

# ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF NOWRUZ DARYA, THE RITUAL OF FISHERMEN IN SOUTHERN IRAN

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**Abstract:** Examining Iranian celebrations and rituals and the time of their celebration shows common features among all of them. These celebrations are related to natural, cosmic, and climatic phenomena, and for this reason, their time coincides with the natural calendar. The Persian Gulf region has witnessed the formation of various rites, customs, celebrations, and traditions in the context of history, each of which, in addition to its own beauty, has played an important role in the cultural and civilizational developments of the region and the world. In the formation of these rituals and traditions, factors and elements such as the productive way of life of the people caused by the living conditions and geographical determinism (coastal life), the use of individual taste and talent, as well as two important social phenomena, i.e. maritime trade and migration (displacement of populations), have been influential. Some of these customs and traditions have either been created in the framework of common beliefs among the people of other regions, or their formation has its roots in the customs of their ancestors in ancient times. This research has investigated the ritual of Nowruz Darya in Qeshm by a qualitative method and through direct observation. This research shows that these rituals, in addition to increasing solidarity and national identity in this region, are also very effective in attracting tourists.

**Keywords:** Nowruz Darya, Qeshm, Ritual, Persian Gulf.

**چکیده:** بررسی جشن‌ها و آیین‌های ایرانی و زمان برگزاری آن‌ها نشان‌دهنده ویژگی‌هایی مشترک در میان همه آن‌هاست. این جشن‌ها در پیوند با پدیده‌های طبیعی، کیهانی و اقلیمی هستند و به همین دلیل زمان برگزاری آن‌ها با تقویم طبیعی منطبق است. منطقه‌ی خلیج فارس در بستر تاریخ شاهد شکل‌گیری آیین‌ها، آداب و رسوم، جشن‌ها و سنت‌های گوناگونی بوده که هر کدام از آن‌ها علاوه بر زیبایی‌های خاص خود، نقش مهمی در تحولات فرهنگی و تمدنی منطقه و جهان ایفا نموده‌اند. در شکل‌گیری این آیین‌ها و رسوم عوامل و عناصری مانند: نحوه‌ی زندگی تولیدی مردم ناشی از شرایط زیستی و جبرجغرافیایی آن‌ها (زندگی ساحل‌نشینی)، بهره‌گیری از ذوق و استعداد فردی و همچنین دو پدیده‌ی مهم اجتماعی یعنی تجارت دریایی و مهاجرت (جابجایی جمعیت‌ها) تأثیر گذار بوده است. برخی دیگر از این آداب و رسوم و سنت‌ها، یا در چارچوب عقاید رایج در میان مردم سایر مناطق به وجود آمده‌اند و یا شکل‌گیری آن‌ها ریشه در آداب و رسوم نیاکان آنان در دوران باستان دارد. این تحقیق به روش کیفی و از طریق مشاهده مستقیم به بررسی آیین نوروز دریا در قشم پرداخته است. منایج این تحقیق نشان می‌دهد که این آیین علاوه بر آن که همبستگی و هویت ملی را در این منطقه افزایش می‌دهند، در جذب گردشگر نیز بسیار موثر است.

**کلیدواژه:** نوروز دریا، قشم، آیین، خلیج فارس.

## I. Introduction

In general, the beliefs, traditions, and customs of the Persian Gulf coast dwellers have transformed over the years. But at the same time, they have not lost their essence and the original form of the ceremony has been preserved in some rituals. Various factors have influenced the formation, change, and continuity of these rituals. The Persian Gulf has also been a meeting place of cultures and beliefs of different nations throughout history, which sometimes reached the coast through the sea or, on the contrary, were transported from ports and coasts to distant places. The ancient sailors of the Persian Gulf and its islands, who traveled to distant seas, i.e. the coasts of India, Africa, Indonesia (Java), and China, carried the customs of their lands with them. In addition, they spread the culture of other lands on the shores of the Persian Gulf (Bahadori, 2013). As a result, the culture and folklore of the people of the Persian Gulf coasts have undergone transformations and changes over time. This historical

process shows the effect of maritime trade activities on the formation of customs. The Nowruz Darya ceremony is one of the rituals that have been held in the Persian Gulf countries for a long time.

The fishermen of the southern region of the country, like other Iranian tribes, have their own calendar and chronology, and it is based on this calendar that the custom of Fishing Nowruz or Sea Nowruz is held. Since this ceremony has a strong connection with the chronology and the local calendar of the fishermen of this region, first the chronology of Qeshm will be examined, then the description of this ceremony will be discussed.

