mosque. In addition, in the evening they would also bring other dishes to the mosque, which each household prepared according to their wealth and culinary abilities.

Those who were relatively wealthy would slaughter a ram or a goat and would bring the whole carcass to the mosque while others less well-off would be limited to supplying more modest dishes. Usually, so much was taken to the mosque that the gathered believers could not eat everything, and therefore the remaining food would be distributed among the local households. Young women did not go to the mosque, and only the elderly participated in the preparation and distribution of collective ritual dishes, after which they went home. For women in general, they celebrated this festival separately in their homes.

During the three days of *Hut*, an especially large fire would burn in the mosque in the evenings. Around it, large copper and cast-iron kettles (*choydjush* or *choydjushi chuyani*) were placed to boil

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<sup>6</sup> Rakhimov M. R. Traces of ancient beliefs in agricultural rituals and rituals of the Tajiks. Karategin and Darvaz in the XIX – the beginning of the XX century / Brief Communications of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. – 1958. – Issue 29. – P. 48.

water for tea, which was constantly being made by two or three. During the festival, entertainment was also arranged, with songs sung, musical instruments played, dances by wandering comic minstrels (*maskaraboz*), and individual scenes and pantomimes performed, and other songs sung collectively, all dedicated to *Hut*.<sup>7</sup>

A folk song about *Hut* tells the story of an agricultural festival, reminding the audience that spring is approaching and that they need to prepare their tools accordingly for agricultural work. Sometimes, at the end of February, when *Hut* was celebrated, a severe cold and frost would descend. According to popular beliefs, when this happened it was necessary to somehow appease nature so that it would take mercy upon the farmers and bring them spring as soon as possible. Such appeasement entailed people gathering in mosques to offer sacrifices (*khudoi*) such as slaughtered cattle, to prepare meat dishes, and to present the “food of the gods” (*shirrigan*) (a dish of thin bread (chapotty), hot milk and melted butter).

## Nawruz

March, according to the Tajiks, is a time of movement for everything, reaching a crescendo with the festival of Nawruz (which literally means ‘a new day’). Many researchers hold that the name dates back to the early fundamentals of the Pahlavi language, in which it was pronounced *Nuk rudj* or *Nug ruz*. Meanwhile, the population of the ancient Sogd called the day *Nav Sart*.<sup>8</sup>

In a global sense, Nawruz represents the beginning of the following series of cosmogonic events: the creation of the Universe; the creation of a fractional world; the formation of the sun; and the movement of the celestial spheres. Nawruz is the oldest new year festival on earth, dating back 3-4 millennia. Written sources have preserved the legend that the appearance of Nawruz was first connected with the legendary king Jamshid.<sup>9</sup> His great-grandfather, the Iranian king Kayumars, who they considered the First Ancestor of the entire human race, named the days, months and years. Having determined the day and stage thereof (morning), when the sun enters the constellation Aries, he ordered the priests (*mubad*) to begin the new year calendar from this point.

His great-grandson Jamshid ordered a throne to be established on the highest mountain, to be as close to the sun as possible, and for it to be adorned with gold and jewelry. When the king sat on the throne, his radiance, as well as the glittering of his crown, illuminated everything nearby spectacularly. The enraptured people called this “a new day” (Nawruz) in honor of their Shah and gave the ruler the name Jamshid, which means “radiant” or “shining.” The king then arranged a festival, called it Nawruz as well, and ordered the people to celebrate it every year to mark the beginning of the year (*sari sol, salt nav*). He ordered everyone to clean their houses, and to bathe, because Allah loves cleanliness. On that day, Jamshid broke sugarcane and drank its juices and since then, it has been tradition to treat each other to fruit and sweets. The history of Nawruz and other related agriculture

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7 Rakhimov M. R. Traces of ancient beliefs in agricultural rituals ... – P. 49.

8 Nawruz in Tajikistan. / Ed. A. Rajabov. Compiled by: Rajabov A., Dodkhudoeva L., Karimov M. – Dushanbe, 2017. – S. 8. Nav Sart – perhaps meant the renewal of Sogd (the world in which the Sogdian lived).

9 In Persian mythology and folklore, Jamshid is described as the fourth and greatest king of the epigraphically unattested Pishdadian Dynasty (before the Kayanian dynasty). This role is already alluded to in Zoroastrian scripture (e.g. *Yasht* 19, *Vendidad* 2), appears as Avestan Yima (-Kshaeta) “(radiant) Yima”.

festivals of the Tajiks, Persians and other nearby peoples are widely covered in *Avesta*<sup>10</sup>, *Shahnameh* by Firdowsi and *Nawruz-name* by Omar Khayyam. The duration of Nawruz varies depending on where it is celebrated: in Iran it lasts for 13 days, and in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan it lasts for 5-6 days. For the other countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), the period of celebration is shorter. It is a festival of both internal and external purification. In Iran the festival is conducted outside the house, in nature. Indeed, the main meaning of Nawruz is not so much the practical preparation for the coming spring, but it rather represents a sort of moral cleansing.

Even in antiquity, Nawruz became a part of palace culture, which emerged not merely on a monarch's whim, but on account of broader state and political interests. Significant resources were allocated to maintaining the Persian empire's prestige. One striking example of such great expense was the construction of a temple city Persepolis<sup>11</sup> (the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BC)) which was constructed mainly in order to annually perform a solemn coronation or ritual associated with Zoroastrianism exclusively on the day of Nawruz. Nobles, guards, representatives of many nations, and other guests flocked to the site, a scene which is depicted on many of the reliefs of Apadana, the great audience hall and portico at Persepolis.<sup>12</sup>

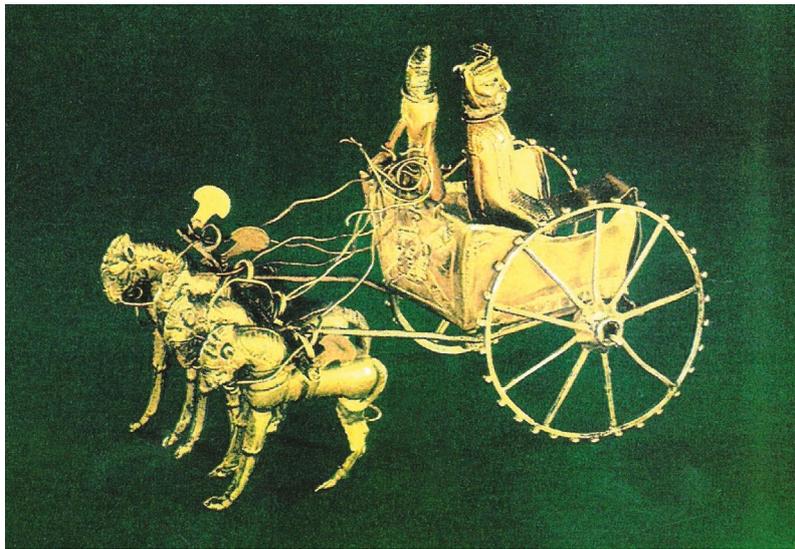


Persepolis. Delegations of Sogd and Cappadocia. Second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

