

Article

NOWRUZ, THE RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY OF IRANIANS

Hekmatollah Mollasalehi

Abstract: Much has been said and written in describing and introducing Nowruz rituals. Numerous rich and valuable sources from past eras are available on Nowruz and its associated rituals, covering the myths of the Nowruz festival, theology, cosmology, astronomy, and the customs and traditions linked to Nowruz rituals, as well as their relation to Iranshahr and the Iranian kingship during the Sassanian era. In the modern period, archaeological findings and the research of archaeologists, along with comparative studies by historians, mythologists, specialists in ancient languages and writing systems, and both Western and Iranian Iranologists, have provided us with credible and useful scientific information about Nowruz rituals. This article, however, does not aim to discuss the Nowruz rituals and customs per se. Rather, its approach and perspective from beginning to end are theoretical and philosophical, focusing on the relationship between Nowruz rituals and the national and religious identity of Iranians. It is believed that this type of theoretical and philosophical perspective on Nowruz rituals is somewhat lacking compared to the historical, comparative, and field studies conducted thus far.

Keywords: Nowruz rituals, Iranian identity, continuity of Iran, Iranian religion

The title of the discussion in this paper is about Nowruz rituals and their relevance to the national and religious identity of Iranians. Although the issue and topic of discussion may not seem particularly novel or original, due to its importance, whenever it is raised and discussed, it is fresh and original. Each time the issue is raised anew and fresh discussions are opened, many things said and unsaid can be extracted from it, and a new and original understanding and perspective about it can be presented.

We will not delve into the detailed historical, comparative, or fieldwork-based discussions of Nowruz researchers and experts. That could be exclusively addressed and discussed on another occasion. What we present here has a theoretical character, with the philosophical side weightier than the fieldwork research side. I believe there is somewhat of a gap in theoretical approaches, philosophical examinations and

HEKMATOLLAH MOLLASALEHI is a full professor at the University of Tehran and a visiting lecturer at the University of Athens. He has authored thirteen books and numerous articles in Persian, English, and Greek, published in reputable Iranian and international journals. Among his works are "Ancient Ritual Art Forms" (1998), "An Introduction to the Epistemology of Archaeology" (2003), and "The Persian Carpet: An Image of the Garden of Paradise" (2017, in Greek).

contemplations on Nowruz rituals and their relevance to national identity in the specific sense, and identity in the broader sense. Our present discussions could pave the way for raising theoretical issues, philosophical discussions, discourses, inquiries and critiques regarding Nowruz rituals in a more prepared and conducive manner.

From the very first breath of birth, a human infant is predestined and involuntarily entwined in the thousand folds of various types and modes of familial, ethnic, linguistic, creedal, social, cultural, historical, patriotic, civic and spiritual identities, being nurtured and educated accordingly. The acquired nature of culture in the more specific human sense, and humanity's unparalleled existential capacity for extensive nurturing and education, necessitate this reality. Humans are the only beings who, alongside their individual identity, individuality and personhood, also possess a distinct personal and unique individual identity.

Like other phenomena in our life-world such as religion, art, philosophy and mysticism, identity has played a dual and contradictory role throughout human history, culture, society and world. Misunderstanding and incorrectly defining identity has always been perilous, risk-laden and problematic for societies—something we have witnessed more than ever in modern times. Reducing transcendent, universal values to ethnic and racial identities has always been perilous and calamitous, acting like a lethal and deadly poison. Reducing the Messiah, Muhammad, the Gospels, the Quran, Islam, and the Kaaba to a Semitic or Arab ethnic identity is also perilous, distancing humans from the essence and truth of that which has opened horizons in human history, culture, society, and world. Beauty, goodness, and truth are universal human values that cannot be reduced to the identity of a particular tribe, clan or historical era.

Unfortunately, we live in an era where the market for fabricating artificial, synthetic, counterfeit and fraudulent identities is hotter and more prosperous than ever, with many customers.

Like a drowning person, many humans, societies and political systems of our time clutch at any straw to avoid being drowned in the surging, turbulent, stormy waves of breathtaking historical events and transformations of the modern era. The modern era has both fueled the issue of identity more than ever before and facilitated its fragmentation more than any other time.

