Nowruz, customs and the musical mughams of Nowruz

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Abstract
This article discusses Nowruz, traditions and the performed customs in Iran. In this survey, the twelve festivals of ancient Iran and the festival of Nowruz and its history will be described. Nowruz, the most significant occasion of Iranians since ancient times, used to be celebrated by several ceremonies, most of which have totally disappeared or faded away to a large extent. The ceremonies and customs that had been commonly held in cities and villages up until half a century ago are as follows:
It is only Haji Firooz that has vividly remained until today and the rest of these ceremonies have somewhat vanished.
In addition to the four above-mentioned ceremonies and the way of celebrating them, the mugham of Nowruz and its quality in the music of Iran will be discussed.

Key Words: Nowruz, Nowruz’s Mughams, Haji firooz, Nowruz khani, Mirennowruzi

Introduction
Nowruz begins with the first day of spring. The words “Nowruz” and “Spring” are so inextricably linked that naming one reminds everyone of the other one. The greenness of nature due to the appearance of spring and its beauty originating from the revival of trees and the chirp of birds caress the soul of any tasteful human with exhilaration, exuberance and peace.
This turn of season and the renovation of nature and the shift from the cold winter to moderate spring have long been cherished and celebrated by Iranians. In addition, particular ceremonies are held before and after Nowruz, including the social customs of cleanliness, putting on new garments, visiting relatives and acquaintances and emotional human relationships.
In addition to these ceremonies and customs, which are held expansively in Iran on an annual basis, there are other important ceremonies and customs related to Nowruz celebrations that used to be carried out prior to Nowruz, some of which still in vogue.
These ceremonies, including Mir-e Nowruzi, Koose Barneshin, Haji Firooz (Amoo Nowruz) and Nowruzkhani have all been accompanied with playing music and singing.
All these ceremonies except Mir-e Nowruzi used to start fifteen days before Nowruz and end on its first day. Mir-e Nowruzi, however, would continue even a few days after Nowruz.
This research discusses the four above-mentioned issues, associated with music and singing in particular.
Not only the music related to these ceremonies, but also the term “Nowruz” as one of the musical mughams in ancient times, prior to the advent of Islam in Iran and following that have existed. This indicates the importance of Nowruz in the music among Sassanid kings before Islam (224-651 A.D.) and musical mughams following the arrival of Islam in Iran. The name “Nowruz” is still in use in Iranian musical radifs and a few melodies are performed by this name. This research aims to introduce the culture and the arts of Iran concerning Nowruz and its significance among Iranians as well as describing and analyzing musical styles specific to Nowruz.

Nowruz Festival

The term “jashn” equivalent to festival in English has appeared as “yasne” in Avesta\(^1\) (the holy book of Zoroastrians), “yazshane” in Pahlavi and “yanje” in Sanskrit defined as praise and worship. Today, however, the term “jashn” is used as merry customs. Like other ancient nations, Iranians have had numerous festivals and celebrations. To specify, there used to be twelve festivals held in each month\(^2\) according to Avestan Chronicle (6) as follows:

1. Farvardegan Festival on Farvadin Rooz in Farvardin (Farvadin 19/ April 8)
2. Ordibeheshtgan Festival on Ordibehesht Rooz in Ordibehesht (Ordibehesht 13/ May 3)
3. Khordadgan Festival on Khordad Rooz in Khordad (Khordad 19/ May 27)
4. Tirgan Festival on Tir Rooz in Tir (Tir 13/ July 5)
5. Amordadgan Festival on Amordad Rooz in Amordad (Amordad 7/ July 29)
6. Shahrivarvargan Festival on Shahrivar Rooz in Shahrivar (Shahrivar 22/ August 26)
7. Mehregan Festival on Mehr Rooz in Mehr (Mehr 16/ October 8)
8. Abangan Festival on Aban Rooz in Aban (Aban 10/ November 1)
9. Azargan Festival on Azar Rooz in Azar (Azar 9/ November 30)
10. Deygan Festival on Dey Rooz in Dey (Dey 1, 8, 15, 23/ December 22, 29 and January 5, 14)
11. Bahmangan Festival on Bahman Rooz in Bahman (Bahman 2/ January 22)
12. Esfandgan Festival on Esfand Rooz in Esfand (Esfand 5/ February 24)