## II. Methodology

In this research, according to the nature of the subject, the documentary method was used first. The Nowruz Sayadi (Fishing) ceremony was researched using field studies and in-depth methods. In this study, techniques such as interviews, participatory

observation, imaging, sources, and documents were used to collect information. The time of conducting this research was in August 2018, when The Nowruz Sayadi ceremony was held in Selakh Village of Qeshm Island. This is a research project for the Anthropology Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism Research Institute.

### III. The natural location of Qeshm Island

Qeshm Island has a long hot season and a short mild season. The winter season in this region is short and mild and most of the rains occur in this season. The

climate of Qeshm Island is hot and humid like other islands of the Persian Gulf and it rarely rains there. The rains in this area are torrential and it rains a lot in a short period. From the second half of the spring season, the air temperature gradually increases as well as the humidity rises due to the long sunlight on the sea level. In August, the humidity and temperature reach their maximum and naturally, life in such conditions is difficult and exhausting. For this reason, many people migrate to other places. The annual rainfall (according to the 1983 report) was about 125.2 millimeters (Blokhashi, 2000: 12).



Figure 1. Map of the villages of Qeshm Island, Google Map, 2024.

### IV. Chronology and local calendar of Qeshm fishermen

In addition to the official chronologies that have been popularized in Iran at some point in time according to a specific situation, some chronologies have also been used in various areas depending on geographical, linguistic, or religious factors. There is a special local calendar in Qeshm Island, which is based on their livelihood system (seafaring and fishing). The people of Qeshm divide the year into two periods in terms of weather.

a) Cold period that includes the months of December, January, February, and March.

b) Warm period that covers the months of April, May, June, July, August, September, October, and November.

Therefore, the warm period of the year is longer and eight months and the cold period is shorter and four months (Table 1) (Asadian, 1993: 49).

In the local calendar of this island, the year has 365 days, including 36 ten-day sections and 5 remaining days, and divides into four seasons. Three seasons are one hundred days and one season is 65 days. Each of these ten days is called meyhun. Seasons in the local calendar are called Shahrimah, Zemestun, Juvâ, and Heat. The table below shows the local calendar of Qeshm Island.

Table 1. Qeshm local calendar

The names of the seasons	Decimal division	Comparison with today's calendar
Shahrimâ is equal to autumn, which lasts one hundred days.	Ten, twenty, thirty	July 25 to August 23
	Forty, fifty, sixty	August 24 to September 22
	Seventy, Eighty, Ninety	September 23 to October 22
	hundred	October 23 to November 1
Zemestun is equal to winter, which lasts one hundred days.	Ten, twenty, thirty	November 2 to December 1
	Forty, fifty, sixty	December 2 to December 31
	Seventy, Eighty, Ninety	January 1 to January 30
	hundred	January 31 to February 9
Juva (Juvâ) is equal to spring, which lasts one hundred days.	Ten, twenty, thirty	February 10 to March 10
	Forty, fifty, sixty	March 11 to April 10
	Seventy, Eighty, Ninety	April 11 to May 10
	hundred	May 11 to May 20
The heat is equal to summer and its duration is sixty-five days.	Ten, twenty, thirty	May 21 to June 19
	Forty, fifty, sixty	June 22 to July 19
	Sixty-five	July 20 to July 24

At the end of the hot season, which coincides with July 20 (July 21 in a leap year), Nowruz Arbabi or Sayadi (Fishing) begins. "In the past, these five days have been celebrated as Nowruz Arbabi (Falsafi Miab, 2000: 255). This event coincides with the end of the fishing season for "Hoor" and "Shark". The Nowruz Sayadi Day starts from sunrise and lasts until the end of the night. This ceremony has been held on all the beaches of the Qeshm district for a long time (Fig. 1).

**V. A historical look at the Nowruz Darya (Sayadi) celebration**

Ancient Iranians called the first day of August by the name of Nowruz Darya and made it the day of the beginning of seafaring. They used to celebrate this day, which is the beginning of calm waters, sea spring, and seasonal winds, and they went to the middle of the sea with flowers, plants, and green branches of trees, especially bananas, coconuts, and tropical fruits. After giving thanks to God, who created the sea for them and placed it under their control, they offered flowers, plants, and fruits to God as a vow to the angel of water, sea, and the endless waters of the sea. They barked and rejoiced. According to Iranians, the Persian Sea included the Red Sea, the Persian Sea, the Makran Sea, the Indian Sea, and the China Sea. After a day of happiness, they would return to the ports, islands, and beaches of their place of residence, and the next day, they would start their long sea journeys with great hope for God's grace (Karimi & Shaikh Mohammadi, 2012: 439).