Identity is not an imported commodity that you can order from this or that factory to produce for you. Nor is it like a serum, syringe or ampoule that you can inject from the outside into the body and soul of a society. It is not like artificial trees, flowers and leaves that you can use to decorate the parks and squares of a society. Of course, you can do so and view identity in this twisted way, but it is not true identity. Even if we erroneously accept it as such, it is inauthentic and unreal - counterfeit and fraudulent. Counterfeit and fraudulent identities are always fragile, vulnerable, deceptive, flimsy, rootless and unstable. Like bubbles, they briefly emerge from the surge of historical events and transformations, only to submerge and vanish again.

Homer's epic works the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the wise Ferdowsi and his *Shahnameh*, Sanai, Attar, Rumi, Saadi, Hafez and their immortal works are not

commodities that you can order from a factory to produce and then import and offer to consumers. Artificial, fabricated, imported, counterfeit and fraudulent identities are always fragile, unstable, vulnerable, rootless, and devoid of the ability, possibility and capacity for growth. They are inherently sterile. Whoever fabricates an identity for you and builds an Eiffel Tower, museum or mosque on the land of your history is in fact building their own identity on your land. You will always remain a stranger to it, and it a stranger to you—a tenant in another’s home in your own land, without realizing that you are a stranger in your own land, and your land is a stranger to you. The true owner of the house is the one who has built the house of your identity for you in your own land. Even if you falsify and appropriate dozens of historical names as your own, you will still be counterfeit, clutching at flimsy fabrications. Identity does not come from above or outside. It can naturally sprout, effervesce, blossom, flourish and ebb and flow from within the soul of a society, its intellectual potentials and spiritual life, the creative and constructive actions of its people, in a free environment. Authentic identities are like this--enduring and long-lasting, perpetuated through the history, culture and spirit of societies. Like the intertwined trees of natural forests, they are rooted in the soil and land of history and existence. The secret to the endurance of the Nowruz heritage lies in its authenticity and rootedness in our nation’s historical and cultural spirit. Authentic identities, akin to the pure and blessed *word*(logos), are deeply rooted in the existence of humanity, extending their branches towards the sky and spreading their foliage, yielding fruit and bearing gifts:

“Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky?” (Quran 14:24) The identity-seeking of modern humans is unfortunately often morbid, ossified, fraudulent, fragmented, incoherent, unstable and tenuous. Reducing Islam, the Quran, the Kaaba and Muslim direction of prayer to an Arab identity of the Arabs of Hejaz is a denial of the essential truth of a religion whose message is universal for all humankind.

Authentic rituals are like mirrors, and the linguistic and semantic connection between the words *Āeen* (ritual) and *Āeene* (mirror) in Persian is not coincidental. Humans have engaged in mirror-gazing through their rituals, finding and seeing themselves reflected. Through the mirror of their rituals, they have strived to establish a warm, lively, passionate and empathetic connection with the source of their existence and of being itself. As Rumi says in his *Masnavi*:

There is a connection, without pretense or comparison,
Between the Lord of the people and the soul of the people (Rumi 2011, Book Four: 585).

It is also not coincidental that we see the art of mirror-work and the skillful, geometric arrangement of mirror pieces occupying a prominent place in the interior spaces of sacred Shia ritual sites, especially the shrines of Imams and Imamzadehs. The function of authentic, true rituals was mirror-gazing.

Through the performance of religious rituals, they lived and experienced the correspondence between the two existential realms of the celestial and terrestrial, the spiritual and material, the throne and the earth - or in other words, between the

macrocosm and the microcosm, the human and the universe. This very meaning was also conveyed by the Greek compound word “enthousiasmos” (ενθουσιασμός). “En” (εν) means “in,” and “theos” (θεός) means “god.”

When this spiritual and celestial connection with the source occurs, then it is a festival for the faithful believer who is the actor on the stage of their own faith, it is a celebration, Nowruz—a new day, new month, new year. Similarly, those making the pilgrimage to the House of God, the Kaaba, must perform the Hajj rituals in a way that makes it a true celebration.

