



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT
Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit

RESEARCH PAPER #23, 2026

NAWRUZ IN WAKHAN



Qurbonidin Alamshoev

Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #23

Nawruz in Wakhan

Qurbonidin Alamshoev

PhD in History, Research Fellow,
Research Institute of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan

Abstract

This article is the result of the author's field observations and direct participation in the Nawruz celebrations in the Wakhan and Zebak districts of Afghanistan in March 2015. The study reveals a vivid picture of Nawruz rituals in one of the most distinctive corners of historical Khorasan and Badakhshan, based on personal experience, interviews with elders, *khalifa*, and guardians of tradition, as well as comparisons with materials from Tajikistan.

The author examines Nawruz as a holistic system of knowledge, uniting ancient concepts of time, nature, and moral order. A special place is occupied by the figure of the *khalifa*, who determines the precise and permitted times of rituals, their direction, and auspicious formulas based on ancient *risola* (books) on *nujum* (astrology). The stages of preparation for the holiday and the most important rituals associated with the celebration of Nawruz, the main national celebration among the Wakhi and Zebak peoples, are described in detail.

The methodological basis of the study was formed by the methods of participant observation, oral history, ethnolinguistic recording of terminology, as well as a comparative analysis of ritual practices in the region.

Keywords: Nawruz, Wakhan, UNESCO, cultural heritage.

About the author:

Qurbonidin Alamshoev is a journalist-researcher, historian-ethnographer, writer, and a public figure. The author is a PhD in History and a Research Fellow at the Research Institute of Culture and Information of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan. He also serves as a Public Adviser on the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. He specialises in the conservation of biodiversity and bioculture, intangible cultural heritage and traditional environmental knowledge, community mobilization and environmental protection in the highlands of Tajikistan. He has promoted sustainable development of mountain communities by integrating environmental and cultural heritage conservation objectives with local initiatives in the Pamir region.

Dr. Alamshoev is also the author of more than 20 books and brochures, over 500 articles in the national and foreign press and scientific publications, as well as 12 documentaries and photo collections dedicated to the history, life, culture and nature of the mountain Tajiks of the Pamirs.

Additionally, he is a laureate of the Abulkasym Lakhuti Republican Journalism Prize and recipient of the titles "Excellent Press of Tajikistan" and "Excellent Culture of Tajikistan."

The **Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU)** works to preserve and promote the rich and diverse cultural heritages of Central Asia through research, documentation, archiving, teaching, and support of regional scholars.

CHHU research fellows are capturing existing information and cultural collections, while generating new dialogues and narratives on cultural heritage and identity in the region.

CHHU is part of the Graduate School of Development, University of Central Asia. The University of Central Asia (UCA) was founded in 2000 through an International Treaty signed by the Presidents of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Kazakhstan, and His Late Highness the Aga Khan IV, ratified by their respective parliaments and registered with the United Nations.

The CHHU's Research Papers is a peer-reviewed series that aims to enhance understanding of socio-cultural and historical processes in Central Asia and contribute to international academic discourse on the region.

Comments on papers or questions about their content should be sent to chhu@ucentralasia.org. "Research Papers" may be cited without seeking prior permission.

Editor: Leyli R. Dodykhudoeva, PhD in Philosophy,
Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Translated by Jacob William Somerlot, MA in Applied Linguistics/ Discourse Studies (Carleton U.).

Design: Aida Tostokova, CHHU, Graduate School of Development of UCA.

Cover picture: *Traditional horse racing without saddles as part of the Nawruz celebrations in Khandud.*
Photo by Q. Alamshoyev.

Copyright © 2026
University of Central Asia
125/1 Toktogul Street, 720001, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic
E-mail: chhu@ucentralasia.org

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Central Asia. The text and sources of the article should be referenced in this format: Alamshoev Q. (2026). Nawruz in Wakhan. Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit of UCA, Research Paper #23, 32 p.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Nawruz – An International Holiday	4
Nawruz – A Celebration of Mankind and Nature.....	7
<i>Soatbini</i> – Determining the Auspicious Hour	8
Cleaning the House on Nawruz Day	
Is a Symbol of Renewal and Purification	9
Decoration of the House from the Inside	11
The Donkey, a Symbol of Strength, Wealth, and Blessings.....	12
<i>Shogunband</i> – Well-Wishes and Holiday Sticks	13
Nawruz – The Farmer’s Holiday	15
<i>Khonagashtak</i> – Visiting Each Other During Nawruz.....	18
Ritual Dishes of Nawruz.....	19
<i>Sumanak</i> and <i>Shoshp</i>	20
<i>Dalya</i> or <i>Boj</i>	21
<i>Qumoch</i>	22
<i>Makit</i>	23
<i>Rezhivj</i>	23
<i>Gandum-Biryān</i>	23
Fun and Games of Nawruz.....	24
<i>Aspdavoni</i> – Horse Races	24
<i>Tukhmjang</i> – Egg Fighting	25
<i>Qustin</i> – Wrestling.....	25
Conclusion	26
Explanations of Traditional Terms and Concepts.....	27

NAWRUZ – AN INTERNATIONAL HOLIDAY

Nawruz, sometimes also called the Spring Festival and the Eastern New Year, is one of the most ancient and enduring cultural phenomena of the peoples of Aryan¹ origin. The word Nawruz itself (also known as Navruz, Novruz, Nooruz, Nevruz, and Nauryz) means “new day”; its spelling and pronunciation vary by region. According to legend, dating back to the Zoroastrian era, the history of Nawruz dates back over three thousand years. Nawruz symbolises the arrival of spring. It is celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, March 20/21. The origins of the holiday go back to ancient times: it first became a holiday in Persia (Iran), and then spread to the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, India, and the Middle East. It is celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, May 20/21². This word comes from the Persian *nav-rūz* (نو – “new” + روز – “day”), which literally means “New Day.” This day serves as a symbol of the renewal of nature and the spiritual rebirth of man.

Nawruz has absorbed thousands of years of material and spiritual culture, preserving the artistic, ethical, and social traditions of ancient Eurasian civilisations. The holiday is associated not only with the agricultural cycle and the solar calendar, but also with mythological notions of the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil.

Nowadays, in the Persian-speaking regions of the world it is known as *Nawruzi Buzurg* (The Great Nawruz), *Shogun / Shaagun*, *Khidir ayom* or *Jashni Buzurg* (The Great Holiday), *Jashni Bahor* (The Spring Festival), *Jashni Dehqon* (Farmers’ Festival), *Idi Sari Sol* (Beginning of the Year Festival), among other names.

According to legend, the establishment of this holiday is attributed to King Jamshid, one of the renowned rulers of ancient Iran. It is believed that Nawruz began to be celebrated during his accession to the throne and during his reign as he was considered a just king. In many sources, the origin of the holiday is also associated with the day on which the first man, Adam, was created, i.e. the symbolic beginning of human history.³



Photo 1. The *Mughcha* bud is one of the symbols of Nawruz and signifies the awakening of nature and the renewal of life. Photo from the Internet.

During the Arab conquest, the cultural traditions of the Aryan peoples were banned; Nawruz was declared a “pagan” holiday. Despite this, the spirit of the celebration continued unbroken. According to popular belief, the justification for its special status as a bearer of sanctity can be found in the Quran itself. *Surah ash-Shams* (“Surah of the Sun”)⁴ speaks of light as a manifestation of divine wisdom. Therefore, during the days during which Nawruz takes place, a person should greet the world with an “open face”, like the sun, thank the sun and light for life and wish that joy and warmth do not leave the house, and that the sky, water and earth remain peaceful and blessed.

1 Translator’s note: The term “Aryan” is used here to refer to the non-Indic Aryan linguistic and cultural sub-branch of Indo-Iranian peoples. In this context, the term predates modern Indo-Aryanism and twentieth-century racial ideologies and carries no racial connotations. It is etymologically related to the term “Iranian”, though it is employed differently in contemporary Persian, Tajik, Pamir, and related languages. This term is translated directly from the Russian original and has been retained for two reasons. First, it is historically accurate in reference to the ancient Aryan heritage of the Wakhan people. Second, its use – together with associated traditional symbols – reflects indigenous cultural meanings that long predate and are distinct from later ideological appropriations.

2 UNESCO. Nawruz, Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Inscribed 2009). Paris: UNESCO, 2009.

3 Frye, R. N. *The Heritage of Persia*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962.

4 Holy Quran, *Surah Ash-Shams* (91:1–8).



Photo 2. View of Wakhan on the eve of Nawruz.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

The holiday is celebrated in the first month of spring, which is called *Farvardin*, when the sun enters the sign of Aries, and day and night become equal. According to the solar Hijri calendar, this first day of the month, *Hamal*, symbolises the beginning of new life, the renewal of nature, and the rebirth of hope.

