

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOME IRANIAN AND BULGARIAN FESTIVE TRADITIONS: WORSHIP OF THE SUN DEITY

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Резюме: Статията разглежда определени сходства в ритуалните практики на някои български и ирански празници. Изглежда, че те се основават върху обожествяването на Слънцето и на соларното движение през годината през четири важни астрономически точки – зимно и лятно слънцестоене и пролетно и есенно равноденствие. Символичната репрезентация на възкръсващото слънчево божество е инкорпорирана в някои от най-популярните празници сред българите и иранците, въпреки че се появяват по-късни религиозни интерпретации. Най-големите сходства могат да се видят в иранските празници Ноуруз и Ялда и българските Коледа, Игнажден и други по-малки празници. Тези прилики следва да се разглеждат, от една страна, като общо индоевропейско наследство, въпреки че се срещат в почти всички култури. От друга страна, трябва да се вземат предвид по-тесните лингвистични и културни сходства на тези народи, възникнали в следствие на продължителни исторически контакти.

Ключови думи: празници на слънцето, праиндоевропейски, зимно слънцестоене, Коледа, Ноуруз

Abstract: This paper discusses certain similarities in the ritual practices related to certain Bulgarian and Iranian festivals. There seems to be a common ground regarding the divinization of the Sun and solar movement throughout the year pointing at four significant astronomical events: the winter and summer solstice and the spring and autumn equinox. The symbolic representation of the resurrecting Sun deity is incorporated in some of the most popular festivals of Iranian and Bulgarian peoples, albeit concealed in later religious interpretational layers. The most conspicuous similarities are observed between the rituals of Iranian *Nowruz* and *Yalda* and Bulgarian *Koleda*, *Ignazhden* and other minor festivals. On the one hand, these affinities must be regarded as a shared Indo-European heritage evident in other cultures, too, but not as an exclusively Indo-European phenomenon. On the other hand, certain cultural and linguistic proximities as a result of prolonged historical contacts must also be taken into account.

Keywords: solar festivals, Indo-European, winter solstice, *Koleda*, *Nowruz*

Introduction

Probably amongst the most significant festivals in any traditional culture, not exclusively Indo-European, are those related to the movement of the Sun, the change in seasons and respectively, the four astronomical positions: the winter and summer solstice and the spring and autumn equinox. Veneration for the Sun results from the major impact that these events had on people's lives. In terms of mythological beliefs, they marked the sacred transition between two states, both in the natural world and in the psychological realm. The chaotic state of destruction of the 'old' is gradually replaced by the creation of the 'new' in an eternal cycle of death and rebirth. In terms of everyday life, they refer to the seasonal stages of agriculture, a means of survival and a main occupation of the ancient people. The Sun is regarded as the greatest creation of the Fire element and it is typically associated with it. Therefore, a Sun-worship festival usually involves fire— either as an equally divine creature or as an active part of ritual practice.

This paper examines two of the most significant feasts of Bulgaria and Iran: *Nowruz* (the Iranian New Year), taking place during the spring equinox, and *Koleda* (Bulgarian Christmas) celebrated a few days after the winter solstice. The two festivals bear the same symbolic meaning and some of the rituals are surprisingly similar despite being celebrated at different times of the year. Both *Nowruz* and *Koleda* are ancient Indo-European heathen traditions dating back to pre-Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic times for Iranians and pre-Christian times for Bulgarians. However, the fact that they have survived to this day attests to their degree of incorporation into Iranian and Bulgarian culture respectively. Nevertheless, in the course of time adjustments have been made in order to accommodate the Zoroastrian, Islamic and Christian doctrines. Hence, a syncretism between heathenism and orthodoxy has been created. Other festivals related to the divinization of the sun will also be discussed. In comparison to *Nowruz* and *Koleda* they are of lesser, yet substantial importance. An older Bulgarian festival, *Ignazhden*, also called the Bulgarian New Year, coincides with the exact day of the winter solstice, on the 20th of December. Its Iranian counterpart is *Shab-e Yalda* or *Shab-e Chelleh*. Other examples of spring festivals are the Iranian *Chaharshambe Suri*, the Bulgarian *Lazarovden*, *Tsvetnitsa (Vrabnitsa)*, *Blagovets*, *Baba Marta* etc. The aforementioned feasts are celebrated by means of unique ritual practices depending on cultural context. In spite of the specific characteristics, they all come down to one basic trait, i.e. the symbolism of change and renovation. The idea of change is manifested through cyclicity both in nature and in human life, as well as through the concept of a dying and resurrecting Sun deity.

