

Akitu (the New Year Festival) and Newruz (Nuroz)

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Many nationalities, ethnic and religious groups in the Near/Middle East and Central Asia, like the Assyrians, Persians, Afghans, Kurds, and Baha'is celebrate the arrival of spring season. This occasion, mostly celebrated on March 21 (for Baha'is will be then on the 22nd since their day starts at sunset), represent the beginning of these groups' national calendar and their own new year. However, since the Kurds of Iraq have aroused suspicion by politicizing this ancient tradition, which is not theirs to start with, it was important to explore and differentiate between the myth from one hand and the historical and traditional accounts from the other.

The *Akitu* festival is one of the oldest recorded religious festivals in the world, celebrated for several millennia throughout ancient Mesopotamia. Yet, the *Akitu* was more than just a religious ceremony—it acted as a political device employed by the monarchy and/or the central priesthood to ensure the supremacy of the king, the national god, and his capital city. Politics and religion in Mesopotamia were irrevocably intertwined. Myths and their supportive rituals justified social institutions and legitimized rulers. *Akitu* festival was a tool wielded by the monarchy and ruling class to promote state ideology [1]. The *Akitu* festival demonstrates the effectiveness of religion as a political tool. Some of the earliest reference date back to the middle of the third Millennium B.C. referring to an *Akitu* building or celebration at Nippur. In the pre-Sargonic period, the *Akitu Festival* is attested at Ur, providing for example the names for its months. Economic documents indicate that in the Sargonic and Ur III periods (2350 – 2100 B.C.), the *Akitu* was a semi-annual festival, being observed first at Ur, Nippur, and Uruk, and later in Babylon and Assyria. The arrival of spring season was celebrated lavishly in Assyria and Babylonia for 12 (twelve) days in what is documented as the *Akitu* (Sumerian A-ki-ti) Festival or New Year Festival. The Assyrian and Babylonian Akkadian term used for the festival is called *rêš šattim* (*resh shattim*), today's Assyrians continue to use the term "resh shita," meaning "the beginning of the year," which begins in the month of Nisan, the first month of the year for the Assyrians/Babylonians. The history of *Akitu Festival* is recorded in cuneiform and is translated to many languages as a genuine Mesopotamian tradition. Additionally, parts of these festivities were recorded in the Sumerian Epic of Creation [2].

In Mesopotamia, when it came to agriculture, these festivities were celebrated twice a year. For fallow lands the Spring Equinox marked the important phases of washing the land to remove impurities such as excess of salinity, as well as to ensure the appropriate softening up the soil, whereas the Autumn Equinox marked the beginning of harvest. For cultivated fields, on the other hand, the Spring Equinox marked the beginning of harvest, whereas the Autumn Equinox marked the fallowing season. Furthermore, the highlight of the *Akitu Festival* was the *Akitu* procession, which commemorated the god leaving his temporary residence and entering his new permanent residence in his chosen city for the very first time. The inner meaning of the festival was therefore the celebration of the time the god had chosen that specific place as his city, to guard and protect from that moment until the end of times [3].

During the festivities, the creation epic of *Enûma eliš* was recited, while the people sang all kinds of hymn and songs [4]. Contenau puts the *Akitu Festival* in Babylon this way. The *Akitu Festival* came to have a double character. It originated in nature festival, with features which expressed simultaneously nature's grief at the death of all growing things and her joy at their rebirth. On to this had been grafted the glorification of Marduk. In Babylon, Marduk received in his temple of Esagila all the gods of other great cities in the shape of their statues, the first being his son Nabu, worshiped in Borsippa. Marduk disappears, but then grief is changed to gaiety on his reappearance, and the entire company of gods was escorted in a great procession to the temple outside the city, known as *Akitu*. In between, many sacred performances took place, which glorified Marduk as hero and victorious against Chaos and included a sacred marriage ceremony. After the ceremonies, the statues were returned to their temples [5]. In Assyria, almost similar rituals took place; however, the supreme god was Ashur and he had to fight the monster Tiamat. On the second of Nisan, god Ashur, after receiving a breakfast, left his temple in a chariot drawn by white horses leading a procession of gods to the *Akitu* House in the open country outside Nineveh where the special rituals took place [6].