10 The Avesta /ə'vestə/ is the primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism, composed in Avestan language. most important portion of the *Yasna* texts are the five Gathas, consisting of seventeen hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself. These hymns, together with five other short Old Avestan texts that are also part of the *Yasna*, are in the Old (or 'Gathic') Avestan language. Extensions to the Yasna ceremony include the texts of the *Vendidad* and the *Visperad*. *Abestāg* texts are portrayed as received knowledge, and are distinguished from the exegetical commentaries (the *zand*) thereof. The surviving texts of the Avesta, as they exist today, derive from a single master copy produced by collation and recension in the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE). The oldest surviving manuscript (*K1*) of an Avestan language text is dated 1323 CE. Following Alexander's conquest, the Avesta was then supposedly destroyed or dispersed by the Greeks. The *Siroza* ("thirty days") is an enumeration and invocation of the 30 divinities presiding over the days of the month. (cf. Zoroastrian calendar). Wikipedia. Retrieved 02.04.2020:7.43

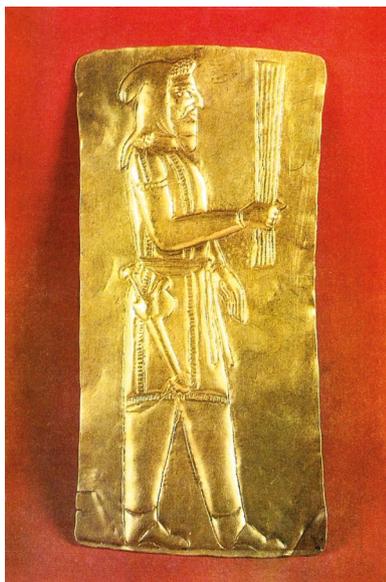
11 The English word *Persepolis* is derived from Ancient Greek: Περσέπολις, romanized: *Persepolis*, a compound of *Pérsēs* (Πέρσης) and *pólis* (πόλις), meaning "the Persian city" or "the city of the Persians". Medieval Persians attributed the site to Jamshid, a king from Iranian mythology, it has been referred to as *Takht-e-Jamshid* (Persian: تخت جمشید, *Taxt e Jamšīd*; [ˌtæxtedʒæmˈʃiːd]), literally meaning "Throne of Jamshid".

12 Lukonin V. G. The art of ancient Iran. – M., 1977. – P. 65.



The Golden Chariot. Amu Darya trove. Southern Tajikistan, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

There is a common assumption that some works of the Amu Darya trove (The British Museum, London) of the Achaemenid period, which were discovered in southern Tajikistan, may be indirectly related to the Nawruz festival. Although the interpretation and attribution of all items of the collection has not yet been completed, the symbolism of some of them is worthy of consideration here. For instance, the famous golden chariot, made in line with the art traditions of the Achaemenids, is a cosmic model of the movement of luminaries and gods. It symbolizes the world, which perishes and is reborn again in its original greatness, in the life-giving power of the Solar Grace (*farn*) (radiated light of the sun), and thus glorifies good deeds.



A gold plate with an image of a Bactrian. Amu Darya trove. Southern Tajikistan 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The image of a Bactrian from the Amu Darya trove, made by local craftsmen in the form of a shallow relief on the surface of a gold plate, is somewhat schematic but the image itself is extremely expressive and accurately reflects a certain ethnic type. In his right hand, the Bactrian is holding a sacred bunch of rods (*barsom*), which indicates that he is participating in a procession, possibly associated with Nawruz.

The steps of the Apadana Palace in Persepolis were facing the sun when the king ascended the stairs on his chariot, a scene described as “a real meeting with the luminary” and was the main symbol of the vernal equinox.<sup>13</sup> This ceremony seemed to embody the divine meaning of the chariot.

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13 Lukonin V. G. The art of ancient Iran. – Moscow, 1977. – P. 65.

The main philosophical features symbolized by Nawruz were, according to Bakhtin M. M, universality and ambivalence (i.e. the perception of being amid constant change, the eternal movement from death to birth, from old to new, from denial to affirmation)<sup>14</sup>.

It should be emphasized that morality and spirituality prevail in the celebrations of Sada, Nawruz and Mehrgon. The ritual of the commemoration of Siyavush (Avest. *Syāvaršan*) (the black horse), which is observed to this day, is associated with an old Tajik version of a pagan cult. The image of a prince riding the horse into flames embodies the idea of a dying and arising deity, who was worshiped before the adoption of Islam, and reflects the seasonal cyclicity of nature, annually withering in fall and blooming again in spring.

The rituals of cleaning of the house and the burning of old things, seen as the embodiment of the outdated and the unnecessary, are all also associated with this cult. These rituals are practiced in a way that the sacred Zoroastrian forces of nature – water, fire and the Earth – did not come into contact with dirt. All such actions symbolized the “purification” of not only the material environment, but also the soul. Before Nawruz, one is supposed to repent their sins, reconcile with their enemies, and forgive their debts in order to clear their aura for the new year.



The alleged image of Siyavush on a plaque from Paykend.<sup>15</sup>

According to the ritual system, every year on March 7, in some villages of Tajikistan, a festival marking the beginning of the year and cultivation/plowing (*juftbaroron*) is celebrated. On the morning of this day, village residents clean irrigation canals to prepare them for the arrival of water. Then, the entire village population gathers on the field to conduct a ceremony for the first furrow (*juftbaroron* or *sari jufti*) giving rise to the Nawruz for farmers, and marking the beginning of the new season's agricultural works.<sup>16</sup> The most experienced farmer in the village picks up a few grains of wheat in the hem of his dressing gown, and then, after reading a prayer for the multiplication of the harvest (*yak dona hazoru az hazor beshumor*), he throws the grains down onto the land with the blessings of those present. The others, following him, lead a pair of bulls into the field and plow the first furrow, against a backdrop of songs and dances.

The Tajiks call this action *juft kardan*, while the ritual is known as *juftbaroron*. In Shugnan language, it is called *hijzinvest* and in Rushan it is *hajzavest*, meaning the same thing (first furrow). With the performance of this ritual, the spring sowing season begins, and the person who sows the first wheat is called *Boboi-Dekhqon*. From this moment on, *Boboi-Dekhqon* becomes the head of Nawruz. This ritual is still reasonably common across Tajikistan.

14 Bakhtin M. M. The work of Francois Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. – Moscow, 1990. – P. 182

15 See Bogomolov G. I., Khushvakhov N.O. A new unique finding from the Kashkadarya valley. // Urat Osiyo kadimgi wa urta asr madaniyatlarining uzaro alokadarligi: merosiylilik va innovatsiya. Republic of ilmi-amali conference materallari September 14, 2019. – Samarkand, 2019. – P. 37-42.

