



Now Ruz

The New Year Celebrations in Persia

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NOW RUZ—THE NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS IN PERSIA

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Of all the Persian national festivals, the New Year celebrations are at once the most important and the most colorful. This festival embodies a wealth of ancient rites and customs, and is about the only one in Persia which is not confined to the traditions of only one religious group. It symbolizes that continuity of the ancient Persian culture which has survived so many adversities and vicissitudes.

The Now Ruz celebration stretches over a period of thirteen days, the last being a special occasion calling for particular ceremonies. The period begins with the first day of spring, when the sun enters the zodiacal sign of the Ram. At Now Ruz people join nature in making a fresh start, full of joy and hope for the coming year.

The origin of Now Ruz is traditionally attributed to Jamshid, the mightiest and the most glorious of the legendary kings of Persia. The legend is recorded by the celebrated historians Tabari and Biruni, as well as by Ferdowsi. One version says that after Jamshid had taught his people the art of building, weaving, mining and making arms, and divided them into four appropriate classes, he then set out to conquer the demon hosts. These he defeated and reduced to hard labor for the benefit of men. Next he ordered the demons to build him a special crystal carriage. When it was ready, he entered the carriage

and, to the joy and amazement of all the people, the demons lifted it into the air and Jamshid rode thus from Demavand to Babylon. The day was called Now Ruz (the New Day) and was made an annual celebration.

It may be safely assumed, however, that the Now Ruz festival, essentially an agrarian celebration, owes its origin, at least in part, to the fertility cult, so common among the ancient Near and Middle Eastern nations. Some of the customs observed at Now Ruz are reminiscent of Babylonian Zagmuk. The growing of "sabzeh" (fresh green shoots), which are later thrown into water, particularly brings to mind the Syrian cult of Adonis.

But it is the Ancient and Zoroastrian Persia which provides the background for most of the customs and ceremonies of Now Ruz.

While the lunar calendar is used for Muslim festivals and holidays, Now Ruz is reckoned by a solar calendar. This was adopted in ancient times by the Zoroastrians, and is used today as the national calendar of Persia. However, one must bear in mind that the Zoroastrian year did not always begin on the 21st of March (1st of Farvardin). There are reasons to believe that at one time it began with the commencement of autumn. Again at a certain period, prior to or during Sassanian times (226-651 A.D.) the beginning of the year was fixed at the vernal equinox, the 1st of Farvardin (21st March),

and it was immediately preceded by a religious festival of five days. During these five days the spirits of the departed (Fravahrs) were said to visit their family, and houses were therefore cleaned and food and drink offered to the haunting spirits. Some of the Now Ruz customs may refer to this festival, which was partly absorbed into the Now Ruz ceremonies in Islamic times.

The Achaemenian kings (550-330 B.C.) celebrated the New Year in the Royal palaces with great pomp and ceremony. Sumptuous receptions were held, and the envoys of the various nations living in the vast Achaemenian empire presented their tributes and gifts. This homage by the envoys has been vividly depicted in the sculptures of the palaces built by Darios the Great and his son Xerxes.

In Sassanian times (226-652 A.D.) there was a vigorous revival of Persian nationalism. Now Ruz, along with Mehregan, another ancient festival, continued to be the main national festivals. During the six-day celebration of Now Ruz, a plenary audience given by the "King of Kings" was the climax of the festivities at the Court. Merriment and rejoicing were heightened by musicians composing and performing appropri-

ate pieces and court poets and singers contributing their art. The splendor of the Sassanian Court was, in fact, best exemplified by its lavish festivities at Now Ruz.

Although the advent of Islam in the seventh century A.D. naturally brought with it new festivals and holidays, Now Ruz was not overshadowed. On the contrary, together with Mehregan and some other old Iranian festivals, it was carried over to the Islamic period, and continued to be celebrated at the royal courts as in Sassanian times. The many graceful odes and sonnets concerning Now Ruz to be found in the Divans of the Persian poets bear witness to the ever-lively spirit and unbroken importance of the festival for the Persian nation.

Today, while many of the ancient festivals have faded away in most parts of the country, Now Ruz remains a national Persian festival, and its advent brings joy to the heart of the people. Although many of the old customs and ceremonies, as recorded in histories and travel books, have vanished with the lapse of time, yet what does remain makes Now Ruz the most fascinating of the Persian festivals, rich in folkloric details and symbolic reminiscences.