When the Medes and Scythians (aided by the Babylonians) attacked Assyria and its capital Nineveh, the Medes came in direct contact with Assyrian civilization. The influence of Assyrian civilization on many dynasties that originated from the Zagros Mountains and beyond, including the Medes, Persians, Achaemenids, and Parthians is well attested by many scholars and history books. The influence of Assyrian art and system of ornamentation at the monumental stairway of the Apadana at Persepolis (Pasargadae) is a living proof [7]. Yet, earlier, it was a civilization of the Iranian plateau, the Elamites, who adopted the written language of Akkadian as the most universal language of the area for two millennia. Furthermore, much of what is known about Elamite civilization comes to us from Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian records [8]. Suffice to know that Akkadian was so important to the Achaemenid Persian King Darius I that he used it in his very famous tri-lingual inscription at the Rock of Behistun.

There are many legends and myths about the Persian origin and Kurdish adopted New Year, also known as *Newruz* (also written NuRoz). To Persians, Nu Roz (new day, time or usually translated to New Year) ceremonies are symbolic representations of the ancient concept of the "End and the Rebirth." Few weeks before the New Year, Iranians (Persians) clean and rearrange their homes. They make new clothes, bake pastries, and germinate seeds as sign of renewal. The ceremonial cloth is set up in each household. Troubadours (Haji Firuz) disguise themselves with makeup and wear brightly colored outfits of satin. These Haji Firuz parade the streets while singing and dancing using tambourines, kettle drums, and trumpets to spread good cheer and the news of the coming new year. Last Wednesday of the year (Chahar Shanbeh Suri), bonfires are lit in public places and people leap over the flames, shouting: "Give me your beautiful red color and take back my sickly pallor!" With the help of fire and light symbols of good, people hope to see their way through the unlucky night - the end of the year- to the arrival of springs longer days. Traditionally, it is believed that the living were visited by the spirits of their ancestors on the last day of the year. Many people specially children, wrap themselves in shrouds symbolically reenacting the visits. By the light of the bonfire, they run through the streets banging on pots and pans with spoons (Gashog-Zani) to beat out the last unlucky Wednesday of the year, while they knock on doors to ask for treats. In order to make wishes come true, it is customary to prepare special foods and distribute them on this night. Noodle Soup a filled Persian delight, and mixture of seven dried nuts and fruits, pistachios, roasted chic peas, almond, hazelnuts, figs, apricots, and raisins [9], or seven well-known crops, familiar to the Persians prior to the advent of Islam and the Arab domination.

The Achaemenian Persians had four major residences one for each season. Persepolis was their spring residence and the site for celebrating the New Year. Stone carvings in Persepolis show the king seated on his throne receiving his subjects, governors, and ambassadors from various nations under his control. They are presenting him with gifts and paying homage to him. These scenes resemble greatly Assyrian art in Assyrian king's palaces. Although there is not too much about the details of the rituals, still, it is well known that mornings were spent praying and performing other religious rituals. Later on during the day, the guests would be entertained with feasts and celebrations. Furthermore, the ritual of sacred marriage took place at this palace. Most of these same rituals were rooted in ancient Mesopotamia [10]. Zarathushtra (called Zoroaster by the Greeks) is said to have lived between 628-551 B.C. Other accounts pin his birth date in 570 B.C. It is documented that it was he who converted the Chorasmian King Vishtapa. Other historians and traditions go further and claim that he lived between 1400 and 1200 B.C. It is also possible that there could have been more than one Zarathushtra. Either way, it is known fact that Zoroaster had great influence and impact on Persian religion. Even if he had lived around 1400 B.C., his influence came about two millennia and perhaps more after the *Akitu Festival* was practiced in Mesopotamia. The point is that it is very likely that the Persians had copied the principles of the New Year Festival from the much earlier Assyrian/Babylonian civilization than from the latter Zoroaster.