16 Nawruz of farmers – Навруз изначально отмечался как праздник земледельцев. [http://www.narodnaya.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6292:2018-03-26-06-57-43&Itemid=213](http://www.narodnaya.tj/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6292:2018-03-26-06-57-43&Itemid=213) Retrieved 02.04.2020.5.00



The *juftbaroron* ritual. Tajikistan, 2011. (Photo archive of L. Dodkhudoeva)

The festival is extremely rich in rituals. The revival spirit of Nawruz culture is most clearly expressed in an old custom reported by Arabic-speaking authors. At the feast of *dastarkhan* laid out for the king, there had to be seven branches of seven varieties of fruit tree. The following are some of the inscriptions that would be attached to the branches: *afzud* (multiplied), *afzun* (multiplying), and *afzoyad* (will multiply).

In ancient times, Nawruz was divided into two types: the nationwide Nawruz, which was celebrated for five days; and the special Nawruz (*Nawruzi khosa*), which in the original sources is also called the great Nawruz (*Navruzi buzurg*), which would begin on the sixth day and entailed celebrations on a great and luxurious scale. On this day, the king's residence would be open for his subjects to convey gifts. By the end of this day, prisoners would be released, and the guilty would be pardoned, after which they would all participate in the festivities.<sup>17</sup>

Tajiks living in lowland regions and in the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara (both of which are in modern-day Uzbekistan) during Nawruz prepare a tincture of dried apricots or dried apples (*gulingob*), which is poured into a bowl (*cosu*) and served to everyone who enters their house. On the bottom of the *cosu*, a sheet of paper (*haftsalom*) is placed with new year's wishes written using saffron (*obi zafaron*) in Arabic. The presence of sprouted wheat grains on a plate (called *maysa* or *sabza*) is also mandatory at the feast of *dastarkhan*. When entering the house, one touches the wheatgrass with their fingertips three times and then runs their fingers over their eyes, before drinking a few sips of the tincture and saying: "*Khudo ba solu mohi daroz be nuksonu ofat rasonad*" ("God give us life without illness and misfortunes").

The festival itself begins in the dark, with all family members dressed in clean or new clothes gathered around the table. A mirror is placed on the table, reflecting both the past and the future, alongside

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<sup>17</sup> Nawruz in Tajikistan..... – P. 13

bowls of water and live fish (symbols of happiness), a pomegranate or an apple and several silver coins. Everything on the table is then sprayed with rose water (*gulabpash*). Here, on a tablecloth (*dastarkhan*) two groups of seven types of products (*haft shin* and *haft sin*) are placed. For the first group (*haft shin*) each of the items begin with the Arabic letter *sh* – *shirini* (sweets), *sharbat* (juice), *sharob* (drink), *shurbo* (soup), *shirbirinch* (rice porridge with milk), *sham* (candle), and *shamshod* (boxwood brunch), while for the second group each items begin with the letter *s* – *sir* (garlic), *seb* (apple), *sipand* (wild rue), *sanjit* (red date), *sumanak* (sweet wheat-based paste),<sup>18</sup> *sambusa/samsa* (pies), and *sirko* (vinegar).<sup>19</sup>

Opposite the table, a fire or lamp is lit while a vase full of red flowers and green branches of fruit trees is presented, as well as the sacred manuscripts of the Avesta. Since the adoption of Islam, the Qur'an has also traditionally appeared on the festive tablecloth.

The number of candles must correspond to the number of family members present. These candles cannot be extinguished deliberately and should instead burn out of their own accord. On the table, there is also a plate of pies (*sambusa*) made out of spring herbs, peas, and pumpkin, which are associated with fertility. It is also decorated with festive bread (*non*), a bowl of water on which a green leaf floats, a bowl of rose water, fruits, nuts, almonds, fish, chicken, sour milk, cheese, and painted eggs. In antiquity, each component was of particular importance for the next harvest, and for the fates of the respective family members. Today, this symbolism has been lost, but the tradition of decorating the table with these dishes and objects remains, nonetheless.



Festive table of Nawruz “haft shin” and “haft sin” (Photo archive of L. Dodkhudoeva)

18 *Sumanak* is a sweet paste made entirely from germinated wheat (young wheatgrass), which is prepared especially for Nowruz (beginning of Spring) in a large pot (like a *kazan*). This practice has been traced back to pre-Islamic Sasanian Persian Empire. Persian-Tajik song:  
سمنک در جوش و ما کچه ز نیم – دیگران در خواب و ما دفچه ز نیم

19 Negmati A. Agricultural calendar feasts of the ancient Tajiks and their ancestors. – Dushanbe, 1989. – P.75.

According to some believers, and as presented in some of the older folk traditions of Nawruz, the good angels (*farishta*) could bring well-being and prosperity to those who had pure thoughts and bright souls, and those whose houses had been cleaned because people believed that keeping a clean living environment reflected the clarity of the minds and inner states of those living therein. Ultimately, it was believed that angels could not enter a dirty house so keeping a clean home was an illumination of both physical and moral purity.

The advent of the new year was preceded by various rituals of purification, among which many carried great symbolism. On the day of *Chorshanbei Suri* (Wednesday of Joy; the last Wednesday before Nawruz), fires were lit in the streets of cities and villages, and people jumped over the fire (*alovparak*) seven times or once every seven fires. On the last night of the old year, it was customary to spray each other with water and jump over running water in order to cleanse oneself of any sins committed in the previous year.

In many villages, manure gathered during winter was taken to the fields as fertilizer. In Darvaz, in the Pamirs, the previously closed *ravzan ruz*, a window in the ceiling of the main room (*chid*), was opened. All of these actions symbolized not only the purification of the soul, but also everything material in its close proximity.

Nawruz has continued to be celebrated since the adoption of Islam even though in the early years of Arab rule, the Iranian people were taxed for celebrating ancient festivals such as Sada, Nawruz and Mehrگون. The Umayyads and Abbasids held celebrations with much fanfare.

Initially, Nawruz was undoubtedly a carnival of a national character. In the days preceding the festival, impressive performances were held in the streets, people wore masks, and the king of the ritual ceremony was chosen. Dancers would dance, musicians sang folk songs, and acrobats held competitions. Customarily, everyone during the festival days would decorate eggs with gilded ornaments or miniature story paintings and send them as gifts to relatives and friends. Paraphrasing Bakhtin M.M, referring to his well-known position on the matter, one could say that Nawruz was like a second life for people, a sort of festive life they could briefly live where they could be both actors and spectators.

The precise moment of the onset of Nawruz was the most important stage in the annual cycle, and all rituals were performed with special attention accordingly given their apparently fateful value. Before new year's eve, in early spring (approximately March 10-15), when the first flowers appeared, 10-20 boys aged between eight and 15 would go door to door. One of them would carry a 1.5-meter-long pole, at the end of which a bouquet of various spring flowers (snowdrops, irises, etc.) was attached. Flowers were in everyone's hands or placed behind their ears. Whoever carried the pole, stopping in front of each house, would sing songs that varied across different parts of Tajikistan: *Gulgardon* (Calling the Spring) in the southern regions of Tajikistan *Guli Siyagush*, *Boychechak* (Snowdrop) in the northern regions of Tajikistan; *Hill, Hilly Bulbuli* (The Tender Nightingale) in Shakhrisabz; *Boykandak* (Richly Plucked) in the Zeravshan valley; and *Bahor Omad* (Spring has Come) in the Sari-Assiyo region of Uzbekistan, which is mainly populated by Tajiks.