In the traditional worldview of the Pamiri people, those of Eastern Iranian origin, Nawruz is a triumph of light over darkness, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance. White, the predominant colour during the holiday, is a symbol of purity and perfection, while black is a symbol of darkness and destruction.

In the Afghan regions of Wakhan, Ishkashim and partly in Zebak⁵, where we collected materials on the traditions of celebrating Nawruz⁶, this holiday is called *Shogun* (*Šogun*), which is understood here as “royal”, literally *sho-gun* “like a shah”. In these districts, many villages still observe ancient Nawruz traditions, sometimes with minor local variations. These traditions, just as they were thousands of years ago, retain their significance in the social and spiritual life of mountain communities, and people hold them in deep respect. For the inhabitants of these mountainous regions, *Shogun* is not just the beginning of a new year, but a new stage in life, new hope, a day of purity, peace, and domestic tranquility. The word *shogun* is spoken with a special joy and reverence. Children are often named after this holiday here: boys are called *Shogun*, *Shogunbek*, *Shogunnazar*, and girls are also called *Shogun*. The first person to cross the threshold of a home on this day is called *poshnai shogun* (*pošnai šogun*), which translates to “a person with a blessed footprint,” whose arrival brings happiness, light, and good fortune to the home.

This work focuses on the tradition of both welcoming and seeing off Nawruz in the Wakhan region of the district (*vulusvoli*) of Badakhshan. Here, as with many other peoples of the East, since ancient times it has been believed that winter (the month of *Dai*) personifies darkness and ignorance,

5 Kalandarov T. S. Pamiri Peoples // Great Russian Encyclopedia. Volume 25. Moscow, 2014, pp. 178–179. Source: <https://old.bigenc.ru/ethnology/text/2701288>

6 This article is the result of the author's research and creative assignment to the Ishkashim, Zebak, and Wakhan districts of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from March 13 to 23, 2015. See also articles on Nawruz in Sanglich and Shugnan: L.R. Dodykhudoeva, “The Verbal Code of Nawruz: A Linguocultural Analysis of Sanglich Texts,” by S. P. Yusufbekov. In the journal *Armenian Humanitarian Bulletin*, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (Yerevan), 2022, no. 8, pp. 220–253 and Edelman J. I., Dodykhudoeva L. R. Spring equinox festival in the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan: Ethnolinguistic analysis and interlinear glossing of a Shughnani text. In the journal *Armenian Humanitarian Bulletin*, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (Yerevan), 2022, no. 8, pp. 206–219.

associated with the image of Ahriman, and spring and Nawruz symbolize light and the victory of good, embodied in the image of Ahura Mazda (known locally as *Hurmuz*).⁷ Therefore, the sun, called *Ir* by the Wakhi people and *Hurmuz* by the Ishkashim people, was perceived as a sacred symbol of truth, warmth, and creation. One of the central rituals of the holiday is the lighting of fire (*otaš*), which is a symbol of the sun and purifying light. The flames, like the sun, give life to all living things and represent spiritual purification.⁸

Festive customs in Wakhan are imbued with respect for the earth, water, trees, and animals. People clean their homes, remove dirt, put on new clothes, and set out the *dastarkhon* (*dasturkhān*), a festive tablecloth symbolising abundance and gratitude to nature. It always includes sweets, bread, fruits, and drinks – all gifts of nature.

The Nawruz celebration lasts several days and is accompanied by communal festivities and socialising, folk games, dances, competitions, shared meals, and visits to neighbours. This strengthens social cohesion and a sense of community solidarity.

According to popular belief, during these days, the souls of ancestors descend to earth to bless their descendants. Therefore, it is customary to clean homes, improve yards, plant trees, and help those in need: orphans, the elderly, and the sick. All this demonstrates the moral meaning of Nawruz and the mercy inherent in it, as well as the continuity of generations.

The philosophy of Nawruz in Wakhan is based on three principles: good thoughts, good words, good deeds, expressing the universal values of humanity and affirming the harmony of man and nature as the basis for sustainable peace.

Persian-speaking countries, including Tajikistan, being the birthplace of Nawruz, share the spiritual heritage of the holiday with neighbouring regions of historical Khorasan, including Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, where Nawruz traditions still retain their original form.

It is worth noting that a special place in the history of the modern recognition of Nawruz is occupied by the initiative of the Republic of Tajikistan, which in 2010 proposed to include Nawruz not only as a national holiday, but also as a celebration that embodies the symbol of peace, friendship and cultural unity of the peoples of the region on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In 2009, UNESCO included Nawruz in this list.⁹ On February 18, 2010, the UN General Assembly proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Nawruz. Since then, it has been celebrated annually under the auspices of UNESCO.¹⁰

7 Ibid.

8 Wakhi People [Ваханцы]. Wikipedia, July 16 2025, <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%92%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D1%8B>; <http://news.tj/ru/news/vakhanskii-koridor-rasshiraetsya-multimedia>

9 UNESCO. Intangible Cultural Heritage Portal: Nawruz – Representative List Entry 00282.

10 United Nations. Resolution A/RES/64/253: International Day of Nawruz. New York: UN, 2010.

NAWRUZ – A CELEBRATION OF MANKIND AND NATURE

Most residents of the villages of Wakhan, Zebak, and Ishkashim celebrate Nawruz on March 21, the day when light finally conquers darkness. However, in some villages, such as Khilkhona (in the Zebak *vulusvoli*), as well as Futur and Yimit (in the Wakhan region), special signs in the surrounding environment that help determine the exact date of the holiday have been observed since ancient times.

In these places, to determine the exact day of Nawruz, special natural landmarks called *amalgoh* (*āmalgāh*) have long been used as places from which to observe the arrival of *Hamal* (literally meaning “ram’s head”). According to popular belief, at the moment when the sun’s rays reach these landmarks in the afternoon, the sun is considered to have entered the constellation of Aries/Hamal. This moment marks the arrival of the New Year according to the solar calendar. When the sun’s rays reach the designated landmark, residents joyfully congratulate each other, show affection and friendship to those around them, kiss the hands of elders in respect, shake hands with the young, and exchange good wishes. However, establishing the exact sacred time for the beginning of the celebration remains the exclusive prerogative of the local *khalifa* [local religious leader].

Not everyone has the authority to determine the signs with such an *amalgoh*. In each colony, such observations have historically been entrusted to a specific family who have passed down knowledge and skills in astronomical research from generation to generation.

In Zebak and Hilkhon, Nawruz has a special local name: *Nawruzi Dewonashoh* (*Dewonashoh* is a sacred figure). It is celebrated annually on the 15th of the month of *Hut*, which corresponds to March 5th. In Yimit, it is celebrated from the 24th to the 27th of the same month (March 14–17), and in Futur, it is celebrated two days before the generally-observed [dates of] Nawruz. In most other villages of Ishkashim, Wakhan and Zebak, residents usually celebrate the holiday on March 21.

Nawruz is a truly significant holiday in these *vulusvoli*. People prepare for it in a special way; on the day of the celebration, people try to decorate their clothes and homes with solar symbols. Such symbols include swastikas and images of stars. They are embroidered on shirt collars, along the edges of traditional *toki* (*toqī*) skullcaps, and used in hand-knitted socks, as well as on the walls and ceilings of traditional *chorkhona* (*čorxona*) houses. The sun, as a symbol of warmth, light, and life, is depicted using various artistic techniques.



Photo 3. Wakhi girls in festive attire. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.



Photo 4. Juniper.
Photo from the Internet.

In the folk rituals of Nawruz these days, a special place is occupied by *archa* (juniper), a revered sacred evergreen tree. When the sun enters Aries and the new year begins, juniper smoke is perceived as a sacrifice to the light, cleansing the earth of winter darkness and awakening its fertility. For purification and blessing, the smoke is fumigated around the home, hearth, and livestock, in the belief that the aroma of this tree dispels illness, sorrow, and winter spirits. Along with juniper, another evergreen plant is often used in Nawruz rituals: the conifer, called *modragh*, which is a shrub that has long been associated with spring cleansing and New Year's traditions.

The predominance of white and green in the region is especially evident during these days in painting, embroidery, and weaving. Particular attention is paid to the preparation of festive religious dishes, which serve as evidence of the connection between these ancient rituals and the lives of farmers.

In the aforementioned regions of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, Nawruz is not only a celebration of human community but also a celebration of nature itself. It unites knowledge and faith, work and joy, and expresses the earthly and cosmic principles.

Nawruz unites generations and reminds us that humans are part of a great natural cycle, and that respect for nature, the sun, the earth, and life remains a source of spiritual strength and cultural unity.

