

Analyzing Norooz in Iran and Afghanistan

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Abstract: In the culture and customs of each nation, there are days that have historical and cultural roots and are the manifestation of beliefs that go forward even to their religious sanctities, and display their historical and cultural identity of that society. One of these days is the beginning of the new Solar year that is regarded as the most frequent universal customs, and less civilization can be found that is deprived of that. Each civilization honors the outset of the New Year in establishing historical and national customs and celebrations. With the benefit of a genuine, long-term culture and history and the concurrency of that with the life and revival of the earth, Norooz and the celebrations of the New Year have the especial point to be different from the New Year celebrations of other nations. The ancient customs of Norooz is beyond the recollection of a nation, but also is the link between past, present, and future. It takes more virtue, after the advent of Islam, and the emphasis is on the commemoration of its customs. The collection of these factors caused that despite of passing many years and vicissitudinous way of history, Nouroz stays strong not only in "Great and ancient Iran", but also wherever that "the Great culture and civilization of Iran" affects. Therefore, through comparing of Norooz in both Afghanistan and Iran, the author attempts to show that where the roots of this tradition are and how Norooz has survived in these two countries.

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1. Introduction

In the countries that calculates day, month, and year is done based on the circulation of earth movement around the Sun, the celebration of the New Year begins in the first day of spring when is the day in which the Earth places in the vernal equinox to the Sun. The vernal equinox is the moment at which Sun passes from the equator and moves toward the north in the north hemisphere. Norooz or New Year basically, is the name of the first day of the New Year that is placed in Iranian calendar deeply traditionally. The antiquity of Norooz is clear from Sassanid era. Undoubtedly, Norooz is one of the most antique celebrations, the antiquity of which traces back to the ancient times. However, today, the geography of Norooz has been expanded in comparison with past. Therefore, in the first days of spring various celebrations are held from many countries of Middle East such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, China, Caucasus, India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Bangladesh as well. Although, in the past holding the celebration of Norooz didn't use to be customary in countries such as Egypt, and China, celebrations similar to Norooz are held in these countries nowadays. The geographical expansion of Norooz was so that in the last AD year, the United Nation registered Norooz as the international day of Norooz and the culture of peace in the world by the approval of resolution. The

significance of Norooz in some countries such as Uzbekistan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Kurdish part of Turkey, the historical background of which are grafted to somehow with Iran is so that in these countries Norooz is turned into as one of the dominant cultural customs on those societies. More interestingly, most of the customs and Norooz culture in these countries are similar to those of Iran.

2. Significance of Paying Attention to the Customs

Among the issues relating to social development, discussion about the relation of tradition and development is an important part of discussions and social development experts' discourses. Explaining the relation of tradition and development, especially social development is greatly important for socialist and scientists of development. Touching the issue of tradition and development and dominant relations of that is one of the most serious issues of development that is greatly important and is able to be followed, especially among nations and developing countries that enjoy long historical and civilization enrichment. There is no consensus on the role and significance of tradition in developing between social science theoreticians, and there are two major ideas in these issues, generally. Some scientists have respected an elegantly role for tradition and emphasized on the agreement and solidarity of development and

traditions, and asserted from saving traditions alongside social development³, since traditions justify the status quo, generally. Moreover, it is possible to prevent from any change in terms of social development. Therefore, the adaptability between tradition and modernism (development) is thought impossible naturally and spontaneously. Modernism in social science is applied to determine a process by the help of which a traditional society that is against tradition moves toward a technologic society by enjoying an efficient system to meet the needs of people and society. In other words, a modernized society takes the advantage of technical means during the production, and applies its dominance on other levels of the society. However, in the present interpretation of social science, tradition is thought as a collection of ideas, customs, and historical, cultural, and social habits. Understanding the place of "tradition" in the process of development depends on several issues. First: there are interpretations of this concept in culture. Second: the instances that are raised for traditions in the society. Third: understanding the level of efficiency and inefficiency of traditions in the way of development, and fourth: treating the modernism and development (Fazeli, Nematollah)

