SHAB-E YALDA

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Chapter 1

About This Article

Today (December 21, 1996), I – Mohsen Banan http://mohsen.banan.1.byname.net/contact_form – ran across a series of articles that link Shab-e Yalda with Christmas. Most Interesting!

I decided to combine them all in one place. If you run across other related material, please forward them to me, I'll be happy to incorporate it in this article.

1.1 Sources

This article is based on:

- An Email from "keyvanh@ee.ubc.ca (keyvan hashtrudi-zaad)" citing part of Najmieh K. Batmanglij's book "New Food of Life" (1996). 2.
- The content of http://www.docs.uu.se/%7Ehamid/english/articles.html – as of Dec. 21, 1996. 3.
- The content of http://www.nightkitchen.com/solstice.html – as of Dec. 21, 1996. **??**.

This article itself is accessible through: http://mohsen.banan.1.byname.net/PLPC/120017

Chapter 2

Winter Feast: SHAB-E YALDAA

In the east more than in the west, life-styles have often remained more in tune with nature. Therefore, natural rhythms change from morning to evening, from month to month, and finally from season to season. This integration of nature into life cycles is especially true in Iran. The winter solstice, December 21 or 22, is the longest night of the year. In Iran this night is called SHAB-E YALDAA, which refers to the birthday or rebirth of the sun. The ceremony is traced to the primal concept of Light and Good against Darkness and Evil in the ancient Iranian religion. This night with Evil as its zenith is considered unlucky. From this day forward, Light triumphs as the days grow longer and give more light. This celebration comes in the Persian month of DAY, which was also the name of the pre-Zoroastrian creator god (deity). Later he became known as the God of creation and Light, from which we have the English word "day" (the period of light in 24 hours).

In the evening of SHAB-E YALDAA bonfires are lit outside, while inside family and friends gather in a night-long vigil around the KORSEE, a low, square table covered with a thick cloth overhanging on all sides. A brazier with hot coals is placed under the table. All night the family and friends sit on large cushions (futons) around the KORSEE with the cloth over their laps. Formerly fruit and vegetables were only available in season and the host, usually the oldest in the family, would carefully save grapes, honeydew melons, watermelons, pears, oranges, tangerines, apples and cucumbers. These were then enjoyed by everyone gathered around the KORSEE, or a fireplace.

On this winter night, the oldest member of the family says prayers, thanks God for the previous year's crops, and prays for the prosperity of next year's harvest. Then with a sharp knife, he cuts the thick yogurt, the melon, and the watermelon and gives everyone a share. The cutting symbolizes the removal of sickness and pain from the family. Snacks are passed around through the night: pomegranates with angelica powder (GOLPAR) and AJEEL_E SHABCHAAREH or AJEEL-E SHAB_E YALDAA, a combination of nuts and dried fruits. Eating nuts is said to lead to prosperity in days to come. More substantial fare for the night's feast include eggplant stew with plain saffron-flavored rice; and rice with chicken; thick yogurt, saffron, and carrot brownies (HALVAA-E HAVEEJ). The foods themselves symbolize the balance of the seasons; watermelons and yogurt are eaten as a remedy for the heat of the summer, since these fruits are considered cold or SARDEE, and HALVAA, the saffron and carrot brownies, is eaten to overcome the cold temperatures of winter (since they are considered hot or GARMEE). On into the night of festivities, the family keeps the fires burning and the lights glowing to help the sun in its battle against darkness.

Early Christians took this very ancient Persian celebration to Mitra, Godess of Light, and linked it to Christ's birthday. Today the dates for Christmas are slightly changed but there are many similarities; lighting candles, decorating trees with lights, staying up all night, singing and dancing, eating special foods, paying visits, and finally, celebrating this longest night of the year with family and friends.

