



# **Nowruz: Origins and Rituals**

By

**Dr. Iraj Bashiri**

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1. **Ahura Mazda**, the chief deity encompassing the sky; defender against *Ahriman* (evil). **Sir** (garlic), a plant the roots of which contain a cure for many ailments, represents *Ahura Mazda*. On the *Sofreh*, *sir* is placed in the center.
2. **Vohu Manah**, represents water, the second element in the order of creation after the sky. Water cleans, erodes and flattens. *Vohu Manah* is represented by *somaq* (sumac).
3. **Spenta Armaiti**, the female representative of earth symbolizes humility and benevolence. On the *Sofreh*, *Spenta Armaiti* is represented by *sib* (apple).
4. **Asha Vahishta**, represents green meadows and fertile fields. On the *Haftsin* display, *sabzeh* (wheat sprouts) represents *Asha Vahishta*.
5. **Khshathra Vairya**, choice dominion, represents germination of life. *Samanu*, a sweet dessert made of wheat germ represents *Khshathra Vairya*.
6. **Haurvatat**, struggle for wholeness, health, and perfection. On the display, *senjed*, a wholesome fruit, represents *Haurvatat*.
7. **Ameretat**, the goal of creation, immortality. **Serkeh** (vinegar), the immortal soulmate of wine extracted from grapes, represents *Ameretat*.<sup>[21]</sup>

### The *Haftsin* Display

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*Nowruz* is a set of simple celebrations with logical rules and specific rituals. Nevertheless, over the centuries, attempts have been underway to dilute the rules and misinterpret the intent of the celebrations. The article discusses the actual rules and rituals involved, as well as probes the history and the motive for the dilution of the rules and misinterpretation of the rituals.

### Introduction

The oldest of Iranian traditions, *Nowruz* (also referred to as *Eyd-e Sar-e Sal* and *Eyd-e Sal-e Now*) recalls the cosmological and mythological times of Iran.<sup>[1]</sup> Its founder is a deputy of *Ahura Mazda* on earth, a position that imparts to him, and the celebration, a spiritual dimension and a particular sense of secular authority.<sup>[2]</sup> The celebration is organized according to the dynamics of love between the Creator and his creation, the material world.

In reality, it is an annual event during which the spirits of the departed return to their homes. The event is celebrated by their offspring according to primordial rites of which only a faint trace remains among the Iranians in general, and the Parsees<sup>[3]</sup> of today. Passage of time, however, has not diminished the resilience of the bond that holds the Iranian peoples together and which continues being refreshed at every *Nowruz*.

The word "*Nowruz*" is a compound of two Persian words, "*now*," which has the same etymology as the English word "new" and means new, and the word "*ruz*," which means both "day" and "time." Literally meaning the "new day," the word *nowruz* is usually translated as "new year." The Persian *Nowruz* begins on the first day of spring (usually the 21st of March).<sup>[4]</sup> The 21st of March, therefore, is equal to the 1st day of *Farvardin*, the first month of the solar calendar.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the mind of Iranians, the word *nowruz* invokes colorful images that are sumptuous, elegant, and opulent as well as delightfully simple, refreshing, and cordial. Although colored with vestiges of Iran's *Mazdian* and Zoroastrian past, the *Nowruz* celebration is neither religious nor national in nature, nor is it an ethnic celebration. Jewish, Zoroastrian, Armenian, Kurdish, Baluch, Turkish, and Arab Iranians, as well as Central Asians celebrate the *Nowruz* with the same enthusiasm and sense of belonging.<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps it is this very universal nature of the message of the *Nowruz* that speaks to its wealth of rites and customs as well as to its being identified as the unique fount of continuity of the Iranian culture.

In ancient times, at the court of the King of Kings, these rituals were of particular importance.<sup>[7]</sup> On the occasion of the *Nowruz*, the *Mu'bad-e Mu'badan* (chief priest) became

the first, from among the people not directly related to the court, to greet the King of Kings.<sup>[8]</sup> Once in the Great Hall, he approached the throne with a golden goblet full of red wine in one hand and a fistful of green sprouts in the other. Accompanying him were servants carrying an enormous number of gifts including a gold ring, gold coins, a sword, a bow and arrows, as well as a pen and inkpot, a horse, an eagle, and a beautiful youth. Upon reaching the royal space, the *Mu'bad* stood at a prescribed distance and performed the *Nowruz* ritual of wishing the King and the Kingdom long life and prosperity. He then tasted the wine, approached the King with slow steps, stretched his arm and respectfully handed the goblet over to the King. Then, slowly, with his other hand, he placed the green sprouts in the King's other hand, all the time reciting benediction and wishing the King happiness, gladness, and joy for the coming year. When the benediction was over, he stepped aside, walked back in slow motion, and bade the servants to place the items that they had brought as gifts in their prescribed spots before the King.<sup>[9]</sup> Then, following the priest's example, princes, governors, nobles, and dignitaries showered the King with their gifts. Each king, prince, and nobleman at court repeated the priest's last act of homage and wished the King of Kings happiness in the coming year. Thereafter, throughout the day, a never-ending line paraded before the King of Kings and presented the gifts they had brought.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Preparation for Welcoming the Nowruz

### *Sabzeh and Khane Tekani*

Preparation for the *Nowruz* begins early in March with sprouting of *sabzeh* (lentil, wheat, or barley seeds) and a thorough *khane tekani* (house cleaning). The sprouting of *sabzeh* harks back to the agrarian background of the Iranian tribes that celebrated the main transitions in the climate that dictated the dynamics of their lives. The *khane tekani* that entails washing carpets, painting the house, and cleaning the yard stems from the Zoroastrians' preoccupation with cleanliness as a measure for keeping Evil away from the blessed kingdom of the Good.<sup>[11]</sup>

Symbolically, *khane tekani* signals to the spirits of the ancestors that their kinfolk, in their previous abodes, are ready and willing to entertain them. In other words, the spirits of the ancestors are invited to return temporarily and restart the growth of the *sabzeh*, the main source of their sustenance, depleted during the long, cold winter season.