Overview of linguistic and cultural similarities

The affinities between the Bulgarian and Iranian peoples must be traced back to as early as the common Indo-European era both linguistically and in terms of the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European mythology. The divinization of the Sun must have taken place in Indo-European culture. The words for ‘sun’ in nearly all branches of the Indo-European family are related (West 2007: 194). The prototype neuter noun **sóh₂wǵ* is preserved in most Indo-European languages including Persian and Bulgarian: Avestan *hvarə xšaēta*; Vedic *surya/svar/sur*, Persian *xuršid*; Old Church Slavonic *slŭnīce*, Bulgarian *slance*, Greek *helios*, Latin *sōl* etc. (see Fasmer 1987: 710). The motion of the Sun depicted as a horse-driven chariot is also a common motif in many Indo-European cultures. With the development of separate Indo-Iranian and Balto-Slavic and later Iranian and Slavic branches, we see separate changes distinctive of solely these branches – the *satəm* shift for example: Avestan – *satem*; Persian – *sad*, Bulgarian – *sto*. Apart from the strictly diachronic developments there is evidence of prolonged historical contacts between the Iranian and Proto-Slavic tribes. As a result, there was mutual linguistic and cultural influence. Traditionally, the word for ‘god’ is considered to be an Iranian loanword in Proto-Slavic. The root **b^heh₂g* originally meant ‘to dispense’ and later shifted semantically to ‘god’ evident in Old Persian *baga-*; Younger Avestan *baya*; Vedic *bhága* Old Church Slavonic – *bogŭ*; Bulgarian – *bog* (see Rastorguyeva, Edel’man 2003:55, Fasmer 1986: 181). It is contained in the name of the Slavonic Sun deity *Dazhbog* meaning ‘the god dispenser’. The distinction between *Belobog* and *Chernobog*, on the other hand, might also have been influenced by Zoroastrian dualism. Another Iranian loanword in Proto-Slavic **divъ* from Proto-Indo-European **deywós* (‘sky god’) also went through a semantic shift and developed a negative, demonic meaning in Slavic probably under Iranian influence– Old Persian *daiva*, Avestan *daeua* (demonic creature) (see West 2007: 166).

Divine attributes of the Sun deity

There is extensive evidence pointing to the recognition of the Sun as a deity amongst Indo-European peoples, although according to Fraser it has never occupied a leading place in their pantheon (Fraser 1926: 441-443). Some examples include the Greek cult of *Helios* and *Apollo*, Roman *Sol Invictus*, Indian *Surya* and *Savitṛ* and Sun goddesses: Baltic *Saule*, Celtic *Sulis* etc. In the pan-Slavic tradition, the Sun deity is known as *Dazhbog*, son of *Svarog*. *Dazhbog* is referred to as the ‘celestial fire’ whereas *Svarog* is the ‘earthly fire’ (Stoynev 1988: 53). In the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition, this is the Ahurian creature *Mithra* (*Mehr*) and in pre-Zoroastrian times there was the cult of *Hvar* (Boyce 1979: 6). There is a general perception of the divine

features and functions of the Sun deity. It is traditionally perceived as good and a God of regular habits who does not respond to human intercession. Therefore, it brings no real anxiety but joy and admiration, quite opposite to the ‘moody’ gods who threaten human existence and, as a consequence, are the subject of intense religious activities. The most widely noted attribute of the Sun is that it surveys the whole world and sees everything that goes on (West 2007: 198). The Sun’s capacity for seeing everything that people do qualifies him as a supervisor of justice, or at least gives him a valuable role as the god of justice’s eye and as a trustworthy witness. In *Shahnameh*, which must be considered the main source and preserver of Iranian mythology, Ferdowsi refers to the ‘the eye of the sun’. In Bulgarian folk tales, the Sun is involved as the helper of the protagonists leading them to the right path and right conduct (Stoynev 1988: 75). The Sun is often regarded in connection with other celestial divine creatures or principles in a system of binary oppositions: Sun-Moon, Sun-Dawn, light-darkness, day-night which have correspondent moral dimension in the oppositions: good-evil; life-death, happiness-misfortune. In Bulgarian folklore the Sun and the Moon are often depicted as a couple or as siblings, the Dawn is the daughter of the Sun, Sun is the son of Fire. In the sense of Zoroastrian moral duality, where practically all creation is assessed as either good or evil, these oppositions have been invested with further meaning.