Furthermore, according to Vadadi (2010: 29), Nowruz Darya is a day to celebrate time. The calm day of the sea and the time when fishing, trade, and travel

should be started. In Avesta, this day is known as Ameretat. The celebration of Amordadegan is inspired by the role of water, with splashing water in Iran and throwing bananas and coconuts into the water in India and some African coasts. This sea festival has two physical and non-physical dimensions. In the non-physical dimension, it speaks of immortality and passing away, and in the physical dimension, it is the guardian of plants and growths.

Sadid al-Saltaneh also writes (1992: 25-26): The Arab Nowruz or Nowruz Darya, according to which the captains travel by sea, starts on the first day of August. According to the experiences of the captains, the following changes appear in the air these days:

- Sixty days after Nowruz, there will be a storm.
- Eighty days after Nowruz, the Surayya star rises and the Lahimir storm occurs.
- Lahimir storm will end on the 90th day.
- On the 110th day, the weather becomes northerly and winter begins.
- On the 150th day, the weather becomes stormy.
- The 160th to 190th day will be in the midst of winter.
- The 230th day is the first day of the wind.
- On the 260th day, the star Surayya will set.
- The 310th day will be the first day of the storm.
- On the 340th day, the air will turn into a bow.
- The 365th day is the end of the year.

**VI. Nowruz Darya**

**1. Start of the Nowruz Darya Ceremony**

On the night of July 20, i.e., the night before the Nowruz Darya celebration, they put water, barley, and

dates in the amount of one pint equal to one-sixth of a Charak [750 grams] in the yard of the house and the open air. Tomorrow morning, they will weigh each one separately. An increase in the weight of each is a sign of its abundance and a decrease in its weight is a sign of its scarcity in that year. As if the weight of water has decreased, it will be a dry year with little rain (Asadian, 2001: 80). Salakh village, the main venue for Nowruz Darya, is known as one of the oldest fishing centers in Qeshm. According to the residents, the name of this village was derived from the word Maslakh, which means a place for skinning. Since Salakh was once a special place for killing huge sharks, which in the local language is called Kolikar, and since several skilled people were needed to catch it, most of the men in the village were employed as fishermen. After the banning of Kolikar fishing to prevent its decline and extinction in the waters of the Persian Gulf, Salakhi men continued to catch smaller fish for a living. Therefore, the sea and fishing are among the priorities of life for these people, and Nowruz Sayadi is a celebration to remember this link between the sea and people. It should be noted that the Nowruz Darya ceremony is also held in other villages of Qeshm, but now the main place of this ceremony is Salakh Village, which also plays a special role in attracting tourists.

## 2. Rubbing Gelak

On the morning of the start of this ceremony, people take their sheep out of the pen and put red soil or in the local language, Gelak, on the foreheads of their animals. This soil is brought from Hormuz Island and has many uses for the people of the south. Hormoz Island has many mines, the most famous of which is the red clay mine, and this mine has been exploited for many years. This soil has various uses such as making rustproof and red paint (Falsafi Miab, 2000: 19). Fishermen who go to Hormuz Island for fishing, always bring some of this soil for souvenirs and uses such as spices. This red spot indicates the beginning of the ceremony, and they believe that rubbing Gelak on the forehead of animals keeps livestock from disease, and rubbing it on trees and palms makes it produce better crops and sweeter dates. Rubbing Gelak is not only for animals and trees, but this custom is also applied to houses, and people paint the doors of their houses with red soil. Of course, most of them write the word "Ya Allah", believing that halal sustenance will enter their homes. In the belief of the natives of Qeshm, wooden doors also have spirits, so they should be marked with the Gelak. If someone is not literate, they draw a mark like a circle or several lines on the door (Fig. 3). The color red is a sign of renewal and life force, and usually, gods were depicted in red to represent supernatural, sacred, or solar powers. Rubbing Gelak in Nowruz

Sayadi signifies the reappearance of the sun and warmth, which also promises the beginning of a new season.