3. Norooz in Iran

Ancient Norooz that has been held since thousands years ago is the resurrection celebration of nature, renewing of life, the celebrations of movement, and the celebration of nature. Norooz and its celebration is very ancient for Iranians. Detailed calculations showed that Norooz used to be recognized and held as a festival in Persepolis by Xenophon. Placing Norooz in the beginning of spring was established from King Seljuk (465 – 485 AH), that was called to the name of its creator (Jalali History – Maleki History). At this time, astrologists such as Omar Khayyam, Hakim Lukri, Meimoon ibn najib vaseti, Abol-Mozafar esfazari and some other succeeded in the modification of the calendar by the order of Malekshah. One should know that before this, Norooz was circulation, and was never placed in its original place, i.e. Aries and the opening day of spring. Most people believe that Norooz and its lateral celebrations (Chaharshanbe Suri, Sizdah Bedar) have Iranian roots, completely. Some of these celebrations, Chaharshanbe Suri, especially are known even depended on Zoroastrianism, because of the importance of fire in it. On the other hand, different evidence indicate that these celebrations have a background higher than "Iranian" nation (that means immigrant Hindu-European ethnic who emigrated to Iran about 3000 years ago) and are originated from the pre-Aryan ceremony of this plateau. Perhaps Elamite, Kasi, Guti, and other

ancient ethnics celebrated them. The source of our information on the beliefs of Hindu-Iranian ethnics is at first the oldest parts of Avesta and the second, comparison of other beliefs of Hindu-European with ancient Iranian ones (especially Hindu-Aryans). Rigveda, the oldest parts of Hindu-European Vedas, is one of the best resources available to understand the principals of belief, celebrations, and Aryan (Hindu-Iranian) ethnics. The beliefs of other ethnics such as Ska, Nuristani, and Persian language people who used to live in Mawarannahr and Eastern regions of the Pamir Mountains can be used as our pattern to understand the ancient Iranian beliefs. (Nowadays this Norooz celebration or Nourouz festival in many countries that are in the scope and under the influence of Persian Imperial: Iran and Iranian scattered people including Kurds, Afghans, are important parts of Middle East, parts of the former Soviet Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. In Avesta, especially in Gathas, and other Yashts that are the oldest parts of the book, Norooz and the ceremonies have not been mentioned. Avestan ceremonies are the invocations to different Amschaspands and Fravashis. Yashts are the hymns that are written to praise Mitra, Anahita, Verona, Home, and other Amschaspands, that should be sang in the celebrations relating to them. (Jashn "celebration" and "Yashts" are from the same origin). Therefore, in old parts of Avesta, there is no remembrance from Norooz, Chaharshanbe Suri, Sizdah bedar or even Sade celebrations. The first sign of Norooz in Avesta is in the second Fargard, Vendidad, where there are some orders for holding Norooz as well as recounting the legend of Yima (Jamshid), Ferdosi mentions to this narration as well. However, Vendidad is among the last Fargards of Avesta that is likely written either in Sassanid era or it is rewritten at that era completely, and most of the Sassanid Zoroastrian beliefs have been inserted in this book. Seen from the other side of the coin, one can reach to a conclusion on the historical origins of Norooz and other related celebrations by looking into the lifestyle of Hindu-Iranian ethnics and comparing that with the ethnics residing in Iran and between the two counties. Hindu-Iranian ethnics used to live on Livestock and nurture of horses, and their lives was based on nomadic. People, who lived in the Plateau of Iran, Elamite, Kasi, Guti, Urartu, Mitanni, and far more people residing between two rivers, depended on agricultural life. It means that the order of planting, and harvesting of crops such as wheat, was regarded, as the major job of these people, and the time for each of these stages was important. We see that writing astrology calendars, based on which they determined the attainment of the season, is the achievements of these people. The annual flooding of rivers, the