The sun and the other celestial creatures are exclusively associated with positive connotations. Although they are perceived as generally well-intentioned towards humans, the rituals of the solar festivals are mainly oriented at obtaining health, prosperity and protection to avert the possibility of death, loss, disease or misfortune. In this case, the Sun is regarded as the provider of well-being. This is the general meaning of the ritual practices in festivals like *Nowruz*, *Shab-e Yalda*, *Chaharshambe Suri* and the Bulgarian counterparts – *Koleda*, *Ignazhden*, *Enyovden*, *Gergyovden* etc. Solar festivals are characterized by earthly imitation of what happens in heaven. A body of symbolic items alluding to the sun is usually displayed, including pictorial depictions of the solar wheel. For instance, circular ritual buns or cakes are typical of the Bulgarian festive tradition on Christmas and other feasts.

Transitional periods

In general, solar festivals are of a calendar nature and celebrate significant dates such as the first day of spring/summer, or the longest or shortest day. They are preceded by the so-called ‘transition periods’ associated with chaos and destruction of the world and followed by total renewal. This is a time of crisis represented by the duel between the celestial and chthonian forces. The duel results in the victory of the cosmic forces and the creation of the new world.

The celebration of this victory is the greatest festival of the year. In the Iranian tradition this idea is incorporated in the festivities of *Nowruz*, the most significant time for Iranians, marking the beginning of the New Year, as well as *Shab-e Yalda*, dedicated to *Mithra*. In Bulgaria the festivals embodying the concept of the new beginning are the cycle of winter festivals *Ignazhden*, *Koleda*, *Survaki*; the spring festivals *Baba Marta*, *Blagovets*, Easter (*Velikden*), *Gergyovden* and the summer festival *Enyovden*.

In the context of the Bulgarian Christmas (*Koleda*), that ‘transition period’ lasts for 13 days, from the 25th December until 6th January (*Bogoyavlenie*). These days are called *Mrasni dni* (‘Dirty Days’). According to popular belief, during this period the forces of evil and ill-intentioned supernatural creatures are extremely active (Marinov 1914: 453). Therefore, a number of restrictions and taboos are imposed. For instance, burial services are banned. Housekeeping is postponed. Going out is considered extremely dangerous. It is believed that a child conceived during that time is destined to become a bad man. The Iranian counterpart is the day of *sizdah-be-dar*, which is celebrated on the 13th day after *Nowruz*. On this day, traditionally everyone goes outside because staying at home is believed to bring bad luck. While in the former the negative meaning obtains throughout the entire period, in the latter it is exclusively confined to the last day. In many cultures, the symbolism of the number 13 is associated with the idea of evil, death and misfortune. In this context it is related to the concept of chaos and transition. Another interpretation suggests that 13 might have an astrological reference to the Sun and the twelve Zodiac constellations, thus showing a concentrated, minimized representation of the year and the victory over the evil forces.

Nowruz and Koleda

It is obvious that all these festivals are somehow related to the concept of the beginning, renovation, with the New Sun and New Year, but analogies between *Nowruz* and *Koleda* are even more obvious when one considers *Yalda* and *Ignazhden*. *Nowruz* (meaning “New Day” in Persian) marks the beginning of the New Year in Iran. It is celebrated on the 20th or 21st of March (first *farvardin* according to the Iranian calendar) at the time of the spring equinox. The festival is also celebrated in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan as well as by minorities in Georgia, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. The roots of *Nowruz* celebrations are really ancient, they go back to the pre-Islamic and pre-Zoroastrian era (Boyce 1983: 794). The majority of the traditions forming part of the festival was established during the Achaemenid period and have been preserved to this day almost unchanged. Coming from a time when Light is the symbol of Good and Darkness is a symbol of Evil, the day of *Nowruz* is considered the victory of Good