***Soatbini* – Determining the Auspicious Hour**

After the sun reaches the natural signs of Nawruz, elders and respected villagers gather and visit the local spiritual leader, the *khalifa* (*khalīfah*). According to local beliefs, to ensure a successful New Year, it is necessary to determine the “auspicious hour” (*sa'ati sa'd*) with the *khalifa*.

In the villages of Wakhan, Zebak and Ishkashim, almost every settlement has its own *khalifa*, and in large villages sometimes even each clan (*awlod*) has its own spiritual mentor. These *khalifa* conduct the religious and ritual affairs of the community, determine the time of the beginning of all rites and holidays, and also act as folk healers (*tabīb*). The visit to the *khalifa* on the eve of Nawruz is called *soatbini* (*sā'atbīnī*) “determining the auspicious hour”, its purpose being to determine the precise auspicious time (*sā'at-e nek*) for the festive rites and the beginning of the new year.

Before visitors arrive, the *khalifa* orders some *modragh* to be brought into the house so that fresh branches can be placed next to his books, sanctifying them. The day of the holiday is not chosen arbitrarily, but rather based on complex calculations. The day of the holiday is not chosen arbitrarily, but rather based on complex calculations. The *khalifa*, using astronomical books (*kitobhoi nujum*) and the national calendar, (*Oftob dar mard*) “The Sun in the Body of a Man”, determines the precise moment when the alignment of the stars is favourable and does not carry destructive force. He opens old books on astrology in front of everyone, compares data with several sources, and, if necessary, makes his own calculations using prayer beads (*tasbīh*). The spiritual mentor determines the moment of the vernal equinox and monitors the arrival of the holiday, which must not coincide with an “unfavourable day” (*ruzi nahs*). After making the calculations, he announces the time he has determined to the entire community.

The word of the *khalifa* has special weight: it is believed that the successful course of the coming year depends on the time he announces. It also indicates where, in what direction – north, east, south or west, the rubbish and dust collected during house cleaning should be placed and buried, so that the cleansing effect of the ritual will contribute to well-being and prosperity. Local residents believe that following these rules directly impacts their luck in the coming year.

After visiting the *khalifa*, the elders inform all members of the community of the auspicious time. From this moment, preparations for Nawruz begin.

If the auspicious hour is approaching soon and there is a risk of missing it, then in order to “mark the auspicious hour” (*sā’atgīr*) on the day, some household items or furnishings are taken out of the house before the New Year, most often a pillow (*baalish*) or a red blanket, lightly sprinkled with flour, a symbol of whiteness and purity (*safedī*). Such an object is placed on the branches of a tree or on a fence surrounding the yard of a house as a symbol of the end of the old year and everything that was in it, and an invitation to light, abundance, and prosperity into the house.

Removing items and equipment must occur at an auspicious hour (*sā’ati sa’d*). Furthermore, cleaning should not begin during the hour of Mars (*taj. Mirrikh*, ancient Greek: Ares), which locals consider an evil planet, a symbol of destruction and intemperance, causing fear and terror.

Cleaning the House on Nawruz Day Is a Symbol of Renewal and Purification

In Wakhan, as throughout Badakhshan, Nawruz is celebrated as a festival of purification of the spirit, body, home, and environment. One of the most important activities of this day is the general cleaning (*khonatakoni*, “house cleaning”). This ancient rite symbolizes the transition from the old to the new, the shedding of all that is obsolete, and the ushering in of a period of renewal. It begins in the pre-dawn hours, while it’s still dark, when the woman of the house goes to fetch water and, having collected fresh water from the spring, returns to the house. It is believed that water brought on this day brings blessings and vitality.

All household utensils, clothing, and bedding are removed from the house and cleaned in the open air, in the snow. All ashes are swept from the fireplace, and then fragrant juniper branches are burned in the firebox. The smell and crackling sound of juniper, according to folk belief, drives away evil spirits and djinn.

The first stage of preparation for Nawruz is the harvesting of willow branches (*khodachub*). They are cut on the day when the sun’s rays touch the natural landmarks of Nawruz, usually at sunset. This ancient ritual is called “cutting the branches” (*khoda-burī*). These branches must be cut from a living, green tree, usually up to three meters tall and about the diameter of a shovel handle. At night, the branches are placed on the roof of the house, and in the morning, the owner of the house ties brooms of mountain grass to them. This is called “binding the brooms” (*zorūb-bandī*).



Photo 5. Traditional household items in a Wakhan house.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.



Photo 6. Household utensils of a Wakhan resident. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

This is a preliminary stage of the general cleaning of the house from dust and debris, preceding the ritual of “removing smoke from the ceiling” (*dudazani*). The following morning, the owner of the house, ascending to the roof, passes the rods into the house through the skylight (*rawzan*), while reciting a blessing addressed to the house and family members:

– *Shogun bahor muborak!* (May the spring festival be blessed!)

The hostess replies from inside:

– *Ba ruyi shuma muborak!* (And to you, blessings!)

After this, she sprinkles flour on the broom – a sign of purification. Five or six brooms are prepared in advance for cleaning the house. Brooms for cleaning soot and grime (*dūd*) from the ceiling come in different lengths: a long one (*drupch*) for the ceiling and beams, and a shorter one for the walls and floor. The owner of the house begins sweeping from top to bottom, following the rule: “first the sky, then the air, then the earth.”

During the house cleaning, the doors are locked, and no one is allowed inside. The ritual of cleaning with long brooms (*dūdazani*) has both practical and symbolic significance: removing soot and dust is understood as a cleansing of the space and the family’s life with the arrival of the New Year.

All the collected trash, dust, and ash, symbolizing the suffering and illness of the past year, are carried out of the house secretly, trying to avoid encountering anyone along the way. According to legend, such a person could become ill from absorbing the emanation of impurities: dirt and debris. The trash is then buried in a quiet corner. The person performing this ritual puts on a fur coat turned inside out, covers his head with the hem and carries a vessel with rubbish in the direction indicated by the *khalifa*.

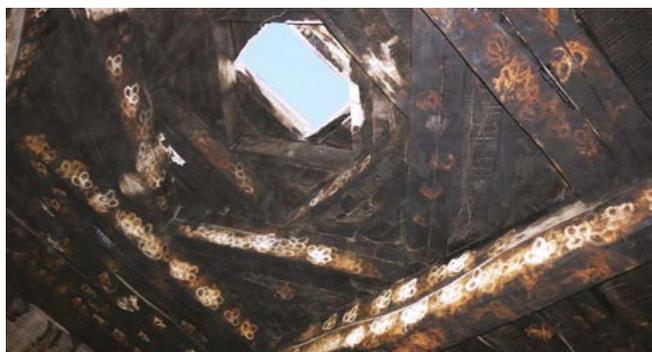


Photo 7. Festive flowers on the ceiling of the Khazrati Devonashokh building. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

After harvesting, brooms are thrown onto the cultivated land as a sign of wishes for a rich harvest and for fertility. They stay in the field for three days, after which the rods are stuck into the ground like young seedlings, a symbol of the renewal of life. While one person cleans the inside of the house, other family members clean and beat pillows, blankets, and rugs in the snow, and if there’s no snow, they beat everything with sticks or tree branches. Women wash dishes and household utensils.



Photo 8. Ornaments carved on columns in Khazrati Devonashokh.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

On this day, everything around should be clean and renewed. Clothes and belongings are sorted, put away in order, and winter items are put away until next winter. At the end of cleaning the house, the person who has taken out the collected garbage is obliged to perform ablution before crossing the threshold of the house again.

Decoration of the House from the Inside

After the completion of the ritual of cleansing the house from the annual smudging (*dūdazani*), the ritual of decorating the walls and columns of the house with patterns, flowers and symbols made of flour (*ordzani*) begins.

In Wakhan, this ritual is called *shogunkuni* (literally, “making *Shogun*”), “decorating and blessing the home,” and giving the house a festive appearance. It is an auspicious ritual symbolizing the joy of renewal, the beginning of a new life, and filling the home as well as the soul with light and hope.

In Nawruz traditions, flour symbolises purity, abundance, and a happy “white path of life” for the coming year, so it is obligatory in all holiday rituals. In order to renew and brighten a soot-blackened home, legume flour, usually along with beans (*bāqilō*), is traditionally used.

The *ordzani* and *shogun-kūnī* rituals are performed exclusively by women. When decorating their homes, they paint the walls, pillars, and ceiling with *shogun* flour (*shogunī pituk*). To apply flour patterns, each home keeps a special stick made from wild willow branches woven into flower shapes.