beginning of hot season, the time of harvesting, the time of periodical abandoning the land, have been all among the agricultural life pastime. Therefore, dividing year into twelve months and four seasons (the presence of which is felt completely in this region), dividing a month into twenty-eight days (based on Lunar calendar), and ordaining a week, were all the divisions of Sumer and Babel people that were also used from their neighbors. There is much evidence available from celebrating the beginning of spring in ancient Babel. In the beginning day of spring, king went toward Marduk temple, Babel god, and showed his support from the monarchy by taking god's hands. After this ceremony, the king came back to the Royal Palace and ordered the public time, and all people could visit the king. This ceremony is so significant that it was held annually after capturing Babel from Cyrus, Persian kings until Xerxes. The end of spring celebrations in the thirteenth day of spring (that was recognized was a doom number in Babylonian legends) used to be announced by going of all the townspeople, including the king to the plains outside the city. Moreover, there are some mentions of celebrating the beginning of the New year in Babel in "Sinohe, Pharaoh's own doctor" book, and it is stated that in the thirteenth day, the false king ceremony has been done. Maybe what is left from *Dorough e 13* (April's Fool day) is originated from the same ceremony. On the other hand, most of the world culture from Babel to European nations has ceremonies such as inflaming fire, at the end of harvesting. Inflaming fire was among the customary ceremonies after harvesting in all agricultural societies, basically, and one can observe it in the European countries nowadays. Inflaming fire is customary in Iran during Mehregan festival (that has been the official celebration of at the end of harvest season. Inflaming fire can be considered as a type of the same ceremony in Chaharshanbe Suri.

In summary, one can guess that the celebration of the beginning of spring and the ceremony of inflaming fire and exiting from the city have all been among the agricultural customs of people residing in Iran. However, Iranian ethnics started adopting this ceremony after they migrated to this country and resided in there, then they iranized it by inserting some of their own beliefs (simulating of the beginning of spring to victory of truth over lies). This celebration, which might be held even from periods before Achaemenians by these people, has been a public celebration that has been able to turn into a public celebration for all people due to its non-religious and apolitical nature, and comes into a celebration little by little so that Parthian and

Sassanid states announce it as their own official ceremony.

Norooz celebration is one of the Iranian national and ancient customs. The details of this celebration are hidden to us until pre-Achaemenian era. There is no mention in Avesta to this celebration. Moreover, there is no information available on the religious viewpoint and religious beliefs of ancient Iranians in relation to this celebration. Although there are some generalities in the few books written in Sassanid era during Norooz celebration. Based on Babylonians literature, Achaemenian kings sat in the House porch and received the representatives from various provinces who had brought exquisite gifts with them for the kings. It has been stated that the Great Cyrus, one of the Achaemenian kings (421-486) visited Baal Marduk worship, who was one of the great Babylonian gods in the beginning of each year. In addition, Parthians and Sassanids celebrated Norooz by holding especial ceremonies and rituals. In the morning of Norooz, the king entered the Palace alone in his own garment. Then, the individual who was known as a lucky person entered the Palace. After that, the highest Zoroastrianism's priest holding a cup, ring, and gold coins, sword, archery, pen, ink, and flower entered the Palace while whispering a prayer. After the great priest, the government officials entered the Palace in a regular queue and gave their gifts to the king. The king sent the exquisite gifts to the treasury and distributed the remained gifts among the present people. It should be mentioned that Norooz celebration used to be held before Jamshid as well and Aboureihan reminds that "the day when was a new day, was celebrated by Jamshid, although Norooz was regarded great and supreme before that as well"⁹ despite the fact that he attributes the celebration to Jamshid.

However, the primarily roots of this ancient national Eid in Iran can be mentioned in three cases:

1. At first, Iranian had a circular imagination for time circulation, which was started from one point and ended in a circular circulation to the same point. This beginning and ending point was named "Norooz".
2. There were six Gahambars (celebration) in Zoroastrianism, each of which was celebrated to honor the creation one of the phenomena: the creation of sky, earth, water, plants, animal, and human being. These celebrations enabled the human being to pass the holy time, and past individual and social sins and errors.
3. Norooz or the creation celebration: is the celebration of Faravahars, and more important the celebration of blessing, germination, and agriculture. On the other hand, Norooz is the resurrection of life, because the plants grow, and human beings are recreated. In the beginning of Norooz, sun moves

from the Pisces to the Ram, which means that the sun arrives at the closest distance to the earth and it is sacred.