Nazar Berooyeto Har Baamdaad, Norouzeest
Shabe Feraagheto Har Shab Keh Hast, Yaldaayeest
Sadeeye Sheeraazee

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From: New Food of Life (1996)
Author: Najmieh K. Batmanglij
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Publisher: Mage

Chapter 3

Yalda

While the Christians all over the world are preparing themselves for celebrating one of the most widespread ceremonies of mankind, that is Christmas, the Iranians in Iran and outside are getting ready to celebrate one of their most ancient celebrations, yalda. Is it a mere coincidence that these two celebration are so close to each other, Christmas is celebrated on Dec. the 25th. and yaldA is celebrated on the night of Dec. the 21th. the night before the first day of winter?! well I have found something on this subject. My reference in what follows is gAhshomAri va jashnhAy-e irAn-e bAstAn written by Mr. hAshem razi, and published in iran.

Yalda and its related ceremonies which are held at the night of the first day of winter; the longest night of the year; is a very ancient tradition, and is related to Mehr Yazat. Yalda is an Aryan ceremony and the followers of MithrAism have celebrated it for thousands of years in Iran. Yalda is the night of Mehr or MithrA,'s birth.

Yalda is also called Chelleh (Shab-e Chelleh) and as mentioned earlier is the night of birth of the unconquerable sun, or Mehr. This ceremony is as ancient as the time that people organized their lives based on seasonal changes.

Light, day and sunshine were assumed to be the signs of order and ahurAic whereas night, darkness and cold were thought as to be ahriman's sign. Watching the changes in the length of days and nights, made the people believe that light and darkness, or day and night are in continuous battle. Light's victory resulted in longer days whereas darkness's victory meant longer nights.

Since the first night of winter is the longest night and from that night on the days get longer and the warmth and light of the sun increases, that night was supposed to be will go the time for the re-birth of sun. The Aryan tribes, in India, Iran and Europe celebrated sun's birth at the beginning of winter.

To remain safe of ahriman's harms, people gathered on this night and made fire, and arranged a special setting on which any fresh fruit which was preserved and also all the dry fruits were put. This setting was sacred and religious. They asked sun yazat to bless them. The fruits resembled people's hope for a fruitful spring and summer. They spent all the night together beside the fire to get rid of ahriman's harm.

When mithrAism spread to ancient civilized world from Iran, in Rome and many European countries, the 21th. of December which is the day before the beginning day of Iranian month day or the first month of winter, was celebrated as mithrA's birthday. But in the 4th. century A.D., because of some errors in counting the leap year, the birth day of mithrA shifted to 25th. of December and was established. Until that time the birthday of Jesus Christ was celebrated in January the 6th. But the religion of most of the Romans and the people of many of the European countries was still mithrAism. But when Christianity spread, the priests, since could not stop the practice of celebrating _mithrA_'s birthday on December the 25th. declared this day as Jesus's birthday which is still so.

Yalda is a soriAni word meaning birth. The Roman used the word nAtAlis for birth. The soriAni Christians brought the word Yalda to Iran, which is still used. It is not just mithrA's birth time which entered Christianity. Nowadays all Christians who celebrate Jesus's birthday, do not sleep for the whole longest night of the year, eat and drink and have fun.

There are so many common believes and customs (sometimes hidden from our notice!!) between different nations and religions. Let's know those customs and talk about them, so that we may bring friendship and peace among the people of the world. Zoroastrianism and Iranian culture is so ancient that it has many similarities (and of course differences!!) with most of the great faiths of the world. Let us emphasize on the similarities and not on the differences.

Ushta-Te Bahman Noruziaan Dec.15.1994

Chapter 4

Ancient Origins: Solstice

OPENING THOUGHTS

A LINGUISTIC PUZZLE

A FAMILY FERTILITY RITUAL

WINTER SOLSTICE IN MANY CULTURES

IN SONG

A TIME OF MAGIC

THIS YEAR’S SOLSTICE

Let’s start with the science.