### *Kharid-e Nowruz*

The sprouting of seeds and house cleaning are followed by *kharid-e Nowruzi* (New Year shopping). *Nowruz* shopping, a family affair performed mostly to engage the children in the celebration, must include all the members. Traditionally, everyone must be measured and outfitted with new clothes, shoes, hats, and the like. In addition, as we shall see below, the *Sofreh* (*Nowruz* display cloth) requires certain items—sweetmeats, confectioneries, candles, fruits, and nuts—which are bought at this time. Needless to say, to what is bought, women of the household add various types of sweet breads. They also sew special clothes for the

little ones. At the end, the father of the family goes to the bank and acquires shiny, new coins and crisp, fresh banknotes to give out to the family members, and others, as *Eydi* (Nowruz gift).

### ***Khwajah Piruz***

The month during which *Nowruz* celebrations are held is an extraordinary time in the life of the community. In ancient times, this aspect of *Nowruz* was so prominent that the mayors of towns were literally displaced by the most victorious person in carrying out the commands of *Ahura Mazda* and his six *Spentas* (holy immortal). This victorious (*piruz*) *khwaja*, or lord, was given the rule of the realm for the period. As a part of his duties, *Khwaja Piruz* saw to it that all the people of the realm were provided with the amenities necessary for joying a prosperous life, at least during his short rule.

After the fall of Iran to the Arab invaders who would not relinquish their rulership to a defeated foe, even for a short period, the title of *Khwaja Piruz* deteriorated into its present-day Arabized form, *Haji Firuz*. His office, too, was drastically reduced. What has remained of a set of complex social concerns is a comic figure who stimulates laughter and provides a good time. Today, *Haji Firuz* is no more than a spectacle held during the last few days before the *Nowruz*, when he and his troupe of musicians appear and fill the streets and alleyways of the country with joy.



Known as the traditional herald of the *Nowruz*, *Haji Firuz* is a black-faced character clad in bright red clothes, a conical hat, and pointed shoes. He plays a tambourine and sings, "*haji firuze, sali ye ruze.*" (It is *Haji Firuz* time. It happens one day a year!). People of all ages gather around him and his troupe of musicians and listen to them play the drum, *saz* or *kamancheh*, and dance. Those who are impressed with the troupe's performance shower it with coins and paper money.

Often, well-to-do Iranians invite *Haji Firuz* to their homes to perform for their wives and daughters who, otherwise, would not see *Haji Firuz* in action. Here, the group plays popular folk music, performs a variety of comic routines, and tells jokes. At the end of the

performance, the members are invited to a nice *Nowruz* meal and, at the end, are handsomely compensated for their contribution with a substantial *Eydi*.

In recent times, the blackened face of *Haji Firuz* has created cause for concern. For instance, on April 2nd, 1400, Mohammadreza Javad Yeganeh, the Deputy Mayor of Tehran for Social and Cultural Affairs, announced that, due to the attribution of racist issues to *Haji Firuz*, participation of *Haji Firuz* in carnivals and other events is forbidden. (See *Haji Firuz*, in *Wikipedia* <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). This announcement requires a long discussion of the fact that slavery and racial issues were not prevalent topics in ancient Iranian society, but that discussion is outside the purview of this short article.

### *Charshanbeh Suri*

The actual *Nowruz* ceremonies begin on the eve of the last Wednesday of the out-going year. Early in the evening of that day, referred to as *Charshanbeh Suri* or "Red Wednesday," several bonfires are made. Every member of the family jumps over the fire and says, "*sorkhi-ye to az man, zardi-ye man az to*," which literally means "Give me your redness and take away my wintry sallow complexion".



The jumping over the fire is followed by a get-together in which nuts and fruits are served. This party is mostly for the benefit of the children of the family who are entertained, long into the night, with stories that they will remember with joy throughout their lives.<sup>[12]</sup>

While the party goes on, the fire dies out. The ashes are gathered and, as the symbol of the bad luck imposed by winter, are taken out of the house and buried in the fields. When the person in charge of burying the ashes returns and knocks on the door, those who are in the house ask, "Who is it?"

"It is I," says the person returning.

"Where are you coming from?"

"From a wedding," is the response.

"What are you bringing with you?" is the last question.

"Happiness and mirth," is the response.

Only then the door is opened and the herald of the new life, who has warded off the bad omen and the evil eye, from himself and others, is ushered in.

In ancient Iranian cultures, fire was of particular significance. The *Charshanbeh Suri* fire might have been related to the signals sent to the spirits of the departed to guide them to their previous abodes to enjoy the prayers that their descendants perform for their benefit. The fact that traditionally the fires were lit on the rooftops points to the need for the visibility of the fire (see *Sadeh* celebration, below).

In recent decades, an attempt is being made to discontinue the *Charshanbeh Suri* celebration. Those proposing the change argue that fire and fireworks have caused injuries

and provide statistics for the dead and the injured. True. However, as it is shown in the article, the *Charshanbeh Suri* celebration is not only a tradition that has been held since ancient times, but also one that sets off the whole *Nowruz* celebration. It serves as an umbrella for a number of other smaller events related to *Nowruz*.

Opinions about the event run deep. Some present-day Iranian leaders consider *Charshanbeh Suri* as a corrupt act that is detrimental to the country's economy. Some others distinguish it as a forbidden superstitious tradition, and an act that is contrary to reason and to the *Shari'a* law. In general, they think *Charshanbeh Suri* is not worthy of the Iranian nation. According to their assessment, the enemies of Iran elevate national traditions, like the *Nowruz* and *Charshanbeh Suri*, to downplay religious manifestations in society (see, <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). At the same time, these same leaders have promoted, and continue to promote religious events at the expense of national ones.