As the sign show, our Norooz customs are similar to the ceremonies related to Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greece gods. Before it, the Greek covered shroud on a statue such as Adonis (in Greek mythology a youth who was murdered because of envy, that is similar to Siavash in Iranian Mythology) and took him to the tombstone. Then they threw him in the sea, river, or fountain and performed the customs related to the revival of this god immediately. It means that culturing was begun in Adonis gardens again. People planted various types of cereal, flowers, and plants and renewed the loam. People used to lay on the table cloth in front of Marduk and placed Izadi feed (god's feed) on it and put branches of cypress and other fragrant plants in Bable that used to last twelve days for this celebration i.e. Akitu Festival. All the Norooz customs had religious and spiritual aspects for all the ethnics including Egyptians, Babylonians, and other ancient ethnics, second, their purpose was renewing, the repetition of creation, and destroying the past time and overcoming to the force of evil. Farvardegan celebration was counted as "the Dead Eid," which is known as Pitara Festival for Hindus. Aboureyhan Bironi tells about Sogdians: at the end of each month, Sogdian people mourned for their dead people, and left eating and drinking for the dead. Therefore, Norooz that followed that is the day of happiness and the New-Year Festival. There were rites relating to Siavash Mourning "Suvashun" following that, Haji Firooz appeared in the streets and brought the promise of happiness with him.

4. Norooz in Afghanistan

Norooz is regarded as a festival (a national celebration) in which higher government officials; president, ministers, and other government bodies participate. The two first days of the New Year are holidays in Afghanistan, and all the offices are close and are held as a traditional festival for two weeks among Pars people. However, the most important venue in Balkh and its center, Mazar-e Sharif is held by the same glory. In the first days of year, the plains of Balkh and the muddy roofs were full of roses. It seems that Balkh is a basket full of roses, or in other words, it is like a big burner in which tulip is burning. This flower grows only in Balkh abundantly. Therefore, Norooz celebration and the rose festival are both used with the same meaning. In the morning of Norooz Eid the Holy flag of "Imam Ali (PBUH) is raised by holding especial and magnificent rites, which means the official beginning of Norooz celebration and lasts for forty days, and sit at the foot of this Holy flag for forty days. It is stated that many

of the cureless patients were healed under the same flag. The people of this country believe that if the flag is raised calmly and without vibration when it is raised, the following year is happy. Among the rites and customs of Norooz in Balkh one can refer to washing the carpets of house, cleaning of house, and performing competitions such as Boz-keshi (dragging goats), Shotor Jangi (Camel Fighting), Camel riding, Ghouch Jangi (Ram Fighting), and wrestling in this region.

Norooz is one of the rare customs that is still regarded as the basic cultural index in Afghanistan despite of thousands of year's ups and downs. This day when is coincided with the first of Ram (Farvardin, the first month of spring), is not only a calendar anniversary, that is the beginning of a new period in the earth circulation. Norooz is the symbol of life commemoration, nature, and human values in the history and culture of Afghanistan that has deep roots in poetry, literature, art, folklore, and family and social relations of this country. Although there are only some guesses on how and when Norooz created, it is clear that the age of this custom is as long as Aryans' age. Traditionally, the beginning of Norooz is attributed to Yama or Jamshid, mythical ruler of Balkh. This myth is reflected in great works of Aboureyhan Bironi, Tabari (the author of Tarikh-e alrosol va almolok, known as Tabari history) and Ferdowsi. The customs of Norooz celebration has an at least 3000 year background, and has deep roots in the religious system of Zoroastrianism that was common until the dominance of Islam on this country. However, in spite of this historical background, Norooz has never been limited to the religion or especial groups. The advent and spread of Islam that brought with it especial religious celebrations, didn't prevent the customs of Norooz to be held. However, Norooz engaged with religious values and found more richness in this country. If raising flag (Ali PBUH) is the peak of Norooz rite in Mazar-e Sharif in Afghanistan. After that, people promenade to the plains full of roses for forty days. People traveled to Mazar-e Sharif and Balkh to hold these customs. In other wilayahs of the north added happiness to Norooz by launching Boz-keshi (dragging goats). In the other villages and provinces, ever man and woman welcomed Norooz by holding especial customs. People wore new clothes, laid on colorful confectionaries and delicious edibles on the table clothes, and had fun out of the town in nature or in especial squares. Hobbies such as Tokhm Jangi (egg fighting), wrestling, Sag jangi (dog fighting), Khorous Jangi (cock fighting), Attan (national dance), singing, etc are some of the customs that are held on this day. Producing and consuming Haft miveh (seven fruits) and Samanak (Samanu; a sweet