White handprints are made on the five pillars, the supports of the house, facing the four cardinal directions. The women of the household dip their hands in flour and apply it to the wall, striking the chosen spot so that a white mark remains on the surface. The symbol of the five fingers, the hand, faces upwards toward the sky. In the Ismaili tradition, in addition to prayer and the expectation of



Photo 9. A Wakhi woman in her house against a background of flowers painted with flour on the wall.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

God's grace, such a sign also signifies and personifies the "five pure ones" (*panj tan-i pāk*), members of the holy family of the Prophet: Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein (*ahl-i bayt*).

According to tradition, festive patterns (*gulhā-yi shogunī*) are applied to the walls and pillars using flour: the sun, moon, stars, juniper signs, swastikas, spruce trees, as well as images of flowers, doves, mountain goats and snow leopards – all local symbols of grace.

All these images carry a sacred meaning: a wish for goodness, peace, and fertility.

The Donkey, a Symbol of Strength, Wealth, and Blessings

After the house has been cleansed and ritual designs applied according to ancient custom, the donkey is the first to be brought through the door on Nawruz. On this day, the animal is washed and decorated, covered with a rug (*gilem*), and followed by the eldest man of the family. After letting the donkey into the house, the owner, following behind, recites auspicious formulas:

– *Los, los, šogun bahor mubārak! Dawlati Ghoron āvardum, dawlat-i Shugnān, dawlat-i Ishkāshim āvardum, bujini gandum āvardum, donai pur āvardum, pur bāqilō, pur gandum, ba falonī zan āvardum, ba falonī shū āvardum...*¹¹

For the Wakhi and all other Pamiri people, the donkey is not just a draft animal, but a symbol of hard work and wealth. According to local beliefs, the donkey embodies prosperity, peace, and patience. It is believed that many prophets rode on donkeys, making them a symbol of humility and divine favor. If a donkey is unavailable, a yak (*khushgov*) or a local breed of cow can be substituted. During the animal's stay, it is given a small amount of *sumanak* (a type of food) or a small piece of *qumoch* (a type of bread), symbolizing blessing and prosperity.

In the village of Khandud, I witnessed this ancient ritual. The woman of the house, holding a small amount of the festive food (*kochi*) and malt bread (*kulchai sumanak*) in her palm, fed them to a



Photo 10. A decorated horse is brought into the house and held under the holy book of the Quran. The ritual is performed to grant the horse strength and blessings so that it may take first place in the race. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

donkey. Then, as a sign of purification and respect, she sprinkled flour on his mane and forehead and threw the same amount on the right shoulder of the man entering the house, saying the words of blessing in response:

– *Ba rūyi shuma ham muborak!*
(May it be blessed for you too!)

The host's congratulatory branch is immediately secured above the crossbar connecting the two posts at the entrance to the main space of the house (*buzovez*). A branch secured in this manner (*shogunband*) is called a *shogunchir* (*shogunchir*). It must not be removed, broken, carried out, or even touched until the next Nawruz.

¹¹ Translation: – Los, Los! Happy Shogun holiday, happy Great Spring! I bring the wealth of Goron, the wealth of Shugnan, the wealth of Ishkashim. I bring a sack of wheat, ripe, full-bodied grain, plenty of beans, plenty of wheat, for one – a bride, for another – a husband...

***Shogunband* – Well-Wishes and Holiday Sticks**

When the house cleansing on Nawruz is complete, it is the family's turn to enter and exchange well-wishes. Each family member holds a green shoot or twig, the bark curled into rings and patterned to resemble a blossoming spring flower. The Wakhi people, like other residents of Badakhshan, use special branches, green shoots of yellow or black willow (*zardbed* or *siyahbed*), for New Year's greetings and holiday visits, decorating them with patterns.



Photo 11. On Nawruz, Wakhi people wear their most beautiful clothes.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

This celebratory twig is made by removing a section of bark from a twig and twisting thin strips of it into spirals. These spirals form a sort of flower, giving the stick the appearance of a small bouquet. This stick is called a *shogunband*. In some villages of Wakhan, evergreen conifer (*modragh*) or spruce branches (*kāḥ*) are used for mutual well-wishes which are symbolic of longevity and continuation of life.

When crossing the threshold of a renovated home for the first time in the new year, each family member should congratulate, firstly, the house itself as the living space of the family life, secondly, the hostess, the keeper of the hearth, and, thirdly, all household members on the arrival of spring. Observing this rule, all family members enter the house one after another, repeating:

- *Los, los, shogun bakhor muborak!* (Los, Los! Happy spring holiday of Shogun!)
- *Los, los!*
- *Ba rūyi shuma ham muborak!* (May it be blessed for you too!)
- May you be blessed too! – says the hostess, sprinkling flour on the right shoulder of each person who enters and taking a decorated stick from his hands.

When crossing the threshold, household members can add their own words of congratulations, variations of well-wishing formulas:

- *Shogun-i bahor muborak! Bakht āwardam, taxt āwardam, dawlat-i Ghoron āwardam, dawlat-i sarchupon āwardam.*
- *Los, los, šogun-i bahor muborak!*¹²

The hostess, greeting the household, repeats the well-wishes. Afterwards, she sprinkles a handful of flour on each person's right shoulder and places their sprigs together. Then she invites everyone to the festive *dastarkhon* (tablecloth) with *sumanak*.

The head of the family, the man, collects all the *shogunband* branches and places them between the beams above the main *suffa* [a raised platform, referred to in local dialects as] *shahneh* or *sartakya*, so that their patterns and flowers are visible. These decorations must not be removed until the first lambing of the sheep and goats. The twigs are only allowed to be picked when spring plowing begins and the first roasted wheat (*gandum-biryān*) is prepared for children. These twigs are typically used to roast the first batch of grains as a sign of renewal and vitality.

¹² Translation: – Happy blessed spring festival of Shogun! I have brought happiness, I have brought the throne (luck and power), I have brought the wealth of Goran, I have brought the wealth of the chief shepherd.
Los, los, blessed be the spring Shogun!



Photo 12. On holidays, after cleaning their houses, people gather together to perform folk songs accompanied by traditional musical instruments. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

These branches (*shogunband*) are attached to the ceiling beams on the right side of the house as a talisman and a sign of a new beginning. According to legend, these branches should not be broken by hand or foot; they should be chopped with an axe, so as not to disturb the tree's beneficial power.

According to tradition, a man should be the first to enter a house to offer well-wishes. If a woman crosses the threshold first, it is considered an unfavourable omen: the harvest will be poor, and the grain will be small and infertile, [i. e. symbolically] “feminine.”

After the festive greeting, the eldest man of the family brings into the house a long rod with a broom on the end, which was used to clean the house earlier (*khodachub*). He raises it up to the ceiling and releases it, as if dropping it, allowing it to fall freely. If the pole falls in the area of the fireplace, an abundance of milk and dairy products is expected; if it falls into the space below, a rich grain harvest can be expected.



Photo 13. A resident of Khanduud plays ritual music with a traditional *rubob*.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

Once all family members have entered the house, congratulated each other, and tasted the festive food (malt flatbreads called *kulcha*) they begin to put away all the utensils they had previously taken out into the sun for purification. Every last detail is returned to the house, except for winter items, which are stored separately. This is done to begin a new life in the new year with confidence and a pure heart. Cleaning (*khonatakoni*) among the Wakhi people symbolizes the cleansing of the soul, the release of the burden of the past year, and the invitation of light, peace, and prosperity into the home.

After the house has been completely cleaned and all belongings have been returned, fresh water is brought in a beautiful vessel. This is called the pure water of the New Year (*ob-i poki soli nav*). This ritual expresses respect of the highland residents for the water born in the mountains, as well as the belief that it brings purification, life, and blessing to the home.

NAWRUZ – THE FARMER’S HOLIDAY

While women and children are busy tidying up the house, men perform another equally important holiday ritual. They prepare plowing oxen for the rite of the first spring plowing (*qulbabaroron*), symbolising the awakening of the earth and the beginning of a new agricultural cycle.

Ploughing is one of the most serious and important rituals of the Nawruz holiday, with strict rules and established customs. It is performed after the completion of house cleaning (*khonatakonī*). According to tradition, on this day, each family must bring their working oxen to the land and perform a symbolic plowing ritual, “plowing at a certain (the *khalifa*’s auspicious) hour” (*qulbai sā’atgīr*).



Photo 14. Wakhi boy.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

One or two furrows (*rağ* or *roğ*) should be made in the ground with a plow (*ispor*).

The people of Wakhan believe that the first plowing (*qulbā*) should begin at the precise hour appointed by the *khalifa*, when the celestial forces – the sun, the stars, the spirits of the earth and water – are in harmony and thus “allow” a person to begin labour. This very moment is “fixed” by the *khalifa* as the auspicious hour (*sā’atgīr*).