The Earth is actually nearer the sun in January than it is in June -- by three million miles. Pretty much irrelevant to our planet. What causes the seasons is something completely different. The Earth leans slightly on its axis like a spinning top frozen in one off-kilter position. Astronomers have even pinpointed the precise angle of the tilt. It’s 23 degrees and 27 minutes off the perpendicular to the plane of orbit. This planetary pose is what causes all the variety of our climate; all the drama and poetry of our seasons, since it determines how many hours and minutes each hemisphere receives precious sunlight.

Pretty basic stuff.

Most of us have known something about this since grade school. What fascinates me about it is how we figured it out in the first place, especially before the advent of satellites and space travel. I haven’t studied astronomy enough to understand how we came to know this. The axis is, after all, an imaginary line. But here's an eloquent perspective on that question from a Nightkitchen visitor.

Solstice means... [Sun]

standing-still-sun

Such precision we have about it now! Winter solstice is when... ...because of the earth's tilt, your hemisphere is leaning farthest away from the sun, and therefore:

The daylight is the shortest.

The sun has its lowest arc in the sky.

When it's winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, the sun is directly overhead at noon only along the Tropic of Capricorn, on which lie such places as Sao Paulo, Brazil, southern Madagascar, and areas north of Brisbane, Australia.

In 1996, winter solstice will occur on December 21 at 6:05 a.m., PST.

Celebrated among the ancients as a turning point.

No one's really sure how long ago humans recognized the winter solstice and began heralding it as a turning point -- the day that marks the return of the sun. One delightful little book written in 1948, 4,000 Years of Christmas, puts its theory right up in the title. The Mesopotamians were first, it claims, with a 12-day festival of renewal, designed to help the god Marduk tame the monsters of chaos for one more year.

It's a charming theory, but like much of cultural anthropology, it may turn out to be totally wrong.

Many, many cultures the world over perform solstice ceremonies. At their root: an ancient fear that the failing light would never return unless humans intervened with anxious vigil or antic celebration.

Solstice celebrations: universal & perhaps much older than we know.

There's much new scholarship about Neolithic peoples and their amazing culture. For example, it now looks as though writing is much more ancient than we earlier thought -- as much as 10,000 years old.

Neolithic peoples were the first farmers. Their lives were intimately tied to the seasons and the cycle of harvest. I'm certain they were attuned to the turning skies.

Scholars haven't yet found proof that these peoples had the skill to pinpoint a celestial event like solstice. But perhaps they did, and perhaps they celebrated it -- with fertility rites, with fire festivals, with offerings and prayers to their gods and goddesses.

> And perhaps, our impulse to hold onto certain traditions today -- candles, evergreens, feasting and generosity -- are echoes of a past that extends many thousands of years further than we ever before imagined.

> "Shall we liken Christmas to the web in a loom? There are many weavers, who work into the pattern the experience of their lives. When one generation goes, another comes to take up the weft where it has been dropped. The pattern changes as the mind changes, yet never begins quite anew. At first, we are not sure that we discern the pattern, but at last we see that, unknown to the weavers themselves, something has taken shape before our eyes, and that they have made something very beautiful, something which compels our understanding."
>
> --Earl W. Count, 4,000 Years of Christmas

A linguistic puzzle.

> The rebirth of the sun.
> The birth of the Son.

Christmas was transplanted onto winter solstice some 1,600 years ago, centuries before the English language emerged from its Germanic roots. Is that why we came to express these two ideas in words that sound so similar?

A family fertility ritual from Romania.

You may have heard of apple wassailing, the medieval winter festival custom of blessing the apple trees with songs, dances, decorations and a drink of cider to ensure their fertility. Here's another, more obscure tradition that

> most certainly predates Christmas, and was probably once a solstice ritual, because it is so linked to the themes of nature's rebirth and fertility. In Romania, there's a traditional Christmas confection called a turta. It is made of many layers of pastry dough, filled with melted sugar or honey, ground walnuts, or hemp seed.