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The preparation for Now Ruz begins well in advance. Children and young people particularly are excited at the thought of approaching Now Ruz with its prospect of gifts, new clothes, and the round of festive parties. Some fifteen to ten days be-

fore Spring each household starts preparing the "sabzeh": grains of wheat or lentil are put into water to germinate; then the germinated grain is spread over a dish and allowed to grow. By the time Now Ruz arrives, the grains have sent up a fresh mass

of green blades as a token of spring. This decorative symbol of good omen is kept till the end of the holiday.

During the days immediately preceding Now Ruz, an amusing spectacle is provided by the "fire-lighters," men wearing high hats, harlequin dress studded with small bells, often with their faces painted black, or wearing a grotesque masque. These messengers of joy parade the streets with a troop of performers, which may include dancers, acrobats and folk musicians, reciting folk songs and trying various tricks to amuse the spectators.

The Wednesday preceding the New Year calls for particular ceremonies and performances of very old origin. The rites and customs vary somewhat from region to region, but a common and essential ceremony consists of piling at least three small heaps of shrubbery in the courtyard and setting them afire. Then all the members of the family jump over the flames in turn, reciting a little rhyme of good augur: "My pallor to you, your ruddiness to me." In Tehran and some other provinces, women who have a person sick in their family sometimes go out, incognito, to collect the ingredients required for a special soup which, it is hoped, will hasten the cure of the sick relative. Without revealing their face or uttering a word, they announce their demand by tapping with a spoon on a copper bowl. Many children make a game of imitating the women, by covering their face and going round to collect money or material for the soup.

A thorough house cleaning is es-

sential to the preparations for Now Ruz: all the rugs and linen are washed, furniture meticulously cleaned, and, if possible, the house repaired and painted. In some regions it was customary to break all the earthenware vessels and throw them out, replacing them with new ones.

Everyone is supposed to provide himself with new clothes, shoes, and hats for Now Ruz. Children are particularly attached to this aspect of the festival. As the exact time of the New Year draws near everyone gets ready for the occasion. The exact time, that is, the moving of the Sun to the sign of the Ram, is announced in larger cities by the firing of cannons. A few hours before this solemn moment, all the members of the family gather in the house. By this time they have all bathed, men have had their hair cut, women have finished their toilet, and all have put on their new clothes. Candles or lamps are lit and a special table is spread in the main room. On it are placed a mirror, candle sticks, and the holy book, according to the family's faith. Generally also a bowl of water, with a green leaf floating in it, a flagon of rosewater, a piece of bread, herbs, fruits, candies and cakes especially made for Now Ruz, and two other items particularly prepared: colored eggs and the "Haft-sin." The latter is a special feature of Now Ruz and consists of seven articles whose names begin with the letter "S." As a rule, they are sib, sabzi, sir, serkeh, sumac, senjed and samanu; that is, apple, fresh herbs, garlic, vinegar, sumac, Bohemian olive and a sweet tasting food prepared with green wheat.

Other articles of good omen may be added to those already mentioned.

When finally the moment arrives the family gathering is pervaded with a spirit of joy and happiness. The members of the family embrace each other, greetings and good wishes are expressed and gifts are exchanged, the children generally being on the receiving side. The special food served on the New Year Eve consists mainly of steamed rice (pilav) mixed with herbs, and served with fried fish.

Visiting relatives and friends, a characteristic feature of the Now Ruz, begins on the first day and continues to the end of the twelfth. The elder members of the family receive the visit first, and the junior members later. A general air of gaiety, contentment and rejoicing marks the atmosphere of these days.

In villages, young boys engage in wrestling and highly active games. In some cities the old custom of playing kettle-drums (Naqqare) accompanied by a kind of oboe (karna, surna) on a special platform is still preserved.

Now Ruz ceremonies are brought to an appropriate end by spending

the thirteenth day in the open country. It is considered unlucky to stay at home, and on this day the country-side around the large cities is covered by groups of people in high spirits, who have trooped out to walk in the fresh green fields and enjoy a rest along the banks of running streams. They can be seen gathered around a samovar, walking along the river banks, enjoying music and singing or playing sportive games. Comic performers resembling the "fire lighters" are particular favorites of the people.

The green shoots of wheat or lentil must be thrown out on the thirteenth day, and when possible, thrown into running water. With the discarding of the "sabzeh" one throws out all misfortune and bad luck. By going out into the open country one welcomes in the spring and leaves all the bad luck associated with the number thirteen on the lap of nature where it can do no harm.

On the return from the country-side the Now Ruz holidays come to a close and there is almost a year to prepare for the next.

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