Meanwhile, Kurdish nationals, especially those of Iraq, and for a good reason that I will address later, narrate the most unsubstantiated accounts about the origin of Newruz. For example, Ardishir Rashidi-Kalhur, claims that the Kurds' ancestors started to celebrate this festival in the mountains of Kurdistan in 728 B.C. Rashidi-Kalhur goes yet further and claims that the original name of the celebration was the Kurdish word "NuRoj" and not "Nuroz" since Kurdish is the original language of the Iranians, it predates and precedes the Persian language by 1,200 years. The writer, however, admits that the modern Kurdish language was derived from Fahli language (Pahli language, which in ancient times was known as Pahlavi).

It was after the Arab invasion, he states, that the "P" in Pahlī switched to "F" and thus Fahli [11]. Fact is that historical references or reliable documentation, which prove the presence of specific people under the name of Kurds who celebrated this occasion in antiquity, are absent. As far as the outrageous claim that Kurdish language preceded the Persian, I will leave that to linguists to argue.

Other Kurds have associated the Kurdish Newruz with a Persian legend but manipulated the origin of certain figures in that legend to suit Iraqi Kurdish national objectives. If you ask Kurds of Iraq today what is Newruz; they will immediately reply, "it is the celebration of the victory of Kawa the Kurdish smith over the cruelty of the Assyrian king Zahak." According to the Kurdish version of the legend, two snakes grew on the shoulders of the Assyrian King Zahak, which caused him much pain. Each day these snakes were to be fed the brains of two children to alleviate the king's pain. Every family had to contribute in feeding the snakes by sacrificing their children; thus, people hated the Assyrian king and could not tolerate seeing their children being killed. Kawa has already sacrificed 16 out of 17 of his children previously; however, his turn came again to sacrifice his last daughter. Kawa thought how to rescue his last daughter and tricked everybody by presenting the brains of sheep instead of children. With time, the other people began to practice the same trick while the saved children were hid in the Mountains of Zagros. Kawa trained these children on how to become fighters and depend on themselves. In time, Kawa turned the children into an army and one day they revolted and marched towards King Zahak's castle and Kawa smote the king with his hammer and the two serpents withered. Kawa then climbed to the top of the mountain above the castle and lit a large bonfire to tell all the people of Mesopotamia that they were free. Hundreds of fires all over the land were lit to spread the message and the flames leapt high into the night sky, lighting it up and cleansing the air of the smell of Dehak and his evil deeds. The fires burned higher and higher and the people sang and danced around in circles holding hands with their shoulders bobbing up and down in rhythm with the flute and drum. The women in bright colored sequined dresses sang love songs and the men replied as they all moved around the flames as one [12]. Although many groups celebrate Newruz (Nuroz), Kurds state that it is especially important to them as it is also the start of the Kurdish calendar and that it reflects the Kurds own long struggle for freedom.

Few other versions of the legend coincide the day of the revolt of Kawa exactly with the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. These versions claim that the saved children gradually became a community, married to each other, and brought onwards offspring. Kawa then trained them as fighters and established in them the love of freedom and liberty. This Kurdish version then claims that on March 21, 612 B.C., Kawa led them in an attack on the king's palace, and ended one of the darkest rules in the Middle East [13].

Neither Persian nor Afghani people celebrate Newruz based on this precise Kurdish version of the myth that includes an Assyrian king. Although the Persian version mentioned King Zahak; however, there is no connection to Assyrians. In fact, and according to Dr Hussein Tahiri, a 1991 Iranian calendar published by a group called the *Guardians of the Iranian Culture*, outlines the seventh of October as the anniversary of the victory of Kawa over the Arab Zahak. In view of this group, Zahak was an Arab [14]. The story of Zahak is told in the 13th century Ferdosi's (Persian poet) Shahnameh (the book of Kings). These are mythical stories about the Persian history. According to this source, Zahak was an Arab king and ruled one day short of 1000 years. He was not killed by Kawa (Kaveh) as the Kurds claim but was captured by the Persian king Feraydune and chained in the mountain of Damavand north of Tehran where he died. By the way, according to Ferdosi, Feraydune ruled for 500 years. This legend is therefore dated to post Islamic Arab conquest, and since there was no Arab influence in the region before Islam, therefore it cannot predate the Assyrian/Babylonian narratives. Other legends claim that Zahak was the last king of the Medes. This latter legend states that the Persians revolted against the evil deeds of the king of the Medes.