There have been other festivals, such as Sadeh\(^3\) Festival and Panjak\(^4\) Festival in addition to these twelve. Chaharshanbe Soori is also another ancient festival, which is still celebrated on the last Tuesday evening of the year with fireworks and firecrackers. Nowruz has been of high importance and one of the biggest celebrations of Iranians among all these festivals continuing until the present. Other festivals, however, have either faded away or thoroughly disappeared. The significance of Nowruz among Iranians is due to the fact that it starts on the 1\(^{st}\) day of Farvardin (March 20) at the beginning of spring and the rejuvenation of nature. The accounts explaining the advent of Nowruz festival are varied, most of which attribute its history to the Kingdom of Jamshid\(^5\).

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\(^1\) Avesta is the name of the holy book of Zoroastrians.

\(^2\) The names of Iranian months on the solar calendar are: Farvadin, Ordibehesht and Khordad in spring/ Tir, Amordad and Shahrivar in summer/ Mehr, Aban and Azar in autumn/ Dey, Bahman and Esfand in winter.

\(^3\) This festival was celebrated in groups on the evening of January 30 by a bonfire on the roofs of houses or on top of mountains.

\(^4\) This festival was held during the last five days of the year.

\(^5\) Jamshid the King was an ancient Iranian myth whose names has appeared in Avesta, Pahlavi and Islamic texts.
Jamshid, shining by derivation and the son of the sun according to Avesta, was appointed by Ahooora Mazda (God) to rule the earth and increase the number of humans and domestic animals. After Jamshid established a system of life and organized social conditions, the day of his coronation in Farvardin was named “the New Day”. People, who were happy on that day celebrated it by the name “Nowruz”.

There are other accounts to explain the history of Nowruz, one of which refers to the Genesis when God created the universe and man. Nowruz used to be celebrated as minor and major Nowruz. Minor Nowruz included the first five days of Farvardin and its sixth day (Zoroaster’s birthday) was named major Nowruz. The king and the high-ranking officials would spend the first five days to deal with general affair. Afterwards, they would celebrate the sixth day with their family and relatives.

Nowruz in the Musical Melodies of the Sassanid Dynasty (224-651 AD)
The two major festivals in the Sassanid Dynasty were Mehregan and Nowruz festivals. Mehregan, once one of the biggest festivals following Nowruz, has now disappeared. As mentioned earlier, Mehregan festival would begin on Mehr 16 (October 8) and last 6 days and end on Mehr 21 (October 13), which was named Raam Rooz.

Mehregan Festival was celebrated most glamorously during Sassanid Dynasty, when people were staunch devotees of religion and the commandments of the holy book, Avesta. Musicians composed and sang. “Mehregan-e-bozorg” and “Mehregan-e-khordak” are two melodies of ancient Iranian music. The sage Nizami Ganjavi\(^6\) has named the twelfth of thirty one melodies of Barbod\(^7\), “Mehregani” in his poetry book “Khosro-o-Shirin”. (1)

A large number of melodies started with the words “Nowruz” and “Spring” during Sassanid Dynasty. A host of melodies, some of which still exist in the “radif” of current dastgahs, were composed by Barbod. Barbod had composed pieces of music for the seven days of week by the name of “Haft Khosravani”. Moreover, he had composed 30 pieces for the days of the month known as “The 30 melodies of Barbod” and 360 melodies for the same number of days round the year known as “360 melodies”. (1) The 26\(^{th}\) of the 30 melodies of Barbod is a piece known as “Nobahari” (The new spring) and the 4\(^{th}\) melody is named “Saz-e-Nowruz”.

In addition to the above-mentioned melodies, other ones named “Nowruz-e-bozorg”, “Nowruz-e-khara”, “Nowruz-e-khordak”, “Nowruz-e-Keyqobad” and “Bad-e-Nowruz” have been mentioned in the melodies dating back to Sassanid and Barbod. There are also melodies in which the word “spring” has been mentioned, including “Afsar-e-bahar”, “Bahar beshkand”, “Sabz bahar” and “Mey-bar-sare-bahar”. Unfortunately nothing has remained about the melody of these pieces.