## 3. Reading Luban

Reciting the Luben prayer for the health of livestock is also one of the traditions of Nowruz Sayadi. Luben means "to close the mouth" in the local language. They close the mouths of the animals that attack the livestock with the reading Luban. On this day, residents who are engaged in raising livestock along with fishing, go to one of the few Nowruz prayer singers with their livestock to recite "Luban" for them. As mentioned, "Luban" is a prayer that increases the blessings of livestock and keeps them safe from disasters. According to them, this supplication is effective only for six hours after the beginning of the fishing year (from morning call to noon call) and after the end of the specified time, the supplication will lose its effect. The one who sings "Luban" for any animal ties a green thread. In the end, the knotted thread, which is the number of animals, is given to the owner of the animals to hide in a hole in the wall and cover it so that no one can find it or untie it. If they pray Luben for several goats and one of them is killed, the Luben prayer for the rest will be invalidated. In each village, only two or three people can recite this prayer. Whenever one of the reciters decides to teach it to another person who is usually younger than himself, after learning the prayer, he will not pray again because according to their beliefs, his prayers will no longer have an effect. This belief has its roots in the totemic tribes to believe in the power of magic and enchantment because it binds the wills together like links of a chain and encourages them to follow a single idea.

In addition to Luben, which is sung in Nowruz Sayadi and is known as the annual Luban, there is also daily Luban. If an animal is lost in the desert, to find it, they go to the reciter of the Luban prayer, and he recites the Luben prayer. This is the daily Luban. They believe that the animal will be found safe after reading Luban's prayer. Luban prayer is a prayer that is recited together with some surahs from the Holy Quran. The prayer that is recited is as follows:

O Shah Sultani, O Owais Qarani, for myself and my benefit, I tied the tail of this goat or sheep in the color of ... (the color of the animal that is lost and the general characteristics of the animal are mentioned). According to the decree of Almighty God and Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, no dog or predator should tear or eat it. Then Surahs Shams, Falaq, Tawheed, and Hamd are recited.

#### 4. Washing the body with seawater

People believe that in Nowruz, all the springs of mineral water pour into the sea, so on this day they go to the sea and immerse themselves in the water to wash off their illness with mineral water. On this day, children sit their elderly parents down in the sea and pour water on their heads and clothes with the intention of healing. Everyone wears colorful and new clothes, and to get rid of the oldness, everyone puts the old clothes into the seawater. The people of this island believe that Nowruz is the day of the birth of fishes and the fertility of the sea, so no boat goes to the sea. If someone goes, he will not catch fish. No one eats fish or any seafood on this day. After washing their bodies, people return home to perform Razif and Shushi performances in the cool evening (Fig. 2).

#### 5. The Razif Ceremony

The poems they read in Razif are full of mention and praise of God and Naat of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). During the performance of the ceremony, Razif's group is placed in two rows. All the people are wearing Dashtasha. The band is present in the middle of the square. The members of the music group include two drummers, one Kasser player, four circle players, and two Shalenj players. First, one of the drummers starts the beautiful and expressive poem of Razif in Swahili-Arabic language, then they sing two groups of poems in order. Two standing groups, each group of about 20 people, each holding bamboos. The form of their movements is such that the left hand of each person is wrapped around the waist of the next person and in their right hand is a bamboo. Along with the rhythm of the song being played, they move their bamboos forward and above their heads. The duration of the Razif ceremony lasts from the afternoon to the evening. Razif's poems are in the form of questions and answers or debates, which are read in different languages, including Farsi with the dialect of Bandari, Swahili, and Arabic. The theme of these poems is sometimes the bitter and sweet story of one year of sailing a boat from the beginning to the end of the journey, which is performed in three separate forms called "Ezva", "Harbi" and "Liva". Ezva is special for joys and it is sung when pulling the nets full of fish on the boat. Harbi is performed when the sailors have survived the stormy sea and come out of the war with the sea. Liva, the third part of Razif, was originally one of the famous games of the southern people, which was performed on the beach and next to the boats. The Razif ceremony has been performed at weddings (Fig. 4).