The traditional game *buzkashi* (goat-carcass polo). Tajikistan, 2012. (Photo by M. Romanyuk)

During Nawruz today, the Tajiks organize various games including wrestling (*gushtingiri*), horse-racing (*poiga*), goat-carcass polo (*buzkashi*), cock fighting (*khuruschang*), quail fighting (*bedanachang*), dog fighting (*sagchangak*) and other games. In the relatively flat parts of Tajikistan such as Ishkashim and Vakhan, young men play polo (*javgonbozi*).

In all regions of Tajikistan and in many surrounding countries where Tajiks live, women play the *doyra* and *chang*, dance, and swing on swings, which have different names in different regions (*hoy* in Kulyab; *arguchak* in Garm; *bod* in Zeravshan; *alvonch* in Bukhara; and *bodbarak*, *hoiravak*, *wulchak*, or *qishqu* across various parts of the Pamirs). Swinging on a swing is considered to be God's work (*savob*), and therefore even elderly women swing on swings on festival days. Such swinging has a magical meaning and serves as a kind of ritual cleansing. It is believed that particularly high swings could drive out evil spirits and demons, as well as help to bring higher crop yields.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Nawruz has long been associated with creativity, folklore, and specific traditions, involving a variety of ceremonial performances and styles. Nawruz for the Tajiks has come to represent an extensive array of ritual actions performed to ensure prosperity and well-being in the coming year. Gradually, their symbols and symbolism evolved, along with corresponding myths and views. These mythological beliefs came to occupy an important place in the festival of Nawruz, where various agricultural deities were assigned actions of a very definite character and meaning. It is most likely the case that the settled agricultural tribes who were the first organizers of this festival held narrow worldviews and were completely subordinate to the forces of nature that they worshipped.

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<sup>20</sup> For the ritual significance of swinging on a swing among other nations, refer to: Sternberg L.Ya. *Primitive religion*. – Leningrad, 1936. – P. 446; Andreev M. S. *The Tajiks of the Khuf*. – Stalinabad. – 1951. – P.113; Snesev. *Relics of pre-Islamic beliefs and rituals among the Uzbeks of Khorezm*. – Moscow, 1969. – P. 79; Basilov V. N. *Ishkashim XIX-beginning of XXV*. – Moscow, 1975. – P. 95.



Playing *daf* during the days of Nawruz. Badakhshan (GBO, Tajikistan).  
(Photo archive of L. Dodkhudoeva)

Nawruz has been described by many poets, and depicted in many drawings, pictures, wall paintings, metals, textiles, ceramics, and other artefacts and ornaments. The theme of Nawruz has also been embodied in monumental paintings, as evidenced by murals in the palaces of Iranian rulers between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For instance, in Nain, many elegant murals in which small figures appear among the fragrant and blooming nature were inspired by a Nizami poem, and in all likelihood were supposed to represent the Nawruz festival. The polychrome compositions of another palace – *Chihil Sutun* in Isfahan – was adorned with wall niches and reflected the style of a modern miniature painting. The figures in them were represented to human scale without explanatory inscriptions.

Abdi Bek (Navadi Sherazi) wrote in great detail about the frescoes of the *Chihil Sutun* Palace in Isfahan in 1515 in his essay *Jannat al Adnan*. He claimed that: thanks to its beauty, every work opens a door to paradise ... and the scenes of entertainment and battles were borrowed from life, and the viewer is completely fascinated by them.” He was echoed by Sahib Isfahani, the court poet of the Shah Abbas II, (1642-1766), who emphasized: “colorful pictures of entertainment and battles can breathe life into the icy body of the walls. Without which, it is hardly possible to understand the nature of the Iranian-speaking world, the special concept of its being and the peculiar type of imagery.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the many other compositions is a fresco depicting the image of Chorshanbe Soori, an ancient Iranian festival, which was celebrated on the last Thursday before Nawruz.<sup>22</sup> The fresco presents a court scene based on the “carnival stock” (definition of Bakhtin M. M.). Participants in beautiful, expensive robes, appearing to have forgotten about any prohibitions, are seen to be participating keenly in the festivities. It represents a triumph of freedom and joy, and heavenly enjoyment.

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21 Diba L. S. Invested with life: Wall Painting and Imagery before Qajars. // Iranian studies. Qajar Art and Society – Vol. 34, #1-4, 2001.

22 Shapur Shahbazi. Nawruz in Islamic Era <peepl.com./people/abbas-shahbazi>

According to Diba L., the frescoes of the *Chihil Sutun* Palace were a visual expression of self-knowledge of the historic culture of Iranian court paintings. Such paintings served as a kind of powerful tribute to the ruler and his dynasty, preserving centuries, if not millennia, of tradition at the same time.<sup>23</sup>



*Chorshanbe Soori* Festival. Chihil Sutun Palace. The end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
(Photo archive of L. Dodkhudoeva)

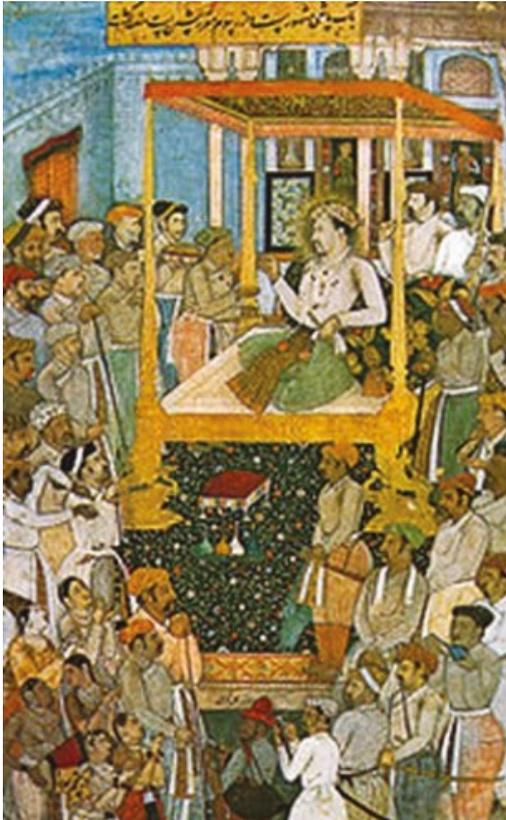
It is known that the practice of celebrating the festival of Nawruz spread eastwards. Mughal emperors, for example, having settled in India, maintained some traditions of the peoples of Iran, and sought to preserve the “common memory” of Turkic-Mongolian dynasties. In their court, the festival of Nawruz was considered to be one of the most important and was celebrated with the same extravagance as in Iran and Central Asia.

However, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Babur (born in 1443), having come to power in India, noted that the festival was not being celebrated with the same level of fanfare to which he had previously been accustomed in Mawarannahr. He himself led a semi-nomadic lifestyle, and proudly boasted in his work *Babur-name*<sup>24</sup> that for a period of 11 years he had never spent Ramadan in the same place twice. Since the cultural landmarks known to him were influenced by Persian-Tajik culture, he tried to introduce as many elements as possible of this culture in the new environments to which he moved. For instance, he planted a traditional Iranian type of garden (*chorbog*) at his court, where the celebration of Nawruz was held, which, courtesy of his devotion, became a common ritual for the Indian Mughals.<sup>25</sup>

23 Diba L. S. Invested with life: .... – P. 113.

24 Babur – Name. [http://www.centre.smr.ru/win/facts/india/babur-name\\_hindi.htm](http://www.centre.smr.ru/win/facts/india/babur-name_hindi.htm). Retrieved 02.04.2020.05.39

25 Dodkhudoeva L. Nawruz as an Ethno-National Resource of Artistic Culture. // In the book: Boztobi Masoyli Nawruz Dar Adabiyet. – Dushanbe, 2016. – P. 59.



Celebration of Nawruz at the court of Shah Jahangir.  
India, 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The inclusive spirit of the Nawruz festival meant it took on a relatively simple and unpretentious character to engage the entire population, from artisans to ordinary people. They would prepare centuries-old images of animals, birds, and other harbingers of spring which according to legend brought prosperity and wealth. Narshakhi reported that on the eve of Nawruz in Bukhara, figurines would be made out of burnt clay and wood, and these were immediately purchased by local people.

This practice has been preserved in the Pamirs, where women today still cook figures/images of various animals from dough (*nasrak*) in the hope of bringing in a fruitful and prosperous new year. The dough is kneaded in a special way, using different types of flour from oat (*lashak*), barley (*kakht/chushch*), peas (*nahud*) or beans (*makh*). The names of the figures *hyochaken* (goby); *mawojak* (sheep); *nakhchirak* (mountain sheep); *pishak* (kitten); *chuhak* (cockerel); *bukhajak* (goat); and *odamak* (man) are given in accordance with which animal or person it figuratively corresponds.

On the first day of the Nawruz celebration in Badakhshan, for each household, a donkey is brought to the house, followed by the house owner who crosses the threshold, thereby removing the temporary ban on entering the house – which has been ritually cleansed and decorated – for all family members (until this moment only the hostess and, sometimes, other female family members are allowed to enter). On the next day of the festival, similar rituals are repeated, but here a bull (*k'dzuk*) is also involved; bean flour is sprinkled on the bull which is also then affectionately stroked and addressed verbally (the respect shown to the bull is far greater than that shown to the donkey, indicating a certain hierarchy). They then wait for the bull to defecate before bringing it into the yard. They make a kind of bowl from the bovine manure, into which they put seeds of wheat, barley, peas, and beans. The bowl is left for several days on a wall, and the number of sprouts rising then indicate how fruitful the new year will be. Meanwhile, there is significance attached to whether the bull defecates or urinates first. The former means a fruitful year is expected, while the latter means there will be a lot of rain during the growing season.

It is most likely that this custom dates back to the first human sacrifice, which laid the foundations for the fertility of the Earth and the prosperity of its people.

The Pamir new year ritual of bringing a donkey into the house (in Wakhan) can be regarded as surviving evidence of the high status historically attached by Iranians to the donkey, which to them symbolized wealth and prosperity. Secondly, the celebration of Nawruz in the Pamirs is notable for the dominant role played by the bull, as well as the existence of two versions of the ritual. It might

indeed be possible to compare the ancient Iranian worldviews with ancient Indian alternatives through this prism. While in India there was already the Rig Veda, the image of a bull (albeit in a fantastic form) located in the center of the world's oceans, in the Iranian version it was the donkey (also in fantastic form) assuming this role. Over time, it was the figures of the bull and fish, which demonstrated the basis of the universe, that became widespread, including for the peoples of Iran espousing Islam. Meanwhile, the initial Iranian idea of a three-legged donkey, standing at the center of the sea *Vourukasha*, remains an integral part of Zoroastrian mythology.<sup>26</sup>



A boy holding a donkey figure during the zweuz celebration. Rushan, Badakhshan, 2018. (Photo by Judith Quax)<sup>27</sup>

The painting of certain images inside the house was considered a magical way of attracting forces of good and blessings. In Khatlon, a flower, a ram's horn or a cypress branch was painted on the walls, while in the Pamirs, women would leave a bean-flour-smear fingerprint from their right hand on the central main pillar of the room (*chida*), which represented the Creator God (*Murtazo-Ali*), and pronounced a new year's greeting with divine providence.

In Karatag (Hissar valley) and Istaravshan (northern Tajikistan), for the festival, potters made whistles (*hushtak*) from burnt clay in the form of birds, horses, lambs, and the fantastic beast *sher*. In Karatag, ritual figures were sometimes covered with green glaze or painted yellow with red stripes and dots. Meanwhile, in Istaravshan they were decorated and painted white with red and blue stripes and spots.

The theme of Nawruz remains to this day one of the most important in Tajik arts and crafts. It is especially widely used in ornamental painting and relief painting (*kundal*), where the creative imagination of the master is not limited to the scope of a decorative design. *Kundal* was long a traditional aspect of art in Central Asia but today it survives only in Tajikistan. A relief surface made of clay or cement is covered with a thin layer of gold by the master, and its background is painted blue. Gold, or sometimes bronze, plays a special sacred role in creating *kundal*, since from ancient times it has symbolized the divine light and greatness, and is a symbol of the sun. The work of Mahmadvakarim Rakibov entitled "Nawruz" is a magnificent example of this type of creativity, reflecting in his design the following famous lines of Hafiz Sherozi:

The melody of blowing Nawruz again kindles the inner light, and the melody of the Throne of Victory "*Tahti Piruzi*" inspires the singing of a nightingale, intoxicated by the aroma of flowers.

26 Kryukova V. New Year's donkey in Badakhshan. // Nawruz as a phenomenon of world culture / Ed. A. Rajabov, M. Karim-zade./ Ed. A. Rajabov. – Dushanbe, 2012. – P. 308.

27 Frederik van Oudenhoven and Jamila Haider. With Our Own Hands: A Celebration of Food and Life in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, LM Publishers; Multilingual edition, 2015. – P. 194.



Rakibov M. Navruz. Kundal, 2008.

The creativity associated with the vernal equinox endures to this day in Tajikistan. During this period, ancient symbols and images are recalled, in an attempt to revive the forgotten or disappearing symbols of Nawruz. Girls sew dresses for the festival, combining modern and traditional costume design in the process. Indeed, fashion shows (catwalks et al.) are now held across many regions of Tajikistan.

