

The tradition of leaving the house on the thirteenth (Sizdah) day of Farvardin, the last day of the Norooz period, and spending that day outside with joy, laughter and pleasure has been in practice since ancient times in Iran. This is the last phase of the celebrations of the New Year (Norouz). This joyous celebration has its roots in the Zoroastrian belief that laughter and joy symbolize the throwing away of bad thoughts. According to Zoroastrianism, bad thoughts are the gift of Ahreeman (the devil) and his offspring and the festival of the New Year will cleanse all bad thoughts. The celebrations defeat the enemies and plant shoots of comradeship and peace. The custom of kissing each other on the cheeks also comes from a belief that it cleanses the individual.

On the last day of the New Year celebrations, the 13th of the first month Farvardin, it is the custom of Iranians to pass as many hours as possible outdoors. All people leave their homes to go to the parks or local plains for a very festive picnic. It is a must to spend this day in nature and the occasion is called Sizdah-Bedar. It is generally believed that if people stay home something bad can happen.

This day was not celebrated in this manner before Islam and might be several rituals in one. It is possible that this day was devoted to the deity



Tishtrya (Tir), protector of rain. In the Zoroastrian calendar each day is named after a deity and this particular day in the month of Farvardin is named after Tishtrya. In the past there were outdoor festivities to pray to this Eyzad in hope of rain that was essential for agriculture. The act of throwing away the Sabzeh from Haft Seen into rivers and running waters on this day also indicates veneration for a water deity. The act symbolically represents an offering made to such a deity.

However, Anahita was the goddess protector of running waters and not Tishtrya. It appears that at least part of the celebration is to pay respect to some water deity. Tishtrya/rain or Anahita/water are likely mixed together to preserve veneration for water deities in general. In ancient mythology the deity Vata the rain-bringer was associated with Harahvati Aredvi Sura, which means possessing waters (Anahita is a later assimilation of this deity). She personified a mythical river and all rivers flow out of this one. Clouds also took up rain



from the same mythical river every year. Tishtrya goes to the river once per year in the shape of a white stallion to fight the Demon of Dearth appearing in the shape of a black stallion. After Tishtrya's victory he rushes into the sea and water is hurried all over, and Vata snatches some for the clouds. The rest of the water is mixed with seeds of plants, which sprout as the rain falls. Ancient Iranian rituals quite often enacted their mythologies, waters were respected and many rites existed with respect to waters. It is very likely that several of these were combined to preserve some aspect of the ancient celebrations venerating waters. Till the 19th century there was horse racing on this day, which very likely represented the fight between the two stallions.

Another account of Zoroastrian folk stories mentions that twelve devilish spirits sent by Ahreeman are eating away at the 12 pillars of the world all year around, and at the end of the year when the pillars are on the verge of collapse, the evil spirits come to earth to celebrate. While they are

Traditions of



dancing with joy, during the first 12 days of Norooz, the pillars are restored to their original state due to the people's joy, celebrations and goodwill. The bad spirits will again start eating away at the pillars on the thirteenth day of the year hoping to topple the world once again. The first twelve days of the year were therefore considered particularly significant and had the important duty of safekeeping the world and the lives of people on earth. The thirteenth day of the year was considered the beginning of the normal period of the year.

In Iranian stories it is stated that the world's length of life is 12 thousand years and the number 12 is taken from the 12 months of the year. On expiry of the 12000 years, the world's lifespan is over and the world's population has the prime duty of fighting against Ahreeman.



On the expiry of 12000 years, according to Zoroastrian folklore, the people will completely defeat the Ahreeman and with the appearance of Shoosaiant, the last face of Ahreeman will be destroyed and the war of Ahooramazda against Ahreeman will result in Ahooramazda's absolute victory. From then onward there will not exist a materialistic earth and the people will return to their permanent place in the heavenly body 'Minoo' enjoying universal happiness, peace and tranquility.

Iranians today regard this day as a bad omen and believe that by going into the fields and parks they avoid the misfortunes that could befall them. This notion is contrary to the Zoroastrian doctrine where all days were regarded as sacred and were named after venerated deities. According to Muslim's popular

belief, the 13th day of the month is a day with unfortunate consequences (nahs in Islamic terminology); therefore Iranians could have combined the two. By going outdoors into the fields, the ancient festivities were observed while the Islamic ideas are also incorporated into the occasion. Muslims today still have a prayer for rain called 'namaz e baran', which is used at times of prolonged drought.

All kinds of food and delicacies are prepared with tea, local drinks, fruits, bread, cheese and fresh herbs, noodle soup called 'ash-e reshteh' and herbed rice with lamb (baqali polo and bareh) are favorites. The wealthy Iranians will spend the day in their country homes and estates, while the entire day will be spent in their gardens. The occasion is a communal one and all close relatives and friends will participate. Wheat or barley shoots (sabzeh) that are grown especially for New Year and are kept throughout the festivities are discarded in nature mainly in running waters and small rivers at the end of the day. Another tradition on the 13th, is the knotting of blades of grass by unmarried girls in the hope of finding a husband. The knotting of the grass represents the bondage of a man and a woman. The picnic ends with the setting of the sun. The occasion has no religious significance and is celebrated by all.

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