paste made from germinated wheat, which is prepared for Norooz in a large pot) are the other customs with which people celebrate Norooz in Afghanistan. Haft Miveh (Seven Fruits) is something similar to Haft-Sin in Iran, that is a collection of pistachio, almond, dried slices of apricot, Shekar Pareh, walnut, and sea-buckthorn that were soaked in water three days before Norooz to welcome the guests with them. Samanak that is prepared from soaked green wheat is regarded as the symbol of blessing, and had it hoping to meet the needs. Preparing Samanak takes several days, and girls played daf while playing and sang especial songs. Another especial customs of this day is giving Norooz gifts to fiancés in Afghanistan. Boys sent some gifts with fish and Jelebi (a kind of confectionary) to their fiancées, and the girl's family sent it back to the groom by putting a gift in the same dish. Although Norooz comes into operation as a public celebration almost in whole the country, these customs are held in different places with local property that adds diversity and color to Norooz. Taliban movement inhibited holding Norooz customs by the interpretation that it is a non-Islamic celebration in one of the first attacks on the cultural heritage of the country. Afghans passed five springs without Norooz for the first time in the history. The beginning of 2003 (Solar Year) is in fact the rebirth of Norooz in Afghanistan. One of the most important customs of Norooz is raising the flag (Imam Ali PBUH) in Afghanistan. In this year, Afghans celebrated Norooz after passing 24 years of civil war and five years of domination on Taliban. It is predicted that in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, ten thousand people gather to watch the custom of raising the flag. It is stated that the presence of such a population has even been unprecedented in the era of Taliban3.

5. Joint ceremonies of Norooz

1.5. Spring-cleaning

Housecleaning is one of the customs that is done by people of the regions who celebrate Norooz. In this custom, all the utensils and furniture is cleaned and dusted in the on the eve of Norooz. This custom is held in different countries including Iran and Afghanistan.

2.5. Fire flaming

The custom of flaming fire has been becoming common in the regions of Norooz since old times. This custom is common in the form of igniting fire in the last Wednesday night of the year in Iran and some parts of Afghanistan. This ceremony is called Chaharshanbe-Suri. Jumping over the fire is common in both countries in Norooz. Moreover, the custom of flaming fire in the morning of Norooz on the roofs

is customary among some of the Zoroastrians (including some of the villages in Yazd, in Iran).

3.5. Norooz table setting

Norooz table setting is one of the joint customs of Norooz among people who celebrate it. Haft sin table setting is laid on in most parts of Iran and Afghanistan. Seven items whose name are started with the letter 'S' or Sīn (س) in the Persian alphabet should be placed on this table, such as serkeh (vinegar), senjed (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree), Samanu (a sweet pudding made from wheat germ), etc. Haft sin table setting has especial customs in Iran. A mirror is placed on the table that symbolizes brightness, candle is also placed, which symbolizes light. Moreover, a bowl of water is placed on the table that is the symbol of purity. Hyacinth was used to beautify the table, and it was not regarded as the seven sins. Painted eggs were used to decorate the table. After entering the goldfish from China to Iran, people used them to beautify Haft sin tables. Moreover, after Islam entered Iran, people placed Holy Quran on the table. All the seven items on the table have especial meanings. For example, Sib (apple) symbolizes beauty and health, senjed (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree) symbolizes love, Sabzeh (wheat or barley sprouts) symbolizes rebirth. Samanu (a sweet pudding made from wheat germ) symbolizes affluence, sekkeh (coin) symbolizes prosperity, and sir (garlic) symbolizes medicine. In Kabul and northern cities of Afghanistan, haft miveh (seven fruits) table is customary. On this table, seven fruits are placed, including green raisin and red raisin, chahar maghz (four mixed nuts), almond, pistachio, apricot, and senjed (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree). Setting a table is similar to using dried fruits, is customary among Shia in Pakistan (<http://www.tebyan.net/index.aspx?pid=159873>).