Where does this connection between the Persian (Iranian) and Kurdish legends coincide, even if in some aspects? History tells us that the name Iran was derived from the word "Aryana," which meant "the [land] of the Aryans." These Aryans entered the Iranian plateau in around 1,500 B.C. Earlier, the land was occupied by aboriginal Caspians. The two main Aryan tribes were the Medes and the Persians. Later, the Medes lived the northern region of the plateau while the Persians moved south to the Elamite land [15]. The Zagros Mountains became the home of many of these two groups. History tells us further that the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser III conquered and deported 65,000 Medes, replacing them on the Iranian plateau with Aramaeans. Additionally, Assyria's Sargon II defeated dozens of Median chiefs and settled

30,000 captured Israelites in the towns of the Medes in the late eighth century B.C. [16]. This mix of people in the Iranian plateau and Zagros Mountains could have planted the seeds of a new breed of people who became later known as Kurds.

The story of the Kurdish Kawa has been used a lot by Kurdish nationals and resistance movements, especially by Iraqi Kurds. However, Dr. Hussein Tahiri states that when and how Kurdish Newruz began is not clear for the Kurds and that there is much ambiguity about the origin of the practice. The claim by the Kurds that Newruz is the celebration of the victory of Kawa, the Smith, over Azhdahak or Zahak seems contradictory and ambiguous as well. Tahiri adds that the Kurds have done no research on the origin of Newruz. The available research is from the Persians, and they regard Newruz as an Iranian national celebration. So why do Kurds practice or create a blind culture, asks Dr. Hussein Tahiri [17]. Furthermore, why do Kurdish nationalists and history writers invent such a myth, i.e. a Kurdish hero executing presumably the end of Assyrian cruel king and indirectly sometimes and directly in others as being the reason for the end of the Assyrian empire? There is not one reliable historical fact linking the fall of Assyria at the hands of a group of people called Kurds, not even one. Why would Kurds then take a Persian tradition, manipulate it to represent "Kurdish" traditions, and then politicize it in such manner? It is obvious that Kurdish nationalists in the last century, or century and a half, have realized the real historic threat of Assyrians to Kurdish national dream in Iraq. Only Assyrians have legitimately a historical claim to Assyria (northern Iraq) since Kurds are not the original inhabitants as they are mainly from the Zagros Mountains in present Iran and southern Armenia, in the mountains of Hakkari (Kurds call Kurdistan). Therefore, they see it necessary to plant this feeling of struggle and conflict in the hearts and minds of common Kurds; such feelings lead naturally to hatred towards indigenous Assyrians. It is the Kurdish nationalist's way to demonize and incriminate the Assyrians so that the Assyrian case in their own homeland be undermined.

In conclusion, the Nisan New Year Festival (*Akitu*) was rooted in Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia before any Aryan people (Persians or Kurds) moved to the region of the Near East. Meanwhile, it is very clear from the point of view of many historians that there is an ambiguity in the origin of Newruz for Kurds. Since the origin of the Kurds as people is ambiguous, therefore, it is natural that the origin of their traditions is ambiguous as well. Kurdish nationals must stop fabricating stories like that of Kawa and the mysterious Assyrian cruel king who allegedly was the reason behind killing two children daily. Spreading such illusionary and fanciful stories is geared towards one purpose and that is planting feelings of bigotry and hatred among Kurds towards the Assyrians; the rightful and original owners of northern Iraq lands (Assyria). These mythical stories are regrettable and deplorable; they do not serve mankind in any civil way.

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