Rather than dismantling *Charshanbeh Suri*, maybe production and use of fireworks should be regulated or banned. Fires should be managed so that all family members can jump over them with ease. Moreover, it is the duty of the elders in the family, and the authorities, to educate the population. Banning *Charshanbeh Suri* (i.e., denying the *Nowruz* celebration its appropriate beginning), is not a viable solution.

### *Qashoq zani*

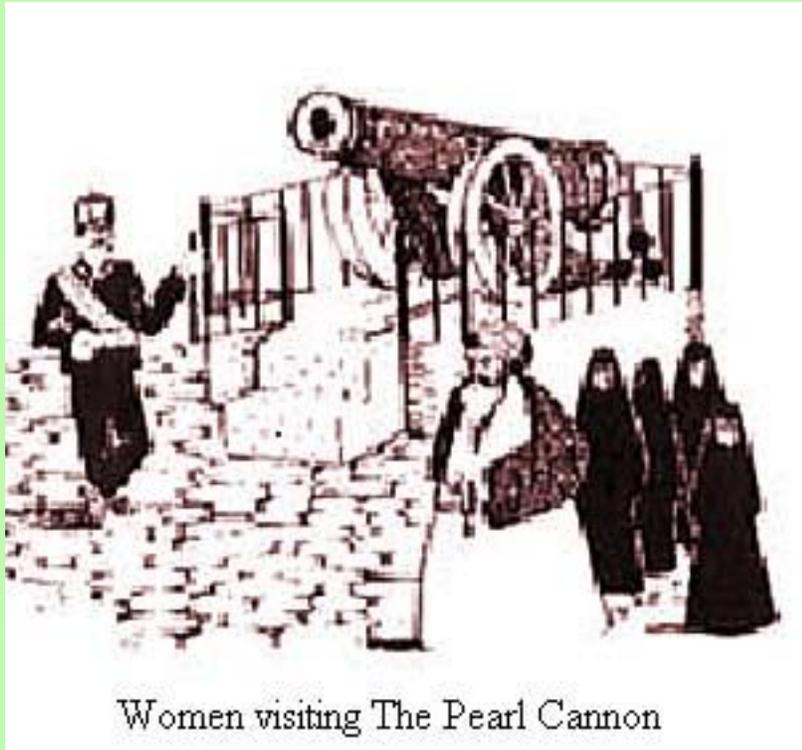
As part of the *Charshanbeh Suri* festivities, and very much like Halloween, children—sometimes accompanied by adults—visit their neighbors' houses in disguise. The disguise is usually something like a veil (*chador*) covering the entire body. Each member of the party carries an empty metal bowl and a metal spoon. At the neighbor's house, they create a chorus with banging the spoons on the bowls and on the door. The neighbor opens the door and places a treat in each visitor's bowl. The party then proceeds to the next house. As a rule, throughout the process, the members of the party must remain silent and anonymous. Often boys and girls, who otherwise would have no opportunity to see each other, meet across the threshold.<sup>[13]</sup>

### *Falgush*

A more culturally interesting aspect of the *Charshanbeh Suri* celebration is the *Falgush* (eavesdrop) performed by girls in their late teens and young unmarried women. For this, the teenagers, or the unmarried women, huddle in the corners of dark alleys and listen to conversations of passersby. The contents of the first sentence of a conversation exchanged is regarded as an omen (*fal*) or portent for the future. For instance, if a young girl, who hopes to get married sometime during the next year, hears the following, "There is no way that any sane person would say no to such an offer..." she would be elated. Conversely, if she hears something like, "Do you think we didn't try? It was like talking to a brick wall,..." she would become utterly disappointed.

### *Tup-e Morvari*

*Tup-e Morvari*, or pearl cannon, was a large cannon kept at the *Arg* (citadel) of Tehran. Studded with pearls, the cannon was rolled out on *Charshanbeh Suri* night. Tehrani women, wishing to get married in the coming year, climbed on the cannon and walked under it hoping that their wishes would come true.<sup>[14]</sup>



### *Gereh Gushai*

Those with a problem for which there is no solution, stop the first passerby crossing their path and ask him or her to undo a knot they have tied in a shirt tale. The willingness or unwillingness of the strange passerby to undo the knot is an omen for the possibility of a resolution of the problem in the coming year.

### *Pishvaz-e Nowruz*

Still as a part of the *Charshanbeh Suri* festivities the family places several low-denomination coins (*pul-e siyah*), a piece of charcoal, seeds of the wild rue, and a piece of

rock salt in a new earthen water jar. While filling the jar, they say, "Our pains and misfortunes into the jar!" Then, the jar is taken up to the rooftop and, from the edge of the roof, the contents of the jar are tossed into the street. When tossing the contents, they say, "Our pains and misfortunes onto the street!" Serving as a preventative measure, it is believed that the items in the jar have the power to foil any attempt by Evil at harming the family during the coming year. Often, water is added to the contents to aid in the rapid absorption of evil into the ground.

### *Shab-e Jom'e*

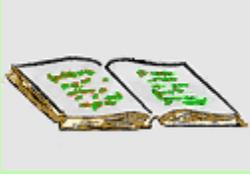
The dinner for the Thursday before *Nowruz* must include pilau and chicken. Fulfilling this ritual assures that, in the coming year, at least once a week, the family will have a similar dinner.

### *Sofre-ye Nowruz*

A few days before the arrival of *Nowruz*, a rather large tablecloth is spread on the floor of the main room of the house and the following items are placed on it:<sup>[15]</sup>



Lighted candles, representing the goodness and warmth that enters life, and the dissipation of the evil that has had the world in its cold grip. The number of the candles must be the same as the number of the offspring in the household. Often an egg accompanies each candle. The candles on display must be allowed to burn themselves out. It is bad luck to blow out the candles. In large settings, an open fire might replace the candles.