No phenomenon, reality, event in general, nor any identity, custom, tradition or ritual in particular, has arisen in a vacuum or occurred in nothingness in our human history, culture, society and world. The world is a world of relationships. No particle, from the tiny particles of quantum physics to the vital molecules and complex living cells of our human existence, can be or endure for a single moment in isolation from other particles in the universe. Our bodily senses’ inability to perceive the layered, hidden and invisible relationships, connections, continuities, changes, existences and non-existences constantly unfolding within phenomena, realities and events does not mean they do not exist. Where our senses stop, our intellect, intelligence and understanding have opened up vast, invisible horizons revealing the mechanisms behind worldly events and our phenomena.

We can interpret, explain and understand customs, celebrations, rituals, creedal traditions, systems of values, and the various modes of identity within this framework of relationships, connections, continuities, motion and constant transformation of the realities and phenomena that make up the world of forms, both natural and historical. Outward forms and structures are the external manifestations, the ebb and flow of the formless, hidden, unseen essences and principles existing within the inner layers and depths of our existence in both the specific and general senses. The more firmly, robustly, sturdily, enduringly and permanently these outward forms, shapes, structures are connected to those eternal, transcendent, spiritual and mystical sources, the more lasting they are.

Again I emphasize, no custom or ritual, no teaching or belief, no thought or idea, no identity has arisen or persisted in a vacuum in our human society and world. Underlying and preceding every custom, ritual, celebration, tradition, heritage, teaching, belief, thought and idea, there is a whole world of feeling, perception, experience, mythology, theology, cosmology, ontology, and epistemology—in a word, the historical, intellectual, cultural experience and mode of human being and presence in the world, the spiritual life and life-world experiences lived by generation after generation. Histories are continuous, ongoing processes—not static, motionless, lifeless rocks. They do not remain stationary in one corner. Historical phenomena, events and realities are constantly subject to transformation. Rituals and customs are also as such. Sometimes their outward form and appearance has been preserved and they have endured longer. But they have lost their inner meaning and essence, being passed down like empty cups from one generation to the next. At times, they have been

absorbed and disappeared into other customs, traditions, rituals and celebrations. Sometimes they have been abrogated, annulled and effaced both structurally and in terms of content. At times they have been pushed from the center, heart and core of a people's culture and life to the periphery, continuing a faded, spiritless existence in the shadows. Many rituals, celebrations and festivals of past eras have this status in our time. Despite much change in outward appearance and inner meaning, the Nowruz heritage still maintains a warm, lively, passionate, festive and intimate presence in the soul of our national, civic and spiritual identity for Iranians and other communities who share the Nowruz feast with us.

Despite the Nowruz celebration and rituals being practiced by all Iranians in the Sassanid Iranshahr, as the sacred rite of the official Zoroastrian religion performed with great ceremony and decorum, drawing upon the rich mythological, theological, cosmological and astronomical world of ancient Iranian religion, after Iranians embraced Islam they had to continue this celebration in the new era and religion of the Quranic message. And it did continue, persisting, flourishing, shining brilliantly as our great artists and poets sang, praised and composed beautiful, delightful musical melodies in the Iranian classical music inspired by the Nowruz rituals—melodies from the great Nowruz, Bayati Nowruz, Khara Nowruz, Arab and Ajam Nowruz, and Saba melodies, to the pleasing and heart-warming tunes of Khordak, Keighobadi, Raha and so on (Dehkhoda Dictionary 1993-1994, 2018-20187). This perpetuation and resilience was truly a great marvel. Many ancient Iranian festivals, customs and rituals did not endure, being effaced, annulled and abrogated, pushed from the cultural center to the periphery and left in the shadows. But the ancient Iranian heritage of Nowruz continued its life among Muslim Iranians in the Islamic era.

Not only did it continue and endure, but like the *Shahnameh*, it played an extremely influential role in perpetuating Iranian identity and linking the religious and prophetic heritage of ancient Iranian tradition with Islam and the Quran. The spring resurrections in the Nowruz rituals of Iranians in the Islamic era became metaphors for great spiritual, existential, illuminationist and mystical resurrections. Thus Nowruz endured, and this ritual of creation, spring rebirth, purity, keeping nature unsullied, and harmonizing with creation has retained its appeal among our nation and other peoples who have gathered around the table to partake in this shared heritage.