over Evil and as a starting point in the recreation of the world. Traditionally, on that day the family gathers around the table with seven items (*haft sin*) beginning with the Persian letters *sin*. Nowadays, these 7 items usually consist of *sabze* (wheat germ), *samanu* (a type of cake), *sib* (apple), *serke* (vinegar), *senjed* (a type of olives), *sir* (garlic) and *somaq* (a type of spice). Each one of them has its own symbolic meaning included in the wishes for prosperity and welfare for the next year. Here we can find similarities with Bulgarian Christmas Eve, where all members of the family also gather around a Christmas table consisting of an odd number of meatless dishes – usually 7 or 9. There is also an identical tradition of exchanging gifts. Apart from the seven items on *Nowruz*, the Holy Quran, a mirror, a water container with a golden fish (*māhi-ye qermez*), coloured eggs (similar to the Easter tradition), coins (*seke*) and candles are put on the table. Candles are also included in the Bulgarian tradition as an avatar of the Fire element, also alluding to the Sun. Another tradition on *Nowruz* is buying new clothes and cleaning houses. Haji Firūz, cognate to Santa Claus, walks the streets in red clothing and a face painted black.

Nowruz is preceded by another festival called *Chahārshambe Sūri*. Its name can be translated as ‘The Fire Wednesday’. It is celebrated on the night before the last Wednesday in the run-up to New Year. This is a relatively recent tradition because according to Islam Wednesday is a day of bad luck. On this day people go outside, light fires and jump over them. This ritual is believed to bring prosperity, fortune and health. A traditional sort of chanting is sung to the fire: ‘Your redness (health, strength) for me, my yellowness (disease, pain) for you!’ (*Sorkhi-ye to be man, zardi-ye man be to*). Analogous to this festival is the Bulgarian Blagovets (‘bringing good news’). It is a spring festival celebrated on the 25th of March. Again, on this day people jump over a fire barefoot and it is believed that if their feet are burnt slightly, people become immune to snake bites (Georgieva 1993: 63). Here again, Fire as creator of the Sun is included in the ritual practices preceding the actual ‘birth’ of the Sun. According to the Christian interpretation, on this day the Virgin Mary receives the news of Jesus’s conception.

Other Bulgarian spring festivals are also worth mentioning in the context of the renewal in nature. On the 1st of March everybody puts on specific red and white items called *martenitsa*, which they wear until they see a stork or a swallow, a precursor of the coming spring. This item must be then attached to a fruit tree. *Lazarovden* and *Tsvetnitsa* are celebrated in two consecutive days as part of the Easter festivals cycle. A group of unmarried girls go from house to house and sing songs of prosperity and welfare. On the next day, everyone brings a branch of a willow tree home and this is believed to have protective force.

The Bulgarian Christmas, or *Koleda*, similarly to *Nowruz* for the Iranians, is one of the most important festivals in the Bulgarian orthodox calendar, as well as the most important one in the Catholic tradition of Christianity. That day is mostly associated with the birth of Jesus Christ. However, it features elements which are remnants from a more ancient, heathen festival which celebrated the end of the old and the beginning of the New Year. It is, therefore, related to Sun as a main deity, which symbolically dies and is resurrected on the day of the winter solstice. In the Iranian tradition there is an ancient celebration dedicated to the Sun deity *Mithra*. It is believed that on that day *Mithra* visits his Mother where He dies and on the night of 24th of December and is born again. The idea of the cyclical nature of the Sun deity is reflected in the popular motif called the 'Wheel of life'. The 'Wheel' as a representation of the Sun is widely attested in Indo-European mythology (West 2007:202). Despite being a non-Christian tradition, the wheel is depicted in the mural paintings of many Bulgarian monasteries and churches. In the early Christian tradition there was no clear distinction between the image of God and the Sun. Thus, in many Bulgarian Christian temples the symbol representing God on altar walls is actually a solar image. On the night before Christmas called *Bădni vecer* (also Small or Dry Christmas) it is believed that the new-born God of the Sun climbs down from a tree. That is usually an oak tree, called *bădnik* (representation of the cosmic tree), which is regarded as sacred and even as a deity in its own right. On the next day, groups of specially trained young men *koledari* go about the town or village and sing songs to bring well-being. The songs also announce the birth of the Young God.