Depending on the faith to which the family belongs, a copy of the *Qur'an* (holy book of the Muslims), or the *Avesta* (holy book of the Zoroastrians), or the *Bible*, or the *Torah* is placed in a prominent place on the *Sofreh*. The holy scripture refreshes the bond between the faithful and the source of light that emanates goodness.



*Haftsin*, or seven edible things the names of which in Persian begin with the letter "sin" or "s", are placed in a tray or, otherwise, are placed together in a special arrangement. *Sib* (apple), *somaq* (sumac), *sir* (garlic), *samanu* (a paste made with wheat sprouts), *senjed* (jujube fruit), *sohan* (a candy made with honey and nuts), *siyahdaneh* (sesame seeds), *serkeh* (vinegar), and *sangak* (bread baked on a bed of rocks) are the usual edible items from among which seven are chosen.<sup>[16]</sup> Often non-edibles such as *sekkeh* (coins), *sonbol* (hyacinth), *spand* (the wild rue), *sepestan* (sebestens), *samovar* (device for boiling water), *sa'at* (clock) are substituted.

As we shall see, each of the seven "sin"s that symbolically represent *Ahura Mazda* and the six *Amesha Spentas*, who help him regulate the affairs of man according to the *Ahuric Order*, has a meaning of its own. Today, as the following shows, various opinions by religious authorities have created an array of irrelevant interpretations for each of the seven "sin"s, of the *Haftsin*, the actual ones and the fake ones:

<i>Samanu</i>	sweetness, fertility, having many children
<i>Senjed</i>	love
<i>Sir</i>	medicine for recovering from evil
<i>Sib</i>	health, natural beauty, fragrance
<i>Somaq</i>	color of the sun at sunrise
<i>Serkeh</i>	age and patience; wards off bitterness in life
<i>Sabzeh</i>	purity, opulence, and good fortune <sup>[17]</sup>

No particular authority has sanctioned these interpretations. Furthermore, they are devoid of the type of theological and/or cosmological values that ancient Iranians might have had for them and the *Haftsin*. Nevertheless, the general public follows these interpretations. What else could an apt interpretation of *sekkeh* in this context be but affluence, wealth, and prosperity? Ironically, this is one of the "s"s that comes into fruition right after the *Tahvil-e Sal*. This is, of course, a reference to the coins that the family patriarch (grandfather or father) distributes among the family members.<sup>[18]</sup> The question is, can this generous act by itself form one of the "s"s of the *Haftsin*?

Additionally, it is said that in pre-Islamic times, *haftsin* could actually have been *haftshin*—*shir* (milk), *shekar* (sugar), *shahd* (nectar), *sharbat* (compote), *shane* (comb), *sharab* (wine), and *sham'* (candle). "Shin" has been changed to "sin," it is explained, to accommodate Islam's disapproval of *sharab*. In view of the liberty taken in changing all the items of the *Haftsin*, in one form or another, why is it that that one item could not be replaced with a different item beginning with "shin"?<sup>[19]</sup>

Other traditions relate *haftsin* or *haftshin* to seven trays (*sini*) filled with seven delicious food items, or seven different growing seeds, or seven varieties of nuts offered to the king. Others consider the seven "s"s to have been Life, Health, Happiness, Prosperity, Joy, and Beauty, all forming the seventh "s" which, according to Zoroastrian traditions, represents Truth.

Still others contend that while the first tray to *Ahura Mazda* was empty (Truth is a combination of things with no substance of its own), the other six trays were filled with flowers, sugar, milk, cheese, yogurt, butter, cream, eggs, water, mirrors, candelabra, burning coal, silver, and gold. These items, according to this belief, represent Truth, Good thought, Dominion, Piety, Prosperity, Immortality, and Obedience.<sup>[20]</sup>

Those who are serious about *Nowruz* will not choose any of the items enumerated above, or mentioned below, for their *Haftsin* display:

*Sonbol*, *sekkeh*, *samovar*, *sikh* (skewer), *sepayeh* (tripod), *sarv* (cypress), *santur* (a type of musical instrument), *sangak* (a type of bread roasted on hot rocks), *sohan* (a kind of sweets), *sa'at* (clock), etc.

There are a number of reasons why these items often appear on the *Sofreh* as a part of the *Haftsin*. They are chosen because one or other of the ingredients is not readily available. Therefore, traditionally these items have been, unwillingly, accepted as replacements for items that are hard to come by. This is the case particularly when the *Nowruz* is celebrated outside of its original home, Iran, where all the actual *Haftsin* items discussed below are found in abundance. Another reason is to make this ancient festival appear less colorful and, in the end, meaningless in the eyes of its supporters (see below).

### The *Haftsin*

As mentioned, those who take the *Nowruz* celebration seriously do not choose the items enumerated above. The reason is that those items do not meet five requirements necessary for acceptance as a "sin" for the *Haftsin* display. The requirements are:

1. The item should begin with the letter "sin"  
This is the easiest requirement and it is the first thing that people know about the *Haftsin*. In fact, this is the criterion that all the items listed above meet.
2. The item chosen should be a part of the Persian culture. For instance, *sonbol* is Arabic, *samovar* is Russian, etc. They do not meet requirement #2
3. The item should be edible
4. The item should be of plant origin  
For instance, *sarv* (cypress) is of plant origin but it does not meet requirement #3
5. The item should not be a compound noun, such as *sibzamini* (potato) or *sabzi polo* (cooked rice with vegetables)

These restrictions, however, are overt requirements. There are also some fundamental, covert requirements that must be met. Those constraints are imposed by the ancient religion. In fact, those are the main reasons for which the ancient Persians created the *Haftsin* and

made it the centerpiece of their most important annual celebration. It was through these primordial symbols that, on that auspicious day, the ancient Iranians welcomed the seven "sin"s into their homes. In the following poem, Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi speaks about the seven "sin"s:

*Row sine ra chun "sin"ha  
Haft ab shui as kinha  
Vangah sharab-i ishq ra  
Peymane show peyman show*

Like the "sin"s, with seven waters,  
Cleanse your heart from vengeance.  
Then, for the wine of love,  
Become a cup, become a cup!