The Name of Nowruz in the Musical Mughams after Islam
After the advent of Islam and during the rule of Umayyad Khalifs (661-750 AD), Nowruz Festival started to suffer and was restricted. With the entry of Iranian families into the court during the rule of Abbasi (750-1285 AD), however, a number of Iranian traditions, including Nowruz were revived. (2) The name Nowruz and its variation has been mentioned in many ancient books concerning Nowruz, such as “Aladvar” by Safiaddin Ormavi\(^8\), “Sharhe Advar” and “Jame-al-alhan” by Abdal Qadir Maraghi\(^9\).

In all these books, which are slightly different, the Mugham of Nowruz has been mentioned beneath the “six songs”, including 1. Gavesht 2. Gardania 3. Nowruz 4. Salmak 5. Mayeh 6. Shahnaz in addition to the

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\(^6\) Nizami was an Iranian poet (circa 12 A.D.)
\(^7\) One of the musicians and performers concurrent with Khosro Parviz, the Sassanid king
\(^8\) Iranian musician (the 13\(^{th}\) century)
\(^9\) Iranian poet, musician and performer (the 15\(^{th}\) century).

In the description of the mugham “Nowruz”, the scale of Nowruz is considered “Hosseini” in which the note “C” has been omitted to be named “Nowruz-e-asl”. (4)

The Scale of Nowruz-e-asl. (Staff.1). (10)

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\text{Staff.1}
\]

Abdal Qadir has also classified Nowruz into five types, including “Nowruz-e-asl”, “Nowruz-e-khara”, “Nowruz-e-Arab”, “Nowruz-e-Ajam” and “Nowruz-e-Bayati” and some others know “Nowruz-e-saba” as Nowruz.

The 6th of the 24 parts in Banaei’s book is “Nowruz-e-Arab” in which 3 intervals of 3 quarter notes appear consecutively. (8)(Staff.2)

\[
\text{Staff.2}
\]

The 8th is “Nowruz-e-khara” whose intervals are as follows: (8) (Staff.3)

\[
\text{Staff.3}
\]

The 9th is Nowruz-e-Bayati, which is akin to the mughams “Hejazi” and “Busalik” and is as follows: (Staff. 4)

\[
\text{Staff.4}
\]

10(Korone), one of the interval Iranian Music

\[
\text{P} \quad \text{P} = 1_2 b
\]
The 57th of 84 scales of Safiaddin is “Nowruz-e-bozorg” whose notes are as follows: (8)(Staff.5)

![Staff.5](image)

There are only three melodies by the name of “Nowruz” in the Iranian musical radif, including “Nowruz-e-Arab”, “Nowruz-e-Saba” and “Nowruz-e-Khara” performed in the dastgahs of “Homayoon” and “Rast Panjgah”. The sounding range of “Nowruz-e-Arab” and “Nowruz-e-Saba” in the dastgah of Homayoon follows as: Nowruz-e-Arab. (Staff.6) Nowruz-e-Saba. (Staff. 7)

![Staff.6](image)

![Staff.7](image)

Nowruz-e-Khara is also similar to Nowruz-e-Saba. However, its melody is slightly different.

**Ceremonies of Nowruz**

Four major ceremonies of Nowruz that have been common in Iran, some of which still held during Nowruz accompanied with music and singing include:

1. Mir-e-Nowruz
2. Koose Barneshin
3. Haji Firooz (Amoo Nowruz)
4. Nowruzkhani

**Mir-e-Nowruz**

Mir-e-Nowruz was a layman who was elected under certain circumstances for several specific days typically prior to Nowruz to wrest control of the affairs (in urban or rural areas). Mir-e-Nowruz used to sit on the throne like kings for fun and laughter and his reign came to an end by the end of Nowruz ceremonies. His five-day rule and comic role as the king is said to have amused people. (11)(Figure. 1)
In this one-person show and ceremony, a man whose chin had little or no hair (with a fan in one hand as the symbol of the warm season and a crow in the other hand) rode on an animal around towns or villages and recited poems about the departure of winter, the cold season, and was given coins by people. This ceremony would continue this way by the end of the first day of Nowruz.

There are still people in some cities of Iran, such as Tabriz in the province of Azerbaijan, titled Takamchi who congratulate the arrival of the New Year. They recite poems about Nowruz and its appearance and are paid money by pedestrians.