Rituals play an important role in the preparation of meals, especially for public festivals. At such festivals, a special ritual is observed according to local beliefs and religious prohibitions (or even spells). The process and ceremony of cooking determines various aspects of proceedings including the venue, the start time, the age and gender of those present, the sociocultural traditions observed, etiquette, and the nature of the entertainment.

Wheat, barley, rice, millet beans, lentils, peas, durra, beans, sesame, and vetch are sown especially for the occasion. These plants grow until the 6<sup>th</sup> day of Nawruz and on that day, in a festive atmosphere including music, songs and dances, their sprouts would be removed and sprinkled on the participants of the festival. The size of each plant at this point would determine their respective yield in the coming year.<sup>28</sup> It should be emphasized that all food at Nawruz is associated to some extent with fertility.

*Sumanak* (*sumalak*) is a type of ritual food made from germinated wheat grains and it is the most common dish served by Tajiks during the festival. Its origins, including the methods of preparation, are described in Abu Raikhan Beruni's "Monuments of the past generations."<sup>29</sup>

*Sumanak* is prepared in several ways. The first, and most common type of this dish, is known as *sumanaki degi*. For this type, the malt of the germinated wheat grains is cooked in a cauldron from morning to evening or all night until the dawning of the new year. A group of 30-40 women usually participate in this ritual ceremony. Men are not allowed to partake, since it is believed that their

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28 Inostrantsev F. Sassanian studies. SPb, 1909 – P. 102.

29 Бируни и его «Памятники минувших поколений» // URL: [http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus17/Biruni\\_2/framepred.htm](http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus17/Biruni_2/framepred.htm)

presence would be a bad omen (*pay megaltad*). The long process of *sumanak* cooking is accompanied by singing, music, and poems. Women, who participate in this process, stir malt, dance and sing the song “*Sumanak dar jush mo kafcha zanem...*” all night until morning. In the early morning, the finished *sumanak* is left out for the liquid to evaporate for 1-2 hours, after which the eldest and thus most-respected woman, with the help of other women participants, pours it into cups which are then placed on a festive tablecloth (*dastarkhan*) for guests.

In the southern regions of Tajikistan, *sumanaki tagialovi* cooking was widespread, where malt is kneaded in dough and baked in ashes in the form of a small flat round bread (*kulcha*), part of which is distributed to neighbors, with the rest laid out on a festive tablecloth (*dastarkhan*). The *sumanak* tradition is common in Wakhan valley in the Pamirs as well.

Similar ritualistic, large and flat round bread known as *kumochi shoguni*, *kamoch* or *shogunkumoch*, or “new year’s *kumoch*,” are obligatory for Nawruz in the region of Gorno-Badakhshan. Their number depends on the wealth of the family, varying from one to three pieces, with each one usually weighing from one to two-and-a-half kilograms, but sometimes as heavy as seven kilograms. From early morning on the first day of Nawruz, women knead dough with milk and water with crushed walnuts and dried mulberries then added. Before cleaning the house, the dough is placed under hot ash in a hearth and then covered with a lid to keep it clean. After cooking, two men (one of whom is the head of the family) sit down by the opposite walls of the main beds (*sufas*) in the house and roll the dough three times (*shogun-kumoch*) to one another. They then cut it with a knife into small pieces and distribute it to everyone present in the house.



Safarov R. Nawruz. *Sumanak* cooking, 1985.<sup>30</sup>

30 From the book *Tadjikistan: k 20-letiyu nezavisimosti*. Irfon, 2011. P. 364.

The rest is left for guests and relatives and can also be sent to close friends living nearby or in other villages. This ritual bread is considered symbolic, possessing a magical significance, akin to a blessing (*barakat*). Thus, the blessing (*barakat*) remains within the family and is not passed on to strangers, or to someone else's family.<sup>31</sup> Currently, in urban regions, ritual bread can be baked in an oven, albeit hearths are still often used.

In Kulyab, cooking *sumanaki degchagy* is common, where malt is kneaded into dough and a mass is thus created (like halva). They put *fatir* into hot oil and crush it, stirring it for a long time with a wooden spoon, which results in a thick mass, which is first cooled, then cut into small pieces, laid out onto plates and put onto a festive table.

In the mountainous regions of Karategin, Darvaz and Kulyab, the cooking of *sumanaki hurmagy* is widely common. To do this, they crush wheat in a stone stupa on a stove or directly in a jar *khurme*, add a small amount of flour and leave it in the ash of the hearth until morning, until fully cooked, resulting in a paste-like mass (*sumanak*).

Another Nawruz ritual dish is a mushy soup (*gandumkucha (dangicha)*) made out of a filtrate from half-ripe wheat with peas and beans, a small amount of flour (*gandmukuch*), and the legs and viscera of animals (*kallapocha*). It is interesting to note that a similar dish called *dangicha* is mentioned in Aboisqawk Atim's work on the cooking practices of the Tajiks and some other Central Asian peoples of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup>

Another dish known as *dalida* or *dalda* is prepared out of wheat and pea flour, the grains of which are grounded, and flaxseed, crushed in a stupa. All of these ingredients are mixed with a small amount of ordinary wheat flour and fried in oil. Water is then added and the dish is cooked for about an hour. In Obi Garm, *dalida* is included in the daily diet of residents in spring and winter. Here, wheat is usually first boiled in water and, when ready, milk and salt are added, before it is then seasoned with herbs, onions and pepper according to taste.

The soup *kashk*, mentioned in the tractate of 14<sup>th</sup> century author Abuysbok Atima "*Kanz-ul-ishtino*," is widely known to both mountainous and lowland Tajiks<sup>33</sup>. In this soup of crushed wheat, they put a lamb's head, offal, onions, carrots, cilantro, red pepper and salt, and then cook it from evening to morning. For its preparation, a cast-iron cauldron has sometimes been used, but more often all the necessary products are laid in a large clay jug, the neck hole of which is covered with dough, buried in hot ash and left overnight.

The preparation of a ritual dish in Gorno-Badakhshan known as *bodzh* has a special significance. Late in the evening, after dinner, all family members gather around the cauldron, and the head of the family, a man, pours water into it. This cauldron is specially brought from the spring the night before. Then, a fire is kindled, and all family members stay silent from that moment until the water boils. Thereafter, the head of the family puts a rolling pin (*galtak*) on the cauldron, and crushes wheat with both hands, joining them together, slowly pouring the wheat onto the rolling pin. He repeats this as many times as there are family members in the house. The whole process is accompanied by prayers. When the

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31 Mukhiddinov I. Rituals and customs of the Pamirian peoples associated with the cycle of agricultural work. // Ancient ritual, beliefs and cults of the peoples of Central Asia. – Moscow, 1986. – P. 78.

32 Aboisqawk Atim. Devon. Book 1.2. Chardjou, 1304. – P. 230 (in Persian).

33 Abuyqawk Atim. – P.1 24.

wheat is poured into the cauldron, all other ingredients are added as well. After that, everyone goes to bed, and the head of the family keeps the fire burning in the hearth until morning when the special salutation ceremony ensues as follows:

Early in the morning, a respected old man of the village knocks on the door, and the owner asks: “Who is it?”