The seven "sin"s that Rumi speaks about are *Ahura Mazda*, the wise lord, and his six *Amesha Spentas* (holy immortals) worshiped by ancient Iranians. On the occasion of the *Nowruz*, *Ahura Mazda* and his *Spentas* were invoked through their representative symbols that were placed in a most prominent spot on the *Sofreh*. This is how ancient Iranians understood their *Haftsin*.

1. ***Ahura Mazda***, the chief deity encompassing the sky; defender against *Ahriman* (evil). ***Sir*** (garlic), a plant the roots of which contain cure for many ailments represents *Ahura Mazda*. On the *Sofreh*, *sir* is placed in the center.
2. ***Vohu Manah***, represents water, the second element in the order of creation after the sky. Water cleans, erodes and flattens. *Vohu Manah* is represented by ***somaq*** (sumac).
3. ***Spenta Armaiti***, the female representative of earth symbolizes humility and benevolence. On the *Sofreh*, *Spenta Armaiti* is represented by ***sib*** (apple).
4. ***Asha Vahishta***, represents green meadows and fertile fields. On the *Haftsin* display, ***sabzeh*** (wheat sprouts) represents *Asha Vahishta*.
5. ***Khshathra Vairya***, choice dominion, represents germination of life. ***samanu***, a sweet dessert made of wheat germ represents *Khshathra Vairya*.

6. ***Haurvatat***, struggle for wholeness, health, and perfection. On the display, ***senjed***, a wholesome fruit, represents *Haurvatat*.
7. ***Ameretat***, the goal of creation, immortality. ***serkeh*** (vinegar), the immortal soulmate of wine extracted from grapes, represents ***Ameretat***.<sup>[21]</sup>

These seven "*sin*"s have passed the test mentioned above. There cannot be an eighth item because, besides *Lord Mazda* and his six *Spentas*, there is no other acceptable archangel in the pantheon.

## The Haftshin and Haftmim

As mentioned above, in some circles, they believe that after the Arab conquest, the letter "Shin" has been replaced by the letter "Sin". This belief has its own history, which is beyond the scope of this article. It can, however, be said briefly that after the decline of Zoroastrianism in the Iranian territories, an all-encompassing, unwritten policy was implemented against the total cultural heritage of the Iranian peoples. The intent of this policy was to gradually dismantle all ancient Iranian festivals. As a result of this policy, the answers to questions regarding Iran's cultural heritage were relegated to Muslim masters, especially prominent religious figures. They provided all the explanations necessary for the population to understand the dynamics of their ancient heritage. Needless to say, the explanations provided were contextualized in a way that were, and continue to be, consistent with Islamic religious principles. And, of course, they were easily understandable and acceptable to the general public. To explain more difficult topics, often pamphlets were provided. In some cases, literature, mostly poetry in the form of *ghazal* (sonnet), or *roba'i* (quatrain) was used. The following is an example:

*Jashn-e nowruz az zaman-e kiyani  
Minahadand mardom-e Iran  
Sham' u shir u sharab u shirini  
Shikar u shahd u shaye andar khan.*<sup>[22]</sup>

From the time of the Kiyanian<sup>[23]</sup>  
Iranians celebrated the *Nowruz*.  
On the display they placed  
*sham', shir, sharab, shirini, shikar, shahd, and shaye.*<sup>[24]</sup>

This poem explains that, originally, *Haftsin* had been *Haftshin*. Because Islam frowns upon drinking wine, it is argued, after the Muslim conquest, the seven "*shin*"s have been changed to seven "*sin*"s. Logically, this explanation makes a lot of sense. The only problem is that, in addition to the fact that these seven elements do not represent the ancient Iranian deities discussed above and, thereby, their relation to the "*s*"s in the *Haftsin*, they are not ancient Iranian words. The ancient Iranian word for wine is not *sharab*, it is *badeh*. Similarly, the ancient Iranian word for candle is not *sham'*, it is *spandar*. The very etymology of the words indicates that the explanation provided is a post-Islamic, misguided attempt at explaining a complex ancient Iranian phenomenon. It also indicates that, unlike Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, who knew about the exact nature of the "*sin*"s on the *Sofreh*, this poet did not have a clue as to the origin of either the *Nowruz*, the *Sofreh*, or the *Haftsin* display. In addition to "*Haftshin*", there is another name, "*Haftmim*". The items for "*Haftmim*" include: *miveh* (fruit), *mahi* (fish), *morgh* (chicken), *morabba* (jam), etc.

Neither is this a rare example of interference with a smooth progress of the *Nowruz* celebration. As is evident from the discussion of various aspects of the *Nowruz*, the unwritten policy outlined above, has created confusion on a considerable scale. As we shall see, other celebrations, like *Sadeh*, too, are indirectly affected, some to the point of annihilation.

The aspect of *Nowruz* that is affected the most, however, is the *Haftsin*. In spite of the fact that the seven edible items involved are easily available, and the explanations are simple and understandable, the individual trying to put a *Sofreh* together is bombarded with an array of phony items, each supported by a number of erroneous interpretations.

## The *Sofreh* Arrangement

The following items decorate the *Sofreh*:



A mirror placed face up with a plain hard-boiled egg placed on the middle of it.



A bowl of clear water with an orange and a leaf of a rose bush floating in it.



Live goldfish in a bowl of clear water.