#### 6. Shushi

On this day, a ritual and traditional show called "Shushi" is also performed. When Razif's music is playing, two people wearing black clothes and their faces whitened with flour enter with a mat hat and a beard made of palm leaves (Seys Mogh) (Fig. 5). At first, the black-clad people walk among the people, stunned and unaware, as if they don't like the instrument. Suddenly, they attack people while screaming. With two branches of palm leaves (Pish Mogh) along with beating the people, they try to collect the instrument and drum, but the fleeing crowd continues to play the drum. Whoever does not run away, the Shushis will hit him with a palm leaf branch, even if he is one of the musicians. The congregation runs away with their instruments and songs. The white-clad people get hit by the black-clad people but they don't stop playing. Calming the Shushis is one of the necessary parts of this ceremony, which is usually done by one of the elders of the ceremony. The fishermen say that they are Shushi and came from behind the mountain. They woke up from the noise of the celebration and came to see what happened. Of course, the actors of this show are neither ignorant nor come from behind the mountain. They are local fishermen and natives of the same area. Usually, the prelude music of Shushis is performed with reed Jafti and drum. Some say that Shushi is a word with Arabic roots meaning to confuse. Some others say the word Shushi comes from "Shavash" or "Shabash" of the wedding. Shushi in the local language means louse, which means someone very dirty. Since the Shushis try to wear torn clothes and disheveled appearance, this term is not meaningless. Gradually, the heads and heads of the next roles of this ceremony are found. A small camel with a camel rider, coming from behind the crowd, reaches the beach and goes towards the sea, ignoring the people and noises. The role of the camel is played by two men together. The front one holds the animal's head and neck, and the rear one holds the legs. They put a board on their shoulders to make the body of a camel look real (Fig. 6). The Shushis do not attack it. A seagull appears behind the two-person caravan, whose camel and camel rider are young people from the village. It opens and closes its long beak and goes to the beach. The black-clad men, the camel and camel rider, the boy, and the seagull are the members of the show.

Good powers such as cows and camels are considered sacred animals and receive their power from this religious sanctity. These two animals are considered to be among the first created animals because they easily satisfy people's needs. Besides, in the agricultural life of different religions, there are many myths about cows, including Vedic myths that consider cows equal to women (Bahar, 1997: 131) and ancient Indo-European myths.





Figure 1. Beginning of Nowruz Sayadi ceremony, Jila Moshiri, 2018.



Figure 2. Washing in the sea, Jila Moshiri, 2018.



Figure 3. Rubbing Gelak on the door, Jila Moshiri, 2018.



Figure 4. Reading Razif, Jila Moshiri, 2018.



Figure 5. Shushi ceremony, Jila Moshiri, 2018.

## VII. Conclusion

Many of the customs and rites that have been remembered from the past and are popular today on the shores of the Persian Gulf, and the things that are said about the secrets of the sea, undoubtedly have their roots in the maritime culture of Iranians. Investigating and studying the traditions and customs related to sea life shows the importance, longevity, durability, and beauty of the sea culture of Iranians. As it belongs to tradition and immutable structures, the ritual of Nowruz Sayadi also strengthens national identity and social solidarity. In this article, the Nowruz ritual of fishermen in Qeshm was investigated and its performance rituals such as holding the Shushi ritual, reading Luban, rubbing Gelak, and reading Razif were

studied. Each of these rituals is a representation of ancient rituals and myths. For example, in the Shushi ceremony, besides Shushi itself, there are other elements such as cow, fox, camel, camel rider, and seagull. As the fox has been the symbol of evil in most myths, the cow and the camel have been the symbols of good. Behind every ritual action, there is a meaning, a purpose, and a function. Nowruz Sayadi is full of meaning and these meanings cause order in the social structure. Basically, mystery is a part of the action of rituals, which in addition to the art and beauty it gives, with the role it plays in society, also causes its own life and cohesion. Holding a palm tree branch in the hands of Shushi symbolizes the thinking of a farmer. In ancient society, the farmer's harvest was connected with the life of plants and seeds. Over the ages, this mental

perception has been transformed into a myth and manifested in the form of the myth of the death of a plant god and his re-emergence or resurrection. Plant life depends on burying the seed under the soil, and if the seed does not bury (disappear), it will not be resurrected or reborn. This objective experience of the farming communities of ancient times, which was obtained from agriculture, has also influenced their worldview (Mishiri, 2020, 54).

The Nowruz Sayadi ritual is a long-standing ritual in which three types of totems can be seen before the Shushi ceremony. First, rubbing Gelak on animals, palms, and houses; Second, Reading Luban for animals; And third, washing with seawater. Rubbing Gelak in Nowruz Sayadi means reimagining the sun and heat, which promises the beginning of a new season. This act

is a symbol of the passing of the winter season and entering the summer season, and among ritual myths, it has a social value equal to rebirth and another season. Reading Luban by mentioning prayers and supplications is an act to protect domestic animals and plants from predators and pests because the speech has a certain rhythm or weight. For this reason, it has legendary power (Ansari Nasab, 2020, 70-71). Washing and purification have a special place in all religions. The ritual of holy washing took place in the cult of the great goddesses of fertility (Eliade, 2010, 195). In recent years, the Nowruz Darya ceremony, due to its attractions, has played an effective role in attracting tourists, even when this island is almost empty of tourists due to the hot and humid weather. This role can be very effective for investment and policy in attracting tourists, especially cultural tourists.

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