The old man answers: “Donkey rider” (“*Attori markabsavor*”).

The owner asks: “What have you brought?”

The old man answers: “The smell of spring” (“*Bui bahor*”).

The owner asks: “What else did you bring?”

The old man answers: “Caravan of camels” (“*Ushtur ba kator*”).

The owner asks: “What else?”

The old man answers: “Happiness, throne and salt of Kalavgan, ruby of Badakhshan, mulberry of Shughnan, halva of Rushan, grain of Zebak and Ishkashim, sweets of the Indus and Kashgar, running water and plentiful bread”

(“*Takht wa bakht, namaki Kalavgon, lali Badakhshon, tutaki Shughnonu, kurchi Rushon, gallai Zeboku Ishkoshim, sharbati Koshgar Hinduston, obaki ravon, noni farovon*”).

After that, the door opens to the old man who enters, saying “May the spring festival be blessed!” (“*Shogun bahor muborak!*”) to which those gathered reply “You too” (“*Ba ruyi shumo muborak*”).

The hostess then tosses a pinch of flour (*bun-safedi*) over the old man’s shoulder, which symbolizes whiteness and prosperity. The old man hands the hostess a bowl of *bodzh* (a special meal in *Navruz* prepared from meat, beans and vegetables boiled overnight) from his house, and in return the hostess hands him *bodzh* that has been cooked in her house.

This marks the lifting of the temporary ban on entering the house, after the ritual of cleaning has been completed, allowing other relatives and neighbors in. The transfer from one house to another of the *bodzh* symbolizes wishes for happiness and prosperity for one another, and the strengthening of family ties and kindred solidarity.<sup>34</sup>

Tajik people, during *Nawruz*, commemorate the spirits of their ancestors, a ritual known as *yedbudi arvoh* (*arvohon*). This custom is accompanied by the preparation of food from various grain crops which is distributed among all those present. Residents jointly buy cattle in advance, which are slaughtered the day before *Nawruz*. On the first day of the festival, pilaf is prepared using this meat while the cleaned entrails are thrown along with the head and legs into a large cauldron with peas, beans and wheat for cooking. This cooks all night until the next morning, after which it is distributed among all of those present and passers-by.

All provisions for the festival reflect forms of understanding reality, newly-arising or existing ideas, and various semantic constructions that emerged across different historical eras.

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<sup>34</sup> Yusufbekova Z., Navruzbekov M. Semantics of some New Year’s ceremonies on *Nawruz* among the residents of Gornyi Badakhshan. // *Muarrikh*, 2016, No. 3-4 (8). – P. 54.

In September 2009, Nawruz was included on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and at the end of February 2010, at the 64<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, March 21 was declared as the “International Day of Nawruz.”

Another festival, Mehrgon, the second most important among the Iranian people, coincides with the autumn equinox and is associated with the day of imprisonment of the usurper, Zahhak<sup>35</sup>, an evil king in Persian mythology with a snake on each shoulder by the blacksmith Kava, a hero of Persian-Tajik mythology, who had rebelled against the tyrant. According to the ancient Iranian solar calendar, Mehrgon festival falls on the seventh month of Mehr (September 23 – October 22 according to the Gregorian calendar). The word *mehr* has a number of meanings including light, friendship, love, courtesy, tenderness, and affection. The process of preparing for the festival includes house cleaning, the preparing of festive clothes, and decorating a festive table with all the fruits of the autumn harvest. Residents visit friends and acquaintances, participate in mass celebrations, congratulate each other on the upcoming harvest period, and wish each other material prosperity, good health and happiness in their personal lives.

In the mountainous regions of Tajikistan, in particular in Khuf, according to the ethnographer Andreev M.S., and in Vakhio, according to the materials of Rakhimov M.R., echoes of the ancient pre-Islamic agricultural harvest festival Mehrgon are still preserved.

The harvest of cereals and even herbs could not be carried out without the intervention of the caliph<sup>36</sup>, *Boboi-Dekhqon*, and other religious representatives, all observing a variety of customs. First of all, the harvest of peas, as well as barley and wheat, follows an order of succession, whereby everyone (the ordinary peasants working the land) has to start on one specific day, indicated by the caliph, *Boboi-Dekhqon*.<sup>37</sup>

Residents near the Pamirs are sure that non-compliance with certain signs and directions would bring early frost and snowfall, and that their crops would be lost. Furthermore, Andreev M.S reports that the reaping begins with the harvest of peas, prior to which the reaper says a short prayer: “In the name of Allah most gracious, most merciful! Oh happy hour!”<sup>38</sup>

Following the reaping of the peas, comes the reaping of the barley and wheat; during the harvest, the reapers would pay respects to the spirit of the field. For example, in Karategin and Darvaz, as noted by Rakhimov M. R., when the harvest of bread on any field came to an end, the reapers tried to complete the harvest as quickly as possible so that the land would die painlessly. At the same time, each of the reapers prayed to themselves and exclaimed loudly three times: “Oh God! – Allah!” or “God is one!” – (“*Allah vahidhan!*”), words that are usually uttered in the agony of a dying person [].

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35 *Zahhāk or Zahāk* (Persian: *ضحاک*) is an evil figure in Persian/Iranian/Tajik mythology, evident in ancient Persian folklore as Azhi Dahāka) or (Azhdaha). the name by which he also appears in the texts of the *Avesta*. In Zoroastrianism, Zahhak (going under the name Azī Dahāka) is considered the son of Angra Mainyu, the foe of Ahura Mazda. In the *Shāhnāmāh* of Ferdowsi, Zahhāk is the son of a ruler named Merdās. Sanskrit *dahana*), "man" or "manlike" (cf. Khotanese *daha*), "huge" or "foreign" (cf. the Dahae people and the Vedic *dasas*). Despite the negative aspect of *Azī Dahāka* in mythology, dragons have been used on some banners of war throughout the history of Iranian peoples. Old Armenian mythological figure *Azhdahak*, modern Persian *aždehā / aždahā* and Tajik Persian *azhdahā* and Urdu *Azhdahā* (آژدها) as well as the Kurdish *ejdiha* (ئەجیها) which usually mean "dragon". See. Wikipedia. Retrieved 2.04.2020; 6.48

36 Andreev M. S. The Tajiks of the Khuf Valley. Ed.2. – Stalinabad, 1958. – P. 73.

37 Rosenfeld A. Z. Materials on ethnography and remnants of the ancient beliefs of the Tajik-speaking population of the Soviet Badakhshan. // SE. No. 3. 1975. – P.212.

38 Andreev M. S. The Tajiks of the Khuf Valley. – P. 74

During the collective harvest, several people would sing the ritual song “*Yo, Allah*” (Oh God!). The moment of the field “dying” was called “*vakti jon baroi zamin*.”<sup>39</sup>

In Khuf, when the harvest draws to a close, the reapers try and finish the harvest as soon as possible, since it is thought that if the harvest is prolonged, leaving some parts un-reaped for a long time, the reapers would suffer from headaches.<sup>40</sup> After the work was completed, one of the reapers says the following prayer: “God is great. Less straw, more grain so that it can be eaten when earned honestly (in conformity with the law). May the harvest from you be in three barns.”