The barley, lentil, or wheat sprouts that had been growing since early March, decorated with a red ribbon around the outside and an orange seated in the center.

Representatives of the kingdoms that sustain life on earth. These include products from the animal kingdom: cheese, yogurt, etc.; the plant kingdom: flour, vegetables, rice; and the water kingdom: goldfish, and the like. Pomegranates and pussy willows, especially the latter because, in Iran, it blossoms at this very time of the year.<sup>[25]</sup>

An upright mirror and plenty of colored eggs, cookies, and various types of fruits and sweets, candies, and nuts.

## *Sa'at-e Tahvil*

*Sa'at-e Tahvil* means the hour during which the old year ends and the new year begins. In an Iranian house, during the *Nowruz* celebration, *Sa'at-e Tahvil* is a most crucial moment in the life of the family, especially with regard to forgiving past failings, putting away petty frictions that would otherwise fester into conflicts, and looking forward to more constructive

relations. And, of course, this is the moment when the egg rolls on the mirror. The moment is announced by the resounding boom of cannons fired in the square, by a brief speech delivered by the leader of the nation, and by the debut of a popular song contributed by a popular favorite artist.

Just before the change of the year, all members of the family, in their new clothes and holding a new coin in their hand for good luck, gather around the *Haftsin* display and, quietly and patiently, watch the solitary white egg on the mirror. Each one imagines a huge bullfish in the ocean of time carrying the world on one of its horns. Any moment now, the bullfish will toss the world over to the other horn, resulting in a tremor that dislodges the egg and sends it rolling to the side of the mirror.

As soon as the egg rolls, the members of the family, rejoicing, kiss each other, exchange *Nowruz* greetings, saying, "*Eid-e shoma mobarak!*" (May you have an auspicious new year!). After exchange of gifts, children, leave the house to make the rounds of the elders of the family first and of the neighborhood after that. <sup>[26]</sup>

As a rule, the patriarch of the house stays home until all those younger, and lower in rank than him, come and pay their respects. He returns those visits later (see below). Visits are short. Sweets and tea are the most often served items. Unwillingness or lack of participation in the rounds is indicative of harboring a dissatisfaction that should be addressed and resolved during the holidays. The visitation rounds might last as long as thirteen days.

### **Beliefs Attached to *Sa'at-e Tahvil***

Several beliefs related to *Sa'at-e Tahvil* are interesting. For instance, the first thing to eat should be an egg; because, it is believed, eggs ensure good fortune. In fact, in some traditions, the patriarch of the family must eat all the eggs that have accompanied the candles placed on the *Sofreh* for each offspring! The first person entering the house after *Sa'at-e Tahvil* decides the good or bad fortune that would visit the house in the next year. Often, a member of the family known to be blessed with good fortune is sent out to become the first visitor. Things brought into the house, especially their color, have the potential of influencing the future course of the family. The color white is regarded to be auspicious. Black is believed to be associated with grief and strife. Even the place where an individual is at the *Sa'at-e Tahvil* is significant. The chances are that the person might be stuck to that, or a similar location, for the entire duration of the coming year. Therefore, one tends not to be near schools, offices, or the bazaar.

### ***Sizdah Bedar***

The *Nowruz* ceremonies end on the thirteenth day of the first month of the New Year. On that day almost all the people (except thieves!) leave the towns and villages and spend the *Sizdah* in the countryside enjoying the pleasant weather that accompanies the change of seasons. More importantly, to say goodbye to winter. With them they bring the display *Sabzeh* and throw it into running water. They hope that along with it, the *Sabzeh* takes all

the sins, worries, and concerns of the past year. The New Year then begins with a fresh slate on the 14th day of the month.<sup>[27]</sup>



Some rural folk, rather than throw their *Sabzeh* in running water, might plant it in their farm. Regarding the *Sabzeh* itself, it should be noted that, on that particular day, one should not touch other peoples' *Sabzeh*. Before the *Sabzeh* is thrown, girls at the age of being married, and unmarried women tie the blades of the *Sabzeh* saying, "*sal-e dige, bachcheh dar baghal, khune-ye showhar!*" (Let next year find me in my husband's house with a baby in my arms!")

In recent decades, an attempt has been underway to change the name of *Sizdah Bedar* to *Ruz-e Tabi'at* (nature's day). It is true that on *Sizdah Bedar* people go to the countryside to be close to nature, but the intent of the outing is not to celebrate nature, although enjoying nature is a part of it, but to ward off the evil of winter and to welcome a new day. More importantly, in the same way that *Charshanbeh Suri* begins the *Nowruz* celebrations, *Sizdah Bedar* imparts a fitting conclusion to them. Over the centuries, this close relationship between *Nowruz* and *Sizdah Bedar* has stymied all attempts at discontinuing the event. Would not the change of the name of *Sizdah Bedar* to an ordinary name like *Nature's Day* make *Sizdah Bedar* vulnerable? After all, an event like *Nature's Day* can be discontinued without need for any justification.

### *Alak Dolak*



*Alak Dolak* is a children's game versions of which are also played by grownups. The number of players can be anywhere from two to ten. The game described below is played by two players.