4.5. Norooz dishes

One of the most common dishes that is cooked for Norooz is Samanu (Samanak, Sumanak, Sumalak, Samani, Samane). This dish is prepared with the wheat sprouts. This dish is cooked in most of the countries where celebrate Norooz. In some countries, cooking this dish is followed by especial customs. Women and girls cooked this dish together and sometimes during the night in different regions of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and sang especial songs during cooking. For example, in Afghanistan, in one of the most famous songs, this stanza was song repeatedly. Cooking other kinds of dishes is customary in Norooz. For example, in some parts of Iran, Sabzi Polo Mahi (a kind of traditional meal that is rice with green herbs served with fish). In Turkmenistan, Norooz bameh is cooked, in Kazakhstan oighi ashar, in Bukhara kinds of samosas are cooked. Generally, cooking Norooz foods is

custom and common in each region where Norooz is celebrated, and each region has its own especial dishes and confectionaries.

5.5. Visiting one another

Visiting one another is one of the Norooz customs that is customary in most of the countries that celebrate it. In some regions, reminiscing the deceases and presenting at their tombstones in customary in Norooz.

6.5. Sport Competitions

General sport competitions in urban and rural streets are other rites that are held in some countries for Norooz. In Turkmenistan, Turkmen men and women hold especial hobbies and games including equitation, wrestling, jumping to take the handkerchief, and chess. Launching cock fighting and ram butting are among the other ceremonies that are still held in Afghanistan and some parts of Iran. In Northern provinces of Afghanistan, goat-dragging competitions are held for different occasions including Norooz.

7.5. Nature excursion

Iranians go to natural places such as parks, gardens, jungles, and areas outside of the city on thirteenth of Farvardin (the first month of spring). This ceremony is called Sizdah Bedar (literally meaning, "Passing the thirteenth day," figuratively meaning "Passing the bad luck of the thirteenth day"). The traditions associated with this day are, to tie the leaves of sabzeh and Dorough-e Sizdah, (literally meaning, "The lie of the thirteenth, which is the process of lying to someone and making them believe it (similar to April fool's Day)). Sizdah Bedar is also held in Western parts of Afghanistan including Herat. Although Farvardin thirteenth is not a holiday in Afghanistan, people shut down their business to surf the nature. People of this region, spend the first Wednesday of the new year in nature. In addition, the residents of Kabul in Afghanistan go to regions where purple flower grows. Another tradition of Norooz that is customary in Central Asia and Tajikistan is the ceremony of flower handling, and nightingale singing. Flower handlers picked flowers from the valley, hill, and hillside and give the tidings of finishing winter and beginning spring, the bride of the year, and spring planting and Norooz to the villagers.

6. Conclusion

Traditions have played a doubled role in each society that means traditions have had positive or negative roles in development or non-development of countries. It means the positive side of traditions has had the dominant mood in some countries and tradition could act as the accelerating and supporting

force. However, the negative and superstitious side toward the dominance of especial political, social, and cultural situation has been dominant, and acted as dam and barrier against development and modernism. The realities of the world, especially the third world that has been mostly dominated by traditions, represents that desirable and undesirable functions of traditions have elegant roles on the development and non-development of countries and determining their positions on the way of development. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to look at the positive sides of traditions in social and developmental affairs, in addition to introducing Norooz in Iran and Afghanistan. Through analyzing the issue of Norooz one can conclude that:

The tradition of Norooz is to somehow the same in Iran and Afghanistan, and little differences are seen in it; however, the thing that is important in this issue is the role that these traditions including Norooz can play on one hand in social freshness and on the other in the issue of development. If the tradition that owns original and historical identity can be introduced well, they can have highly positive function in the social and developmental affair.

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