The plowing that begins at this sacred moment is considered blessed and can be continued at any later time without fear of ill-effects. Thus, the *khalifa* determines the auspicious hour (*soatgir*). This hour has a permissive quality, paving the way for successful and fruitful plowing.

Before plowing begins, one of the bulls, or sometimes a pair, is brought into the cleaned house. The housewife sprinkles flour on the animals’ foreheads and places a bowl of thick flour soup (*gardob*) before them. It is essential that all the women of the family be inside the house at this time, not outside.



Photo 15. The ritual of the first ploughing. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.



Photo 16. *Ispor* (plough) sprinkled with flour on the day of Nawruz as a sign of grace.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

According to popular belief, this is necessary for the symbolic unity of the forces of fertility, to maintain a balance between the “feminine and masculine principles of the seeds” (*tukhmi modina wa narina*). It was believed that if any woman remained outside the home at this time, the “feminine” component would prevail in the seeds, and the harvest in the new year would be poor.

Before bringing the bulls out to the field, the owner of the house climbs onto the roof and opens the hatch (*rawzan*) in the ceiling. The woman of the house, holding a ladle (*kafles*) and a rolling pin (*ghaltak*), stands at the threshold

of the house. The couple enters into a symbolic competition to see who will be the quickest and fastest: the woman, who throws a ladle up into the hatch, or the man, who throws a handful of wheat seeds (*duzdaki*, literally “stolen”) down into the house. If a man succeeds first, then in the coming year, work that men typically do will be especially successful: plowing, watering, harvesting, transporting the harvest, etc. If a woman, then it is work typically done by women: spinning, sewing, weaving, etc. If a ladle falls upside down on the roof, it is a sign of impending famine; if it falls bottom-down, it is a symbol of abundance; if it falls on its side, the year will be moderate, without shortage or excess.

After this, the man throws a bag of *duzdaki* grain down from the roof into the house and loudly congratulates everyone:

– *Shogun-i bahor muborak!* (Happy arrival of spring!)

After this, the bulls are led out into the field. The farmer takes some wheat grains (*tukhmi duzdaki*) with him to the field, placed either in a skullcap or a small bucket. Having begun sowing, he recites a blessing:

– *Fath-i kor, futūh-i kor, mubārakāt-i shogun-i bahor!*
*Yak donaat hazor, hazor donaat beshumor*¹³, *ba haqq-i Khoja ‘Abdullo-i Ansor!*¹⁴

Then, scattering the grains on the ground, he recites the words of blessing:

– *Ba nāmi Khudā, ba nāmi khonāvodai faloni bo bachahoyash...*
(In the name of God, in the name of the family of so-and-so and his children...)

Remembering each family in his clan, he throws a handful of grains into the ground. Then he remembers the domestic animals in turn: cows, goats, sheep, and birds: pigeons, sparrows, magpies, and others. He throws a handful of grains in their honour to increase their food supply and well-being.

On this day, the farmer does not forget even the smallest creatures: creeping and nocturnal, insects and moths, and, naming them, throws grain into the ground “in their name” (*ba nomi onho*), asking the Almighty to grant the earth abundance, peace and fertility.

13 Translation: – Success in your work, an abundant harvest, the blessing of the spring Shogun! From one grain – a thousand, from a thousand – countless, in the name of Khoja Abdullo Ansor.

14 In some villages of Wakhan, Ishkashim, Zebak: *ba haqq-i Khoja ‘Abdullo-i Dehqon* ‘In the name of Haji Abdullahi Dehkan’.

According to custom, women are not allowed to leave the house until the first seeds have been sown. Once the sowing is complete, one of the men returns to the house and signals that the women may now leave. Each family, harnessing their oxen to a yoke, begins the first spring plowing (*qulba*) on the plot closest to their home. The farmer begins plowing in a circle (*doira*), which among the highlanders symbolises the eternal cycle of life, the changing seasons, sowing and harvest, birth and renewal. The circular furrow serves as a protective sign for each family of the clan (*awlod*), outlining the boundaries of a blessed space, inaccessible to evil spirits and bad intentions. For this purpose, one such circle is drawn for each family within the clan, so that each house receives its own closed amulet, its own measure of fertility, peace, and grace. If the clan consists of four families, four circular furrows are drawn; if it consists of six, then six are drawn.



Photo 17. The ploughing oxen are brought out to begin ploughing at an auspicious hour determined by tradition. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

While the men are busy plowing, the women, wearing inside-out fur coats, go out into the fields and begin rolling around in the freshly plowed soil. This ritual is called *mola kashidan*. It symbolises a wish for a bountiful harvest: may the ears of grain grow so thickly that they fall on top of each other.

Ox dung, left in the furrow during plowing, is considered a sign of fertility. It should not be thrown away or buried: it is mixed with damp earth, formed into a small cup, a few grains of wheat are placed in it, and placed on the sacred shelf of the house (*mundal* or *karsin*). This cup remains in place until autumn, until the harvest. By this time, the grains inside have sprouted and dried. When the time comes for the first harvest and threshing of the wheat, when the straw is separated from the grain, this cup is placed on top of the grain pile (*sorgirī*).

The first-time harvested, separated grain (*sor*) symbolizes the beginning of a new harvest cycle and the first food from the fruits of the earth. These are obtained during the first threshing and then stored until the end of the harvest season as a symbol of abundance and blessing.

After the furrow is made, the oxen are left in the field with their yokes. During this time, women bring them *sumanak* and wheat flour porridge (*atalayi ardi*) in bowls (*lagan*), symbols of abundance and prosperity. The bulls are treated to all these dishes, and a little oil is applied to their horns and hooves to prevent them from cracking and drying out. The group remains in the field until the bulls begin to chew. After that, they can be led to the stall.

If anything remains on this day from the first threshed grains, which become a ritual sign, they are put in a bag and hung on the central beam of the house near the *shah-sutun* (*šah-sutun*) pillar. They are saved until the main plowing begins, then mixed with the seed grain to impart strength and blessing, and a small portion is added to the grain intended for eating. People believe that the Almighty will increase the blessing (*barakat*), abundance, fertility, and good fortune.

The main plowing period in the region begins about a couple of weeks or more later, depending on the weather, and lasts for about two months, from 20 *Hamal* to 20 *Savr* according to the solar calendar.

KHONAGASHTAK – VISITING EACH OTHER DURING NAWRUZ

When the daily chores of Nawruz (house cleaning, renewal rituals, and the first plowing) are completed, sunset marks the beginning of a time of joy and gatherings. By this time, the sun is already setting, and the most joyful part of the holiday begins: visiting each other (*khonagashtak*). Among the Wakhi people, these are festive house-to-house visits, during which relatives, neighbours, and friends visit each other, offering congratulations and good wishes. Each person, dressed in new festive attire, goes to congratulate their family and neighbours on the arrival of spring and the New Year, wishing them good luck, abundance, and blessings.

At this time, laughter and children's voices can be heard throughout the village: boys and girls, dressed up, running through the streets, visiting every home with congratulations and kind words. They sing, dance, joke and play around, receiving gifts of sweets, dried fruits, nuts, and small treats from their elders.

The ritual walk (*khonagashtak*, also called *idgardak*) is accompanied by a rich feast. Almost every home fattens a ram or goat for the holiday, to be sacrificed during Nawruz. Such a sacrifice is considered a source of blessed abundance (*barakat*) and a guarantee that the family will not go without meat throughout the year. The shedding of the sacrificial animal's blood is perceived as a sign of human victory over the forces of nature, a reminder that humans are its guardians and continuers.

Each family, according to its capabilities, in addition to *sumanak*, *qumoch*, pilaf or meat broth, also prepares other dishes, inviting neighbours to a generous festive table. It is believed that the family that treats guests best will live in prosperity and abundance throughout the coming year. The women of the house strive to prepare the most delicious dishes and present them beautifully. As a sign of friendship, mutual assistance, and community unity, people exchange food.

Men visit the homes of friends and relatives, exchanging greetings and kind words. Women, however, according to tradition, are not allowed to visit other people's homes for three days after Nawruz. Even when bringing the festive bread, the bread of hope (*umedi*), they leave it at the doorstep without entering.