#### **Items needed:**

1. Two pieces of wood.
  - a. *alak* is a piece of wood about eight inches long and half an inch thick
  - b. *dolak* is a piece of straight wood about two and a half feet long and about an inch thick
  - c. two bricks or similar rocks

**Players:**

1. batter, uses the *dolak* and hits the *alak*
2. catcher, tries to catch the *alak* and then throw it at the *dolak*

**How to play:**

1. The two bricks are placed parallel on the ground. They should be high enough for the tip of the *dolak* to comfortably fit under the *alak* and lift it.
2. The *alak* is placed across the bricks
3. With the tip of the *dolak*, the batter flips the *alak* into the air.
4. As the *alak* twirls, the batter hits it very hard
5. On the other side, the catcher tries to catch the *alak* as it approaches him
6. The batter places the *dolak* alongside the bricks so that the tip of the *dolak* touches the end of one of the bricks on the side he is standing
7. The catcher throws the *alak* and tries to hit the *dolak*, which is on the ground by the bricks

**Possibilities**

1. The catcher fails to catch the *alak* in the air
2. The catcher catches the *alak* in the air but fails to strike the *dolak* by the bricks
3. The catcher catches the *alak* in the air and strikes the *dolak* by the bricks

**Reward and penalty**

In the case of (1), the play is repeated

In the case of (2), the catcher and the batter exchange their places

In the case of (3), the batter pays a penalty

The batter has to carry the catcher on his back from the bricks to the place where the *alak* was caught.

The game goes on with the catcher as batter.

Varieties of this game are played during *Sizdah Bedar* with members of different families participating in the competition.

## Eydi and Hediye

*Nowruz* visits may include exchange of *hediye* (gift). Exchange of gifts, however, should not be confused with *Eydi* (*Nowruz* gift), which can take a number of forms depending on circumstances. Within the family, the head of the household may give either coins or new banknotes of a certain value to the members of his family, or to visitors as *Eydi*. The coins may be gold, silver or of some special make. On the *Nowruz* day, the family may stage a small "money-hunting" game. This is very much like finding Easter eggs in the grass. The money is usually placed under the edges of carpets in various rooms in the house.

As mentioned, *Nowruz* visitors during the early days of the celebration are children and young adults. They visit the older members as a sign of respect. Similarly, employees visit their bosses and directors at this time. The reason for lack of such a visit is usually interpreted

as existence of some dissatisfaction on the part of the family member, or the employee. The visitors do not bring any gifts but may receive a gift. During the latter part of the twelve-day *Nowruz* celebration, the older members of the family visit the younger members. This visit may include gifts, usually larger gifts like carpets and cars, as *Eydi*. Bosses and directors often delay a promotion so that it can be given on the occasion of the *Nowruz* as *Eydi*.

In modern times, *Nowruz* visits have expanded into parties. Some of these parties are communal in nature. They are organized by members of Iranian societies in the community and charge a fee for food and drinks. Other similar parties welcome the guests as "members" of the family. In the latter situation, it is appropriate to bring a *hediyeh*. The gifts given usually include, but are not restricted to, confectioneries, especially *gaz* made in Isfahan, or *sohan*, made in the holy city of Qom. Although, even in Iran, these sweets are not made at home, they are available from Iranian specialty shops in most major cities. Other types of sweets, as well as pistachio nuts, dried nuts and fruits, books, flowers, and liquor (outside Iran) are also appropriate gifts for the occasion.

## Other Celebrations

In addition to *Nowruz*, ancient Iranians held a number of other celebrations among which three have remained relatively vibrant, especially in towns and villages. Those celebrations are *Tirgan*, *Mehregan*, and *Sadeh*.

### *Tirgan*

After the *Nowruz* celebration, *Tirgan* is the first of the three feasts to occur. Tradition points to *Tishtrya* for *Tirgan*. It is believed that for their abundant harvest, the ancient Iranians felt indebted to *Tishtrya*, the angel in charge of waters. They believed that *Tishtrya* fought the demon of draught and, by defeating him, provided abundant water for their fields and orchards.

Legend points to Arash-e Kamangir as the provider of water. Arash's arrow settled the border dispute between Iran and Turan and provided ample water. Whether the similarity of the name of the month of *Tir*, during which the celebration occurs, and the word *tir* (arrow), has anything to do with the genesis of the legend remains to be seen.

The *Tirgan* celebration (*Tir* 13, or July 2, 3, or 4) is usually held near rivers and lakes. During the celebration, the participants splash water on each other. In an event called *Tir-o Bad* (arrow and wind), using strings that have the same colors as the rainbow, they weave wristbands and wear them for nine or ten days. Then either throw the strings in water, or take them to the rooftop and throw them to the wind. Their hope is that the water, or the wind, will carry their wishes to the place where wishes are fulfilled.

In a different venue, individuals deposit an item of theirs, like a ring, in a jar that is brought to the houses of the participants by a young girl. After all items are collected, the girl covers the jar with a green cloth and puts it at the foot of an evergreen tree. On the day of the celebration, among poetry recited by older women, the jar is opened and some of the items are brought out. The wishes of the owners of those items will come true.

### ***Mehregan***

*Mehregan* is recognized as a rival of the *Nowruz*. It is a name-day celebration dedicated to the *yazata Mithra*, or in present-day Iran, *Izad-e Mehr* (deity of the sun).<sup>28</sup> Like *Nowruz*, *Mehregan* harks to the Iranian tribes' preoccupation with agriculture; therefore, at harvest time, they paid homage to the deity in charge of green fields and abundance.

### ***Sadeh***

*Sadeh* is a midwinter feast that occurs on *Bahman* 10 (January 30), roughly 50 days before *Nowruz*. In fact, it is called *Sadeh* (one hundred) because there remains a combination of one hundred nights and days to *Nowruz*. *Sadeh* is celebrated with bonfires, and fires kindled on rooftops. The celebration ends in a family get-together. In the same way that *Charshanbeh Suri* begins the *Nowruz* celebrations, *Sadeh* begins the agricultural season, the season of fertility.

Three other celebrations: *Shab-e Yalda* (longest night), *Chelle-ye Bozorg* (forty days before *Sadeh*), and *Chelle-ye Kuchek* (twenty days, i.e., twenty days and twenty nights) after the *Sadeh*) cooccur with the celebration of the *Sadeh*. Whether this coincidence adds, or detracts, from the splendor of the *Sadeh* celebration, is open to speculation.