After saying the prayer, the reapers, if not alone, throw their sickles with great force so they stick into the ground, thus representing the end of the harvest. This “throwing of the sickle” is celebrated with homemade refreshments.<sup>41</sup> M.S. Andreev noted that earlier in Wakhan and Ishkashim: the reaper (mostly the master), returning home at the end of the harvest, takes two sickles and puts them, like a ring, around his wife’s neck; she starts screaming because she’s scared that they might hurt her. In response, the reaper promises to release her for a ransom, and, after a short debate, usually they make up and share a treat.<sup>42</sup>

Zarubin I.I., in Bartang and Rushan, noticed a slightly different custom, according to which “at the end of the harvest of millet (millet is the last to ripen), the sickle is thrown at the feet of the farmer’s wife, and she arranges a treat.” Moreover, he added that, sometimes “if there is any misfortune in the village or someone has a disturbing dream, then at the end of the harvesting of wheat, they bring before the *Shotolib* (personifying the ancient patron of agriculture) everyone’s sacrifice (a cow or a ram).”<sup>43</sup>

The harvest is transferred to the threshing floor with the help of a special wooden tool (*chukht*), which is thrown at the hostess.<sup>44</sup>

In the north of Tajikistan, the same custom of quick harvesting from the last plot of land (*chonbarorii zamin*) has been preserved and is known as “the hare escaping” (“*kuyan kochti*”)

Harvesting from the threshing floor and grinding is also accompanied by various rituals. For example, a piece of cow dung is placed on top of a pile of grain, and is fumigated with sacred smoke, and sprinkled with sweets; the mill is considered the place of residence of the spirits, and at the end of the grinding they bring home the stuffed “old women” (“*starukha-melnik*”).<sup>45</sup>

According to Andreev M.S., during this festival in Khuf, people bake flat round bread (*hadurd – pukhta*) out of a newly-milled flour that is eaten not only at the mill, but also taken home, and brought as a present to those household members who have stayed at home. M.R. Rakhimov wrote the following about the celebration of the harvest by the farmers of the Hingou River Basin: The grounded mill flour was poured into sacks and trampled underfoot so that it lay tight. Then the hostess

39 Rakhimov M.R. Traces of ancient beliefs in the agricultural rituals and rites of the Tajiks in Karategin and Darvaz in the 19th and early 20th centuries.// Brief Communications of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. – 1958. – Issue 29. – P. 48.

40 Andreev M. S. The Tajiks of the Khuf Valley ..... – P. 75-76.

41 Andreev M. S. The Tajiks of the Khuf Valley ..... – P. 77.

42 Andreev M. S., Polovtsev A. A. Materials on the ethnography of Iranian tribes of Central Asia. – St. Petersburg, 1911. – P. 26.

43 I. I. Zarubin’s Personal Fund Archive of the IOS RAS in St. Petersburg, fund 121. Op. 1, Unit 227, 230, 240, 242, 252, 277.

44 Andreev M. S., Polovtsev A. A. .... – P. 42.

45 Andreev M. S., Polovtsev A. A. .... – P. 24-25,

fumigated the flour hutches with smoke from the burnt marsh onions, coriander seeds or *ispand* (*Peganum harmala*). On the evening of the same day, thin flat round breads *chapoti* were baked from the new flour, from which they prepared their favorite dish *ravganjushi*. All family members sat down together and ate. The first to start was the oldest, the most honorable man in the house, and the rest thereafter. After eating, the eldest in the house read a prayer. The next day, they made flour stew with dumplings *umoch/amoch* out of new flour, being a ritual dish, and treated it to the village men in memory of the spirits of their ancestors.<sup>46</sup>

There is a custom in Bartang and Rushan, according to which, after the wheat ripens, initially only a few sheaves are mowed. The farmers then thresh them by hand, grinding them into powder, and immediately bake bread, a large part of which is allocated to a summer camp, and a smaller part of which is eaten at home. In order to protect the new crop from the evil eye, they only invite neighbors and fellow villagers.<sup>47</sup>

## Mehrgon

*Mehrgon* as a harvest festival is known to have existed among the Tajiks since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Today, it is being revived under the name of *Idi Hosilot* or *Mehrgon*<sup>48</sup>, although in the mountainous regions of Tajikistan it never faded and has been preserved through the generations. Tajiks living outside the country also celebrate this festival for a month under various names including Melon Festival (*Idi Kharbuza*) and Honey Festival (*Idi Asal*). With the support of local municipalities, these festivals have become credible variations of the *Mehrgon* festival.



Rakhimov A. Mehrgon. Gifts of Tajikistan. 1981.

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46 Rakhimov M. R. Agriculture of the Tajiks of the Hingou River Basin in the pre-revolutionary period. – Stalinabad, 1957. – P. 207-208.

47 Archive of Zarubin I. I. .... – P. 93.

48 Amonov R. Amu Darya in the bowl. – Dushanbe, 1977. – P. 37

The repast during the public holidays of Sada, Mehrgon and Nawruz was and remains an important social link that can unite society and maintain the continuity of traditions of Tajik ethnic culture. These are special rituals; sacralized and socialized forms of communication. These unite representatives of the clans (*avlods*), fellow citizens, and friends, and consist of dishes that can symbolize the social position of a person or a whole group.

Such characteristics would also differ in the meals prepared centuries ago by farmers during the ancient festivals of Sada, Nawruz and Mehrgon. All of the solemnity of ritual ceremonies are reflected in the culinary diversity of such feasts.

Smith A.D. wrote that if someone wants to determine the special character of a nation's ethnic identity, he or she should consider the nature (form and content) of its myths, symbols, and historical memory, which form a “*myth-symbol*” complex based on the mechanisms of their spread and survival (or loss). Symbols, constant reminders of a common heritage and destiny, are associated with a complex of memory and values, allowing us to talk about the “ethnic categories” and “ethnic forms” that distinguish a certain community of people and internally connect them.<sup>49</sup> Based on this, it can be argued that the complex of Tajik national festivals is also a special ethnic category of the “myth-symbol” of the Iranian peoples, adopted over time by other peoples too, uniting them with a sense of solidarity and hope.



Nawruz. Festivities in Dushanbe, 2012.

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49 Smith A. D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. – Oxford, 1999. – PP. 49, 149, 150.

Nawruz has long become an international annual festival to mark the coming spring, the new year and new life. Throughout history it has spread among and across nations and other peoples across the world. The Tajiks, together with neighboring peoples, continue to celebrate, in one form or another, their ancient agricultural festivals of Sada, Nawruz and Mehrgon, each of which is dedicated to a certain season and is closely associated with agriculture. Currently, all three festivals are precious opportunities for the peoples of Tajikistan to express their creativity and at the same time express their solidarity with others.

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