



MILLENARY

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NEW DAY



ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT HOLIDAYS ASSOCIATED WITH EARLY AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF THE AZERBAIJAN PEOPLE IS CERTAINLY NOWRUZ (TRANSLATES FROM FARSI AS NEW DAY). IT IS CELEBRATED ON 20-21-22 MARCH OF EVERY YEAR. THE HOLIDAY HAS BEEN MARKED IN AZERBAIJAN FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL AND PEOPLE HAVE IDENTIFIED MANY OF THEIR DAILY CANONS AND NORMS WITH IT. THERE IS A PLETHORA OF SURVIVING DOCUMENTARY AND ILLUSTRATIONAL MATERIAL CHARACTERIZING THE TEMPORAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS OF NOWRUZ.



The Avesta (a collection of holy books of Zoroastrianism) describes Nowruz as a festival of natural abundance and emphasizes its strong connection with agriculture. The Avesta defines Nowruz as a holiday of agricultural fertility and seeding, which symbolizes prosperity, well-being and abundance.

There is a variety of legends and myths both in Azerbaijan and countries of Central Asia and the Middle East which also celebrate Nowruz.

Pre-Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic legends link it to different historical facts and events. For instance, one legend goes that Siyavash (from Avestan Syavarsan), a son of Kay Kavus, appeared in the domain of the Turanian king Afrasiab. The latter warmly welcomed the guest, gave his daughter to him in marriage, thus turning their friendship into kinship. As a token of gratitude, Siyavash built the fortress walls of Bukhara, one of the major cities in Afrasiab's possessions.



However, enemies succeeded in setting Afrasiab against Siyavash. As a result, Afrasiab ordered to kill Siyavash and have his body thrown at the Bukhara wall. Contrary to the order, Zoroastrians buried Siyavash at the eastern gates of the city and even composed mourning verses for him. Some extant sources suggest that the day when Siyavash was buried was called Nowruz and marked as a holiday every year.

Another legend links Nowruz to even earlier times. In the times when the son of Oghuz (epic ancestor of Oghuz Turks) lived in a cave, winters were extremely cold and it was difficult to survive. For this reason he hoarded everything he could lay his hands on in spring, summer and autumn. One winter happened to

be particularly severe and long. The son of Oghuz ran out of all his supplies and was left with no other op-



tion than to get out on the 30th day of Major Chilli (in Azeri – one of the two coldest months of winter which

lasts 40 days and is followed by Minor Chilli, which lasts a further 20 days) to find something to eat. He looked for hours but could not find anything at all. His beard was covered with frost, while his hands and feet were completely frozen. Utterly frustrated, he headed back to the cave and came across a wolf cub. “Where are you coming from, the son of Oghuz, and where are you heading for?” the wolf cub asked. So the son of Oghuz told the wolf cub of his woes, said there were months when one is full and happy, but there are also months of starvation.

The wolf cub replied, “Go down this road and you will find a herd of sheep, a sheaf of wheat, a spinning wheel and a hand-mill. Take this all to your cave. You can then eat the



sheep's meat, spin the sheep wool into thread and sew some clothes for yourself, grind the grains from wheat-ears and make yourself some bread. I hope you can survive the winter. But make sure you protect my gifts like the apple of your eye. You must raise the sheep and grow the wheat-ears yourself. The lambs will have to be looked after, you will have to work very hard to make the seeded grains grow. If you can't do this all, it will be very difficult for you to survive, the son of Oghuz..."

So the Son of Oghuz went down the road and took everything the wolf cub had told him about into the cave. He survived the winter, while in spring he took the sheep out to mountain slopes, seeded the grains and looked after the sprouted yellow

wheat-ears. And real abundance was showered upon the son of Oghuz! From then on, he worked hard all



year round, while on the date he met the wolf cub he started preparing for a great feast. For five days every year

he ate and drank, sang, danced and celebrated the holiday with his close ones. The son of Oghuz named the day Nowruz and turned it into a custom because Nowruz brought him luck...