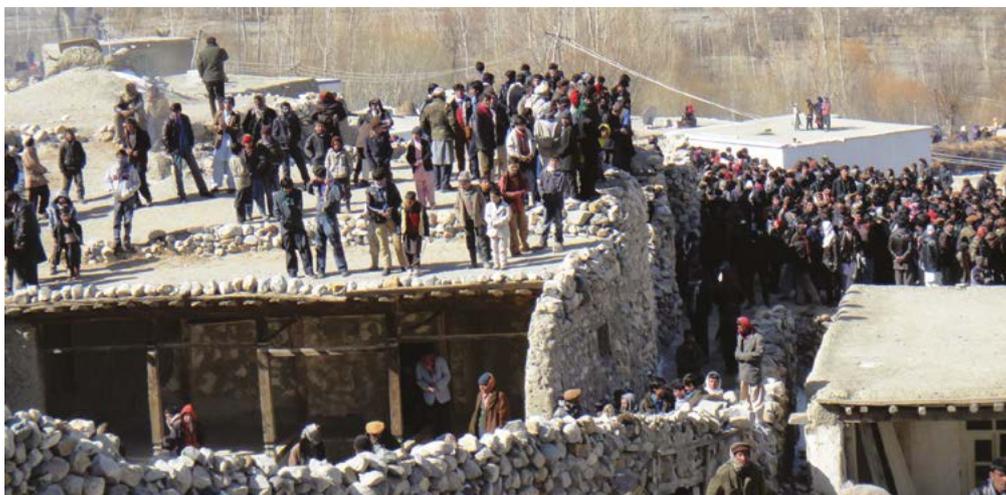


Photo 18. Celebration of Nawruz in the building of the mazar of Hazrati Devonashoh in Khilkhon village, Zebak District. Photo by F. Faizi.

The elders of the Wakhan emphasise that the essence of such visits, is not food and merriment. These visits have a spiritual purpose: to see each other after a long winter, forgive old grievances, and strengthen friendship and love between neighbours.

Visiting homes symbolises the renewal of human relationships, harmony, and peace in the community.

RITUAL DISHES OF NAWRUZ

Religious rituals, the sacredness of food, and centuries-old customs and traditions of preparing festive dishes and meals occupy a special place in the philosophy of the Nawruz holiday. Traditional Nawruz dishes in Wakhan are prepared with particular care, diligence, and taste.

One of the obligatory customs is the preparation of a festively set table, a tablecloth (*dasturkhān*) which is a symbol of abundance, unity and blessing of the home. The table should be decorated with everything the hosts have at their disposal. To ensure the *dastarkhon* meets all the requirements, each family begins preparing for the holiday well in advance, even in winter, stocking up on flour, butter, dried fruit, and dairy products. The *dastarkhon* is a sign of hospitality and generosity. It is set to invite as many family, friends, and neighbours as possible into the home on this great holiday. Since Nawruz has long been considered the beginning of the agricultural year, people try to place on the festive tablecloth all the gifts of the earth.

The ancient agricultural culture of the Wakhi people is deeply reflected in their national cuisine. On Nawruz, the main dishes are always prepared with grains, primarily wheat, which symbolises abundance, fertility, respect for the land, vitality, and well-being. The sacrifice of a specially fattened ram or goat is especially significant. Wakhan residents' festive dishes are divided into [the categories of] meat, flour, and dairy. In many cases, they are a combination of all three.

On Nawruz, each family, depending on their means, places traditional local dishes on the festive *dastarkhon*: sprouted wheat (*sumanak*), festive bread with nuts and mulberries (*qumoch*), bread products, sacred types of bread (*kulcha* and *nān*, *fatir* and *bursoq*, as well as *rezhivj*).

Meat dishes (*qilya-kabob*), boiled head and limbs of a ram with wheat (*kalapocha-yi gandumī*), wheat dishes (*bāat*, *amoch*, / *atolā-yi gandumī*), bean dishes (*oš-i bāqilō*), as well as a wide variety of dishes made with milk: *shir-fatir*, *shir-birinj*, *kochī*, *mūl*, *mōlida*, *pai*, *shirkadu*, *panīr* / *dūgh*, *shirkochi*, *halvoshir*, *shirarzan*, and *chakka*. Meat dishes also include: *biryani*, *boj*, *dalya*, *kabob*, *qayla-bat*, *gusht bo gaz*, *shavdegi* / *shavla*, *palov*, and *chakka*. Meat soups include *shurbo*, *homshurbo*, *batgusht*, *oshi burida*, and bean *bodge* (*bāji-yi bāqilōyī*). Other purely local dishes include: *giyah-choy*, *ijgūy*, *lindich*, *pūst*, *zharchmul*, *khushpa*, *chonbir-khushpay*, *chambur-palov*, *durkhtov*, *lyndūrkbāt*, *shyndūt*, and *lochlochak*.

Many of these, according to locals, are not only nutritious but also considered healing, reflecting the harmony of man with nature and the ancient philosophy of Nawruz. Food in these rituals is not just food, but a sacred act, uniting earth, labour, fire, and blessing into a single circle of life.

Sumanak and Shoshp



Photo 19. Sprouted wheat grains for *sumanak*. Фото из интернета.

Some of the most ancient and revered ritual dishes prepared during Nawruz are *sumanak* and *shoshp*. They symbolise purification, hope, faith, and prosperity in the new year. *Sumanak* is even mentioned in the treatises of ancient Persian historians. To prepare it, the finest and healthiest barley or wheat grains are selected, carefully cleaned, washed, and soaked in a clean container, leaving it in a dark, warm place. When the wheat sprouts germinate and reach 10–15 cm, the grains swell and become suitable for cooking.

In many Wakhan villages, two weeks before the festival, women select and soak hulled wheat grains, placing them in soft wicker baskets. When the sprouts emerge, they are spread on the roof to dry, then the dried stems and grains are ground in a hand mill. The resulting sweetish mass is mixed with a small amount of regular flour for taste.

The preparation of *sumanak* begins early in the morning, usually between 4 and 5 a.m. This process is accompanied by special rituals and songs sung by women, following an ancient custom. The completion of the cooking is believed to symbolically coincide with the cleansing of the home and the arrival of springtime harmony. *Otovi sumanak* is served with melted butter. This sweet mixture is also used to bake festive flatbreads called *kulcha* and *qumoch* bread, spreading them with butter or animal fat. Women follow strict ritual rules when preparing bread for Nawruz.

A woman preparing to bake bread must go fetch water early in the morning, ensuring that no one sees or encounters her. If she does encounter someone, she is not allowed to speak to them. The Wakhi believe that if a woman encounters someone with an “unkind face,” it will be a harbinger of misfortune, and the holiday will bring no joy to the family.

Another dish made from the same sweet malt flour is *shoshp*, a thick, sweet stew made from sprouted wheat. It is cooked on Nawruz without the addition of regular flour. The unique way to prepare it is that the *shoshp* is cooked not in water, but in melted mountain ice, which the cook gradually adds over the course of an hour, stirring constantly.



Photo 20. The process of preparing *sumanak*, the most important dish of Nawruz. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.



Photo 21. *Sumanak*, ready to serve. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

Once the dish is ready, everyone in the family tries it. It can be stored for up to a week. It is customary to share it with relatives and neighbours. This New Year's gift is called "food of hope" or "gift with hope" (*umedi*).

Thus, *sumanak*, *shoshp*, and *qumoch* are more than just festive dishes. They are the people's living memory of fertility rituals, respect for the land, water, and bread, which combine ancient mythology, work ethic, and belief in the renewal of life with the arrival of Nawruz.



Photo 22. *Kulcha* flatbreads being baked in a *tandoor*.
Photo from the Internet.

Dalya or Boj

One of the most revered dishes at the Nawruz holiday, not only in Wakhan, but also in many other regions of Badakhshan, which is always put on the table, is *dalya* or *boj*.

First, the wheat is carefully sorted and crushed in a special stone mortar (*juvozg*). In some villages of Wakhan, the meat and wheat are boiled separately, then combined with wheat broth (*shira-yi gandum*) and continued cooking for several more hours. To ensure they have this sacred food for Nawruz, many families fatten up a young "festive" ram in advance. It is slaughtered on the day of the holiday, and most of the meat, including the head, legs, and entrails, is saved specifically for making *boj*.

The best wheat is selected for the ritual. The grains are softened and crushed in a mill, separating the bran and solids. On the night before Nawruz, the head of the family (*sāhibi khona*) goes to the river with a bucket to fetch water for the *boj*.

According to ancient belief, he must fetch water without being seen or encountered. He must draw a full bucket of water in one movement, "a whole breath of nature."

Late in the evening, after dinner, the whole family gathers around the hearth. The woman of the house place a large cast-iron cauldron on the fire, and the head of the household pours in the water they brought, along with meat and some large, select wheat.

Then he places a rolling pin (*galtak*) over the cauldron, takes the crushed wheat alternately with his right and left hands, joins his palms, and slowly pours the grains onto the rolling pin. He repeats this as many times as there are family members living in the house. The entire process is accompanied by the recitation of prayers.

Until the *boj* boils, no one is allowed to leave the house. Silence is observed during this time, which is necessary to prevent evil spirits from entering the house. The preparation of the food is performed in complete silence; this ritual is known as "the ban" (*pichromch*).