Ignazhden and Yalda

In the Bulgarian festive calendar there is an older festival, *Ignazhden*, corresponding exactly with the astronomical event of the winter solstice on the 20th or 21st December. This day is considered as the beginning of the winter festive cycle. It is also known under the names *Idinak*, *Edinak* (meaning 'separate day'), also *Godinyak*, *Polyaz*, *Sur*, *Ignat*. The names can also be referred to an etymological root for the word 'fire' – Proto-Indo-European *h₁égni*, Sanskrit – *agni*, Latin – *ignis*, Bulgarian – *ogăn* (Mayrhofer 1992: 44). It is also called 'The Young Year', 'The Young Day' or 'The New Day', analogous to the meaning of *Nowruz* in Persian. A specific ritual practiced called *polazvane* is performed on that day and is related to the belief of the 'magic of the first day'. According to that belief, whoever steps first into a home, will determine the fortune of the family throughout the year. If that person is of a good nature, the year will be happy and prosperous. If it is a bad person, the same will go for the year of each family member. Usually, however, the choice is made in advance. When that person steps into the house a

number of specific rituals ensue. The purpose of these rituals is to ensure the fruitfulness and prosperity of the coming year. People believe that on this day the New Sun is born so they greet each other with the question: ‘Do you honour the Young God?’ i.e. the Sun God. In three of the winter festivals there is another typical practice of ‘burning incense’. As has become evident, fire recurs as a substantial element of every Sun-related festival with its renovating and purifying qualities. The Christian interpretation of *Ignazhden* is that on this day the labour pains of Virgin Mary began.

The Iranian cognate festival is *Yalda*, also known as *Shab-e Chelleh* (‘the 40th night’). The Iranian poet Sa’adi refers to *Yalda* in his book *Bustān*: ‘The true morning will not come until the *Yalda* night is gone’. Similarly, it is celebrated on the 21st of December, coinciding with the winter solstice. *Yalda* is a loanword from Syriac and it originally meant ‘birth’. The festival was observed in the most ancient cultures including those of Mesopotamia and Egypt and the tradition was later applied to the Zoroastrian religious system of the Persians. The Zoroastrian interpretation is that on the last day of the month *azar* ending with the longest night of the year the forces of *Ahriman* (the evil spirit) are strongest. The next day or the first of the month *dey* is called *xoramruz* (the day of the Sun) and it belongs to *Ahura Mazda*. The festival symbolically represents the victory of the *Ahurian* (good) over the *Ahrimanic* (evil) forces as light starts increasing and days become longer (Mirrazavi 2015). Fires burn throughout the night to ensure the defeat over the forces of evil. Similarly to *Nowruz* and *Koleda*, *Yalda* is a family tradition in which all members gather around a table with a set of special dishes. Iranians believe that eating summer fruits such as watermelon will prevent illness during the cold months. The bright red seeds of the pomegranate allude to the dawn and the shining of to the sun. There are prayers to *Mithra* or *Mehr*, who is believed to be the *yazad* (venerable creature in Zoroastrianism) responsible for protecting the ‘light of the early morning’, or *havanagah*. Another similarity is the concept of a temporary dismantling of order and an initial state of chaos prior to creation. To appreciate and celebrate the first creation Iranians held a festival where all roles were reversed. Disorder and chaos ruled for a day and eventually order was restored at the end of the festival.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Iranian and Bulgarian festive systems belong to an extremely ancient tradition. The roots of that tradition might not have been originally Indo-European as similar practices were attested in neighbouring Semitic cultures and are, on some degree, universal. However, they have been incorporated in the traditions of Indo-European peoples to such great extent,

that they have become an inseparable part of their culture and identity throughout several millennia. Apparently, a major role in these traditions was played by solar festivities. The original form of that practice is unclear, yet its authenticity has not been lost. The universal concept of the renovating nature of the Sun deity is expressed in multiple and diverse ways but its symbolic meaning has remained unchanged.

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