The modern world is an era of hardship and exile for the spiritual life of humans and the twilight of spiritual traditions—a world that has bid farewell to spiritual traditions. It gathers religious rituals and teachings like historical and cultural artifacts left over from past eras, displaying them behind glass in grand museums. The heavy pressure of events, the oppressive density of transformations, the complicated possibilities for entertainment and the unprecedented diversity of small and large preoccupations have stripped modern humans of the sense of need for a culture and life of ritual. In our contemporary society too, Nowruz is no longer celebrated with the myths, theology, cosmology and astronomy of ancient times. Those myths, cosmologies and celestially-oriented astronomical systems of antiquity have gradually

receded and settled into the lower, unconscious layers of our collective and historical memory. Our language and cultural fabric may be full of the dormant myths of past eras, but our souls are no longer warm to them—they lack a living, vibrant presence within us. The identity, epistemological and historical aspects of the Nowruz rituals predominate over and reign supreme compared to their spiritual and mystical essence. We no longer celebrate Nowruz in commemoration of the mythical Iranian king Jamshid's enthronement.

In any case, those myths, theologies, cosmologies, astronomical systems and celestial knowledge that gave life to the Nowruz rituals in past eras and ensured their continuity have gradually settled into the lower, unconscious layers of our nation's historical and collective memory. They no longer have a living, vibrant presence available within our souls' reach and embrace, no longer felt. Now their identity, cognitive, historical and epistemological aspects predominate over their mystical and spiritual essence. The Parthenon temple on the Acropolis of Athens is no longer a place of worship for the goddess Athena. The place of the ancient votaries and worshippers has now been taken by modern tourists. The Parthenon reflects an image of the historical, cultural, national and civic identity of the Greeks in the mirror of the modern human gaze. It is regarded as a museum and preserved in this way. Likewise, the Ziggurat of Chogha Zanbil from the Elamite era is now a museum, viewed from this perspective. The great historical sites of Persepolis and Pasargadae follow the same pattern. The Nowruz rituals too have not been immune or spared from historical transformations, especially the breathtaking changes of the modern era. Time and again they have been summoned onto the stage of our Iranian culture and life with a new appearance and fresh meaning. The Nowruz rituals have now taken on the message of reconciliation with nature, of keeping it pure, and the message of world peace - an extremely good, necessary and vital message for our society and world. Interestingly, it is with these attributes and this message and responsibility that the Nowruz heritage has been inscribed by UNESCO for global recognition.

Although in our era, historical time no longer harmonizes with the rhythm of natural, cyclical time and the repetition of seasonal cycles, and in the cosmology and knowledge system of the modern era, linear, unidirectional, evolutionary time has such forceful momentum that it has deprived humans of the opportunity to experience other sensations and perceptions of time, the reality is that we are still in dire need of transcendent, spiritual experiences and perceptions of time. The dominance of linear, unidirectional, evolutionary time over the modern human mindset has stripped our human sense, perception, and relation to time of other horizons and vistas. In the modern era, historical time dominates and overshadows the mythical, ritual, sacred, and cyclical time that Mircea Eliade (1949) spoke of.

I propose the immediate establishment of a dedicated museum for the tangible and intangible heritage of Nowruz rituals in our homeland. This initiative may help preserve the warm, living connection to the Nowruz rituals, which is rapidly growing cold, within the confines of modern museums. The breathtaking, foundational

transformations of the modern era necessitate this action. If we don't consider it the only refuge, it is certainly one of the accessible sanctuaries for contemporary humans to protect their cultural heritage against the heavy, oppressive storms of modernity.

In conclusion, although a significant gap exists between the Nowruz rituals of past eras—rich with ancient myths and replete with the spiritual treasures, theologies, and cosmologies of previous ages—and the Nowruz customs and rituals of our time, and although those ancient Nowruz rituals, which once vividly and vibrantly depicted creation on a universal, cosmic scale at the beginning of each new year and spring, have receded into the sublayers and subterranean realms of history and historical memory, they nevertheless continue to carry vital and important messages for humanity today, despite their wear, dilapidation, and extensive erosion. The Nowruz rituals call our society and world towards peace, reconciliation, friendship, purity, cleanliness, and the preservation of our natural and cultural heritage. It should not be forgotten that with such distinguished attributes, the Nowruz rituals have been inscribed on the global register as a heritage of human history and culture.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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