Photo 23. *Boj* – traditional holiday food.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

When the *dalya* begins to boil, the owner is the first to “break the ban” and leave the house. Upon returning, he picks up a branch from a fruit tree outside and, upon entering the house, offers words of congratulation:

– *Shogun bakhor muborak!* (With *Shogun*’s blessing!)

After this, the branch is hung from the ceiling of the house as a sign of spring renewal and continuation of life. By its nature, *dalya* requires a long cooking time. When the durum wheat softens, softer wheat is added. After a long simmer, the contents are poured into a large clay jug (*paghniz*) and placed in the hearth, where the dish simmers until morning. By morning, the *boj* is ready: the meat and wheat have infused each other’s aromas and turned into a thick, sticky, nutritious mass.

This food is not only delicious and filling, but also considered blessed. It is eaten by the whole family and always shared with neighbours. Passing *boj* from house to house symbolises a wish for abundance, as well as strengthening family ties and community solidarity.

Qumoch

One of the essential attributes of Nawruz is the ritual flatbread (*shoguni-qumoch*), a festive loaf of bread baked specifically for the New Year. The number of loaves depends on the family’s wealth: typically, one to three are baked, each weighing between two and seven kilograms.

Traditionally, the head of the family rises very early on the holiday morning and wakes the entire household. Everyone must be awake before the first rays of the sun. The women of the house (*kadbonu*) knead the dough for the holiday bread, first grinding nuts and mulberries on a large special stone called a *bulbulok*. The host lights a fire in the hearth, and the hostess places the prepared nut and fruit mixture inside the dough. The dough is placed in a *tandoor* (*tanur*) and covered with hot ashes. Once the house is cleaned and all the utensils are put away after the holiday cleaning, the hostess takes the baked bread out of the hearth. Any ash remaining on the surface is carefully wiped away with a soft cloth. This bread resembles a large cake: it exudes a fragrant aroma, and the nut and mulberry filling tastes like chocolate. The head of the family cuts the loaf into four pieces. According to popular belief, this division symbolises the four seasons, the four cardinal directions, and the four elements. These pieces of bread (*brukh*) are considered sacred (*tabbarruk*).

The remaining bread is distributed among relatives, friends, neighbours, the elderly, and the poor as a sign of respect and blessing. In some villages, ritual bread is considered to carry special magical powers and blessings for the home (*barakati khona*). Therefore, it is not allowed to distribute it to outsiders: the grace of the home must remain within the family and clan.

In different villages of Wakhan there are many varieties of *qumoch* bread, each of which has its own symbolic meaning and purpose in the rituals of Nawruz.

“Farmer’s bread” (*dehqon-qumoch*) is baked on Nawruz and is meant to be a treat for farmers beginning their first spring work. It is also called “fertilizer of the soil” (*kuruj-qumoch*). It is a symbol of fertility, the rebirth of the soil, and a blessing for the farmer’s labour.

Another type of bread, *luk-qumoch*, is distinguished by its large size, reaching almost the diameter of the *tandoor* in which it is baked. Both women and men participate in the preparation process, giving it the character of a communal bread. This bread is baked during a general house cleaning. The baked

bread is kept for a week and then divided equally among relatives and neighbours as a symbol of unity and mutual support.

Dud-qumoch is made from flour obtained from sprouted wheat (*sumanak*). After cleaning the house, this bread is cut, mixed with melted butter, and served to everyone who comes to offer congratulations. It is considered the final element of the home cleansing ritual and symbolises the sweetness and fullness of the new year.

Bread baked in the shape of a mountain goat (*nakhchirak* or *yashkun*), a shovel, an egg, or other objects symbolising life, fertility, and labour. *Yashkun* bread is preserved until the first newborn animals are born. When the young animals are first brought out to pasture, they are served to the shepherds along with roasted wheat as a blessing for the flocks and a wish for strength and fertility.

Small buttery flatbreads (*kulchai rughani*) baked for Nawruz. Their fragrant butter gives the bread a special softness. They serve as holiday gifts for relatives and neighbors.

It is important that no sugar is added to the dough for festive breads. Their flavour should be natural, reflecting the purity and simplicity of the new year, without artificial sweetness or pretense.

Makit

Makit is a festive dish prepared especially for Nawruz. First, the bitter apricot kernels are ground into flour. The cauldron is set over low heat, the crushed kernels are added, and they are fried until oil appears. Then a little water is added to remove the bitterness.

After this, *sumanak* and flour are mixed into the mixture, continuing this process until the mixture resembles a thick dough.

The dish is simmered over low heat for 5-6 hours, stirring constantly with a wooden spatula to prevent burning. When the mixture takes on the colour of cocoa or chocolate, the *makit* is ready. This dish is a symbol of the “sweetness of labour” and the blessing of spring renewal; it combines the fruits of the earth (grain) and the garden (apricot).

Rezhivj

Rezhivj is a thin, sourdough-based dough baked into thin flatbreads on heated stones. These flatbreads resemble pancakes and are served with an egg and butter on top. This dish is considered the “bread of Nawruz morning”: it is prepared first thing after sunrise, to fill the house with the aroma of fresh bread and the scent of a new day.

Gandum-Biryān

Roasted wheat (*gandum-biryān*), one of the sacred ritual dishes of the spring cycle. It is first prepared immediately after the rite of first leading the oxen to the fields (*qulbabaroron*). According to custom, children are the first to be treated to this dish. According to folk beliefs, this dish ensures children’s strength, vigour, and health in the spring, when nature awakens and the body requires renewal. It is prepared a second time after the



Photo 24. Roasted wheat (*gandum-biryān*).
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

completion of the grain sowing season. Then, as a sign of the completion of the agricultural cycle and the hope for a bountiful harvest, it is shared with community members.

FUN AND GAMES OF NAWRUZ

Aspdavonī – Horse Races

During the Nawruz holiday, numerous competitions and fun games are held in the Wakhan Valley, in which everyone, from children to elderly men and women, participate.

Horse races (*aspdavon*) are considered the most spectacular and crowded event of Nawruz. They are held annually in various villages of Wakhan, but the largest takes place in the village of Khandud, the administrative centre of the Wakhan vulusvoli. Dozens of horsemen from across the region participate.

According to legend, this tradition dates back to the arrival of the saint Pir Shokhnosir-i Khisrav in Wakhan. It is believed that, upon seeing these competitions taking place, a villager named Yamit said:

– *In aspdavonii shumara pisandidam, on ba hej adyon zarar nadorad, inro idoma dihed...*
(I enjoyed the horse race, this competition does not harm any religion, and it should continue forever...)

Since then, each generation of Wakhi people has strived to continue the tradition. On Nawruz, riders and their horses gather at a designated location early in the morning. The competition is divided into two categories: one for horses aged two to five years, the other for those over five. Since then, each generation of Wakhi people has strived to continue the tradition.

On Nawruz, riders and their horses gather at a designated location early in the morning. The competition is divided into two categories: one for horses aged two to five years, the other for those over five.

Before the start of the race, each rider leads his horse through the Quran, which lies on the crossbar at the entrance to the house (*buzovez*), asking the Almighty for health, luck and protection for his horse.



Photo 25. Horse racing (*aspdavonī*) is one of the most spectacular games of the Nawruz holiday. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

The uniqueness of the competition is that, while conquering the distance on horseback, the riders sit barefoot, without saddles or stirrups. They gallop barefoot. Some races involve over a hundred horses, and the entire village celebrates victory.

***Tukhmjang* – Egg Fighting**

One of the most popular games of Nawruz is the fight with painted eggs (*tukhmjang*). It is primarily attended by teenagers and young men, but adult men are also not uncommon. Preparations for the game begin in winter: to ensure the eggshells are especially strong, they are stored in a warm place, under the ceiling of the house (*shift*), where it is dry and hot.



Photo 26. *Tukhmjang* (egg fighting) – a traditional Nawruz game. Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

Sometimes, boys, in the name of victory, “raid” their neighbours’ chicken coops, steal eggs, and then boast about their spoils. However, adults, understanding the children’s pranks and the spirit of the holiday, do not take offence at these times and forgive the theft of eggs (*tukhmduzdi*) in the name of Nawruz. The competition takes place in the village’s main square. The rules are simple: participants hit eggs against each other with sharp ends; the one whose egg remains intact wins and takes the opponent’s broken egg. You can win dozens of eggs, which you can then share with friends or take home as a symbol of good luck.

An egg fight can go on for hours and even until late in the evening, accompanied by laughter, shouts and joy from the crowd.

***Qustin* – Wrestling**

An equally beloved competition is traditional wrestling (*qustin* or *gūshtingirī*). It attracts large crowds of spectators, especially young men and women who come to support their fellow countrymen.