“Takam” is a traditional wooden doll comprised of “taka” and “m”. By derivation, taka means a strong male goat moving at the front of the herd. The inflection “m” is a possessive adjective. Therefore, “takam” has come to mean “my male goat”.
Takams are adorned by red velvet, sequins and bells. While walking, a Takamchi sings and moves the doll to create a euphonious sound by bells. (13) (Figure. 3)

Figure. 3

Nowadays, this ceremony is on the verge of extinction.

Haji Firooz
They usually appear in groups of 2-3 wearing colorful clothes and a long hat. Although Haji Firooz used to wear a mask in the past, they dye their faces black by means of charcoal. Only a few days before Nowruz, they clap, sing, dance and play the tambourine as a harbinger of spring. While they were usually noticed in royal courts, now they mostly wander in the streets. (14)(Figure. 4)

Figure. 4
The poems recited by Haji Firooz are short allegories chiefly containing amusing and funny themes, in which Haji Firooz greets his superior (the word “arbab” is equivalent to “superior (noun)” in Persian) and asks him to look at him and smile. This song aims to cheer people up. This song is in the meter of 6/8. (Example. 1)

Example. 1

Another popular allegory sung during Nowruz indicates that Haji Firooz is requested to snap his fingers while he is afraid of being blamed by his lover and expresses his patience (“beshkan” is equivalent to snapping one’s fingers accompanied with a song to make people feel happy). The meter of this song is also 6/8. (Example.2)

Example.2

The black face of Haji Firooz symbolizes the cold, night and darkness that disappear by the emergence of Haji Firooz.

Nowruzkhani

This is one of the ancient customs of Iran that was popular in some regions until a few decades ago, particularly near north and south Elburz, Mazandaran and Guilan. However, it is still common in only few remote areas.
Nowruzkhans are wandering singers who walk around in the streets 10-15 days before Nowruz and inform people of Nowruz. His job, however, comes to an end by the beginning of Nowruz. The songs of Nowruzkhans have a very simple and clear structure of a repeated melody or a few verses of poetry whose sounding range does not go beyond a tetrachord. Nowruzkhani is merely a vocal piece of music performed by a walking singer in the absence of any musical instrument. The poems chosen by Nowruzkhans described people’s emotions about spring and Nowruz, ideologies and religious thought as well as social and political events. Furthermore, comic and satirical songs were also a part of Nowruzkhani. (15) (Figure. 5)

Here are two examples of Nowruzkhani from the north of Iran, Mazandaran and Guilan.

**Figure. 5**

Mazandaran’s Nowruzkhani: (9)
This song welcomes the arrival of spring. (Example. 3)

Gilan’s Nowruzkhani: (9)
The singer of this song congratulates the arrival of Nowruz and asks the landlords to pay him. (Example.4)

Example.4

However, these customs have been subject to extinction owing to the arrival of mass media, which inform people of the ongoing occasions, such as Nowruz.

Result
As explained in the current study, festivals and customs of Nowruz have been popular in different shapes in ancient Iran and have experienced changes. Haji Firooz is the only custom that has remained almost the same from among the four major customs, namely 1. Mir-e-Nowruzi 2. Koose Barneshin 3. Haji Firooz and 4. Nowruzkhani. The other three have faded away or totally disappeared.

The main cause of the extinction of Koose Barneshin, Mir-e-Nowruzi and Nowruzkhani, especially during the past half of the current century is the widespread popularity of mass media, such as radio and television. The main job of Nowruzkhans and koose barneshins was to inform the residents of rural and urban areas of Nowruz. However, the presence of mass media has obviated the need for informing people through these traditional ways.

The job of Mir-e-Nowruzi, which has traditionally been for the purpose of amusement, is now taken by mass media, such as television. The producers of TV programs have taken the place of live performances by Mir-e-Nowruzi nowadays.

The usage of the name “Nowruz” as a musical mugham in ancient Iranian music and music scales is indicative of the importance of this occasion among Iranians. Musical melodies of Nowruz might have varied based on the settings. For example, while Nowruz’s music performed by Haji Firooz has been a less serious, crowd-pleasing one accompanied with playing the tambourine and sometimes dancing, the melodies belonging to the gushes of Nowruz have been glorious and magnificent as they appear and are performed in the Iranian musical radif of Today’s music.

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11 Each Iranian musical dastghah is comprised of smaller pieces called “gushe”.

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