According to sources, it was a tradition to celebrate Nowruz in the epoch of the Achaemenid Empire (558-330 BC). Holiday rituals of the time described the life of a plowman, abundance and agricultural activities. Some time later, holiday celebrations lost their mythical undertone and were transformed onto real grounds, as various religions and sects, rulers and kings attempted to link it to themselves. Trying to completely Islamize the tradition, Muslim religious leaders enthroned their caliphs on this very day. However,



neither Zoroastrianism nor Islam have succeeded in making Nowruz part of their religion, while Nowruz has retained its originally human and natural values. People consider it a universal holiday detached from all religions and sects.

The fact that Nowruz was celebrated in ancient times is also confirmed by the best known literary works of the East. For instance, in *Shahname* (Book about Kings), Ferdowsi indicates that the holiday was celebrated in the first days of Farvardin, the first month of the year by the

Iranian calendar.

Iskandar Nama by Nizami Ganjavi and *Sadd-i-Iskandari* by Alishir Navai (both epic poems about Alexander the Great) say that Nowruz was the most significant holiday in 350 BC. It is not by chance that the leading character in Nizami's *Iskandar Nama* arrives at the residency of the Barda governess Nushaba on Nowruz. Written monuments are further evidence of the fact that people treated Nowruz as a calendar holiday symbolizing the Earth rotation around the Sun and the change of seasons. People

also perceived the New Day as the start of a new season, spring, i.e. the beginning of new work. Therefore, holiday celebrations were very tumultuous.

Nowruz has turned into an integral part of public conscience that it is widely represented in the *Yalli* (a popular folk dance traditionally played on the *Zurna*), customs, rites, performances, games and songs. Pre-holiday rituals and songs express hopes and wishes of the people for an abundant harvest. According to the spirit of Nowruz, there are three paths leading to abundance: first is to make a wish of abundance and proclaim it for everyone to hear; second is to work tirelessly in the name of such prosperity; and third is to renounce evil intention, be merciful, supportive and honest.

The fact that Nowruz is embedded in public minds manifests itself through collective and widespread preparations for the holiday which commence long before Nowruz. There are numerous folk songs about people renewing their homes in preparation for Nowruz, cleaning and softening their beds, buying new clothes, stocking up on food for the holiday dinner, thus creating a holiday atmosphere in their homes. The nationwide nature of preparations for Nowruz is confirmed by the cooking of holiday dishes and sweets and the existence of numerous recipes.

The Nowruz customs and traditions also pursue the goal of personal self-improvement. On Nowruz, all





those at odds with each other are expected to make up. This is one of the key requirements of the holiday tradition, characterizing the nature and psychology of the people who don't want to tarnish the New Day with old strife. Hospitality, respect for the wanderer and compassion with the needy are the most sacred ethical norms of the holiday. According to the same tradition, the host of a house must provide the guest with the best room, while those asking for shelter should receive the most fertile land. Those who display anger and hostility, the Nowruz tradition says, will face numerous and incessant woes.

Nowruz rites include the so-called "generosity tests" whereby people hand out trays filled with sweets, fruit

or gifts and decorated with Semeni (sprouted wheat grown on a plate specifically on the eve of Nowruz), secretly leave hats at people's doorsteps asking for a share of the holiday feast.



These traditions are linked to archaic beliefs that people must share their wealth with others. Subsequently,

these traditions have acquired the sense of unity and neighborliness.

Other Nowruz festivities include various folk performances and shows. The most noteworthy of them are horseracing, fencing and wrestling contests, competitions of rope-dancers, weight-lifters and acrobats.

The ethnographic nature of Nowruz is the national reflection of spiritual life of the Azerbaijani people. It is the holiday of a hard-working people during which farmers are urged to love the land that feeds them and will certainly repay a thousandfold if you treat it with care and respect. For this reason, people see Nowruz as a holiday bringing luck and happiness, fulfilling dreams, granting abundance and prosperity. ❀