### Afterthought

As it was explained in this short article about *Nowruz*, in the early Islamic era, a wrong and sterile policy was established to diminish, and eventually suspend, the major components of the *Nowruz* celebrations: *Charshanbeh Suri*, *Khawja Piruz*, *Haftsin* and *Sizdah Bedar*. Their demise, it was assumed, would reduce the grandeur of *Nowruz* and, eventually, render it meaningless. According to this unwritten policy, since then, steps have been taken to discard the *Charshanbeh Suri*, which begins the *Nowruz* celebrations, and *Sizdah Bedar* that provides a proper end for them.

The main attack, however, has been focused on the *Haftsin*, the main center of the *Nowruz* celebrations. This simple display and its seven well-defined items, have been attacked from several directions. First, as it was discussed, doubt is thrown on the identity of the letter "sin" with the insertion of the phony letter "shin" as its precedent. Second, fake items are introduced as replacements for the seven items. Often the required necessity for the items to be edible is totally ignored. Third, a host of irrelevant interpretations for the fake items fills the literature.

In the past, due to the illiteracy of the majority of the population, this policy proved fruitful. Today, however, due to the awareness of the people, especially the younger generation, of the destructive nature of this policy, its enforcement is facing stiff resistance. The strict stance of the young generation has another reason. They struggle to create a balance between their Islamic holidays and their national celebrations so that, like their ancestors, they do not sacrifice one at the altar of the other.

In the early Islamic period, the fate of the other festivals discussed above, too, was discussed. At the end, it was determined to leave their fate to the dynamics of urbanization in the growing Iranian society. It was thought that the increasing urbanization of the society would break the strong ties that had held the ancient agricultural communities together. Fairly fortunately, that eventuality did not come to pass. Today, the general public is aware of the need for strengthening the link between the urban centers and the rural communities. Young people in particular pay special attention to the necessity of keeping the dynamic interaction between agriculture and industry vibrant. Undoubtedly, in the future, these celebrations will be held with greater splendor and pomp.

It is hoped that the awareness outlined above can be sustained and expanded through writing articles, plays, and songs about the important components of the *Nowruz* celebration. Furthermore, that not only the Iranian public in general, but also the citizens of our global village, be made aware of the hidden danger that threatens this unique heritage.



## Footnotes

- [1] Boyce, 1982, pp. 172-175.
- [2] Safa, 1992, p. 292; see also Soudavar, 2003, p. 114 for the relationship between *Nowruz* and *Mehregan*. For the relation between *Nowruz* and *Rapithwin*, see Hinnells, 1973, p. 36.
- [3] Parsees are Iranians who left Iran for India after the Arab and, later, Mongol invasions.
- [4] Hinnells, 1979, p. 59.
- [5] Among others, Iranians have borrowed two cultural points from the Arabs: their alphabet and their starting point for history (*mabda'-i tarikh*). For the former, they modified the Arabic alphabet by adding four letters while retaining a number of sounds that are not used in Persian. The alphabet thus created is referred to as the Arabic-based Persian alphabet. For the latter, they have accepted the *hijrah* of the Prophet as the starting point for their history, abandoning centuries of real history as well as a wealth of mythic time (cf., the Christian calendar that begins with the birth of Christ). Thus, both the solar and the lunar calendars used in Iran are Islamic, albeit of different modes. During the rule of the Pahlavis, an attempt was made to replace the year 1355 with 2535 but, due to mismanagement and lack of stability of the regime, the effort failed. This calendar would have been an Iranian calendar since its starting point coincided with the coronation of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire.
- [6] Ahmadov, 1984, pp. 41-42.
- [7] Hicks, 1979, p. 121-122.
- [8] Khayyam, 1965, p. 27.
- [9] Hinnells, 1979, p. 97. See also Wilber, 1989, p. 84.
- [10] Khayyam, pp. 22-25
- [11] See Darmesteter, pp. 48-131.
- [12] Hedayat, 1964, pp.149-151; <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.
- [13] Hedayat, 1964, 151-152.
- [14] Hedayat, 1986, p.18.
- [15] Using the floor is the traditional way. As the displays have become larger and moved into public spaces, table tops are replacing the floor. Sometimes several tables of various sizes are used for the display to cascade from the higher one to the others below.
- [16] The list provided in this section is a popular list from among which people choose the seven items to be placed on their *sofreh*. *Haft sin's* ancient past, however, dictates that seven specific items be used for the purpose. See below for more details.
- [17] These popular explanations are mere guesses. See further below for a more correct explanation of the *haft sin* and the meaning of the items placed on the display.
- [18] Donaldson, pp. 120-123; Hedayat, 1964, 152-154.
- [19] For the reason why *shin* could not have been an appropriate letter for the *Haftsin*, see further below.
- [20] For the reason why these other interpretations are not acceptable, see further below. Some of these interpretations could have belonged to some of the other celebrations, such as *Mehregan*, held by ancient Iranians.
- [21] Cf., Engheta', <http://hagheghat.persianblog.ir/post/257/>
- [22] *Khan* is the short form for *dasturkhan* (also pronounced *dastarkhan*), the prevalent word used for the display in present-day Tajikistan.
- [23] Kiyān or Kiyānian is a mythological dynasty of ancient Iran. Its mention testifies to the ancient history of the *Nowruz* celebration. For further details, see Bashiri 2012, pp. 11-45; Over time, this poem has taken other forms which we do not need to deal with.
- [24] *Shsyeh* is used in the sense of fruit.
- [25] Note that some of the items that should not be used for the *haft sin* can be placed on the *sofreh* proper.
- [26] Hinnells, 1979, p. 110.
- [27] Kenney, 2012, p. 88; Hedayat, 1964, p. 154.
- <sup>28</sup> In Zoroastrian literature, the days and months of the year are dedicated to different deities. Sometimes the name of a day and the name of a month coincide. On those days, a celebration is held.

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