In this tradition, with the making of the cake families enact a lovely little ceremony to assure the fruitfulness of their orchard come spring. When the wife is in the midst of kneading the dough, she follows her husband into the wintry garden. The man goes from barren tree to tree, threatening to cut each one down. Each time, the wife urges that he spare the tree by saying:

> "Oh no, I am sure that this tree will be as heavy with fruit next spring as my fingers are with dough this day."

Winter solstice in many cultures.

Winter solstice was overlaid with Christmas, and the observance of Christmas spread throughout the globe. Along the way, we lost some of the deep connection of our celebrations to a fundamental seasonal, hemispheric event. Many people--of many beliefs--are looking to regain that connection now.

I gain inspiration from the universality of the ancient idea--winter solstice celebrations aren't just an invention of the ancient Europeans.

Native Americans had winter solstice rites.

In Iran, there is the observance of Yalda, in which families kept vigil through the night and fires burned brightly to help the sun (and Goodness) battle darkness (thought evil).

Winter solstice celebrations are also part of the cultural heritage of Pakistan and Tibet. And in China, even though the calendar is based on the moon, the day of winter solstice is called Dong Zhi, "The Arrival of Winter." The cold of winter made an excellent excuse for a feast, so that's how the Chinese observed it, with Ju Dong, "doing the winter."

I’m certain there are other examples...I’m just starting to collect them. Nightkitchen visitors have told me of celebrations among the Hopi and Iranians, among others. Know of any others you’d like to share?

In song

The rising of the sun
And the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing in the choir.

Now, where do you suppose the first couple of lines of this carol came from?

There is a whole series of medieval English carols on the subject of the rivalry between the holly and the ivy. In many of them, the holly and ivy symbolized male and female, and the songs narrated their often rowdy vying for mastery in the forest or in the house.

A time of magic.

In many cultures, customs practiced at Christmas go back to pre-Christian times. Many involve divination--foretelling the future at a magic time--the season turning of solstice.

In Russia, there’s a Christmas divination that involves candles. A girl would sit in a darkened room, with two lighted candles and two mirrors, pointed so that one reflects the candlelight into the other. The viewer would seek the seventh reflection, then look until her future would be seen.

The early Germans built a stone altar to Hertha, or Bertha, goddess of domesticity and the home, during winter solstice. With a fire of fir boughs stoked on the altar, Hertha was able to descend through the smoke and guide those who were wise in Saga lore to foretell the fortunes of those at the feast.

In Spain, there’s an old custom that is a holdover from Roman days. The urn of fate is a large bowl containing slips of paper on which are written all the names of those at a family get-togehter. The slips of paper are drawn out two at a time. Those whose names are so joined are to be devoted friends for the year. Apparently, there’s often a little finagling to help matchmaking along, as well.

In Scandinavia, some families place all their shoes together, as this will cause them to live in harmony throughout the year.

And in many, many cultures, it's considered bad luck for a fire or a candle to go out on Christmas Day. So keep those candles burning!

Winter solstice this year.

Winter solstice for 1996 occurs at 6:05 a.m. PST (be sure to adjust for your time zone!) on December 21. Here's what my friend, astrologer Robin Clauson, has to say about it:

> The Winter Solstice Chart
>
> View the chart
>
> Three Grand Trines in earth lend an expansive, almost giddy sense of material optimism. Charities will reap the bounty of the collective willingness to share resources. Choose elegant yet practical gifts for your Christmas list. (Hey, cashmere can last a lifetime!)
>
> Our intuitive knowledge is heightened by another surge of technological breakthroughs. This accelerated pace of evolution takes place on an unconscious level, but is made visible by scientific and humanitarian advances. It's possible that a cure for AIDS will be found during this period.
>
> The love lives of the powerful will continue to fascinate the public. It's highly likely that the Clintons face further sordid accusations in this quarter. (Watch out for Hillary's rolling pin, Bill; it may be wrapped in divorce papers!)
>
> Everyone should avoid signing contracts or making long-term commitments between December 23rd and January 12th when Mercury is retrograde. Misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, accidents, and transportation

problems are likely during that time.