The duration of the competition depends on the number of participants, and each fight is accompanied by cheers, songs, and drumming. The winner’s main reward is applause and loud cries of gratitude from the crowd.



Photo 27. *Qustin* (wrestling on rooftops) – one of the most fun competitions, with participation even by the elders. Photo by F. Faizi.

CONCLUSION

Games and amusements, competitions and other fun rituals and games, and ceremonial dishes at the Nawruz holiday in Wakhan, Ishkashim, and Zebak... These are not just manifestations of festive culture, but a living expression of the worldview of mountain peoples, for whom this holiday is the beginning of a natural seasonal cycle that is associated with spiritual and social aspects.

Games, competitions, and rituals for cleansing the home and cultivating the land combine ancient agricultural beliefs and rituals with ideas of purification, friendship, and balance between man and the surrounding world.

In those years, the region still retained a truly traditional way of life, and I was fortunate to observe the rituals of Nawruz in their natural, authentic form, among people who carefully preserved their spiritual and linguistic identity.



Photo 28. Traditional singing accompanied by frame drums (*dafs*) in Zebak.
Photo by Q. Alamshoev.

As you can see, for the people living in these regions, who speak Iranian languages and have preserved traditions for centuries in relative cultural isolation, Nawruz is more than just a calendar date. In these highland villages, the holiday retains its pristine purity and simplicity: there is nothing artificial or imposed about it.

Here, Nawruz is a dialogue between man and nature, his gratitude for light and warmth, for bread and water, for existence itself. It preserves the spiritual stability and inner harmony of people who, despite their geographical isolation, have managed to maintain a connection with ancient Aryan culture and its ethical and cosmic principles.

Nawruz is more than just a spring festival. It is an ever-renewing symbol of life, a philosophy of kindness and creativity that unites people, languages, and cultures, linking the past with the present and the future with the eternal cycle of light.

EXPLANATIONS
of Traditional Terms and Concepts

<i>Amalgoh</i>	آملگاه	place of observation of the arrival of <i>amala / hamala</i> , the beginning of Nawruz
<i>Aspdavoni</i>	اسپدوانی	spring horse races traditionally held during Nawruz in the Wakhan Valley
<i>Ahura Mazda</i>	اهورامزدا	<i>Hurmuz</i> is the supreme deity of Zoroastrianism, a symbol of light, goodness, and truth. In Ishkashim and Wakhan, it represents the sun
<i>Archa</i>	هچرا	juniper tree
<i>Barakat</i>	برکت	grace, abundance and good luck
<i>Boj</i>	باج	a ritual dish made from meat and crushed wheat
<i>Brukh</i>	بروخ	a piece of festive loaf, <i>qumoch</i>
<i>Bulbulok</i>	بلبلک	a large, smooth, ball-shaped stone for crushing dried fruits
<i>Buzovez</i>	بوزوویز	a wooden crossbar with patterns at the entrance
<i>Chambur-palov</i>	چمبرپلو	a local dish
<i>Chorkhona</i>	چرخخانه	an architectural symbol of the traditional Wakhi house, reflecting the harmonies of the four cardinal directions and elements
<i>Dalya</i>	دالیا	festive porridge made from meat and crushed wheat
<i>Dastarkhon</i>	دسترخوان	tablecloth, a symbol of hospitality, to a house, connecting two supporting pillars
<i>Drupch</i>	دروپچ	a long broom made of willow branches used to clean the ceiling during <i>khonatakoni</i>
<i>Dud-qumoch</i>	دود قوماج	bread made from sprouted sumanak wheat flour
<i>Duzdaki</i>	دزدکی	“ritual grains” for the first sowing
<i>Farvardin</i>	فروردین	the first month of the solar year (March–April), the time of the celebration of Nawruz
<i>Fatir</i>	(فتیر)	a thin flatbread made from flour and butter
<i>Gandum</i>	گندم	wheat, the main symbol of Nawruz and the agricultural culture of Wakhan
<i>Gandum-biryon</i>	گندم بریان	roasted wheat is a sacred dish of the spring cycle
<i>Gardob</i>	گردوب	thick flour porridge
<i>Ghaltak</i>	غلتک	a wooden rolling pin used in the ritual preparation of <i>boj</i> and <i>qumoch</i>
<i>Gushtingiri</i>	گوشتنگیری	traditional Tajik wrestling abundance and harmony

<i>Hamal</i>	حمل	the first month of the [Islamic] solar calendar, corresponding to the period March 21–April 20, the beginning of Nawruz
<i>Hashgov/Hushgov</i>	هشگاو	yak
<i>Idgardak</i>	عیدگردک	festive house-to-house visiting during Nawruz
<i>Juvozg</i>	جوزگ	a stone mortar in which wheat and nuts are crushed
<i>Kadbonu</i>	کدبانو	mistress of the house, keeper of the hearth
<i>Khodachub</i>	خُدچوب	a long willow pole used in house cleaning and purification rituals
<i>Khalifa</i>	خليفة	<i>mullah</i> , spiritual mentor, leading religious and ritual affairs
<i>Khodaburi</i>	خدابری	the ritual of “cutting sticks” for making brooms before Nawruz
<i>Khonatakoni</i>	خانتکنی	the main ritual of cleansing the house at the beginning of Nawruz
<i>Khona-gashtak</i>	خانهگشتک	a festive walk from house to house offering congratulations and good wishes
<i>Khodchub</i>	خودچوب	a wooden pole with a broom for cleaning the ceiling from soot
<i>Khushpa</i>	خوشپا	a kind of stew
<i>Kulchai rughani</i>	کلچای روغنی	butter cakes baked for Nawruz.
<i>Kuruj-qumoch</i>	کُرُوج قوماچ	“fertilizing bread”, a type of <i>dehqon-qumoch</i>
<i>Luk-qumoch</i>	لوک قوماچ	a large ritual bread baked during the general cleaning of the house
<i>Los</i>	لوس	an exclamation-wish for change and novelty in life
<i>Makit</i>	مقییت	a festive dish made from ground apricot pits, flour and <i>sumanak</i>
<i>Modragh</i>	مادْرَغ	a coniferous, sacred tree
<i>Mundal</i>	موندل	a sacred shelf in the house on which grain, a cup and a lamp are placed during the days of Nawruz
<i>Nakhchirak</i>	نخچیرک	“wild goat” a type of <i>yashkun</i> bread baked in the shape of a goat, an egg or a shovel
<i>Ordzani</i>	اردزنی	the ritual of decorating the house with flour and symbolic patterns during Nawruz
<i>Paghnidz</i>	پغنیض	a large clay jug
<i>Pichromch</i>	پیچرمچ	ritual silence during the cooking of <i>boj</i>

<i>Pituk</i>	پیتوک	ritual music
<i>Panj tan-i pak</i>	پنج تن پاک	“Five Pure” five holy personalities of the Shia tradition: Prophet Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Hussein
<i>Qulbabaroron</i>	قلبه برآوران	the rite of first bringing bulls to the field is the beginning of the agricultural year
<i>Qumoch</i>	قوماچ	a general term for loaf-shaped bread
<i>Qurut</i>	قروت	dried sour cottage cheese
<i>Rawzan</i>	روزن	a rectangular opening in the ceiling of a house, a chimney and a window for light
<i>Rezhivj</i>	رژویج	thin flatbreads made from liquid dough, baked on stones on the morning of Nawruz
<i>Ruzi nahs</i>	روز نحس	“an unfavourable day” according to popular belief, a time when one cannot start new things
<i>Soatbini</i>	ساعت بینی	the tradition of “watching and knowing the happy hour” determined by the <i>khalifa</i> or elder
<i>Soati Sa’d</i>	ساعت سعد	“happy hour”, the moment of the beginning of the new year or sowing, when, according to people’s belief, the heavens are open
<i>Shahnekh</i>	شاهنخ	the main elevation or nar in the house, the place of elders and honoured guests
<i>Shah-sutun</i>	شاهستون	the main column under the supporting beam of the house
<i>Shavdegi</i>	شاودگی	boiled meat left in hot broth overnight to achieve special tenderness and rich flavour
<i>Shavla</i>	شولا	a thick dish of rice (or legumes) and meat
<i>Shir-birinj</i>	شیربرنج	milk rice porridge
<i>Shir-fatir</i>	شیرفتیر	milk flatbread soaked in butter
<i>Shirkadu</i>	شیرکدو	pumpkin boiled in milk
<i>Shirkochi</i>	شیرکوچی	porridge made from milk, flour and butter
<i>Shogun</i>	شگون	literally means “royal” or “kingly”; this is how the holiday of Nawruz is called in Wakhan and Shugnan, emphasizing its majestic nature and sacred significance as the beginning of the new year
<i>Shogun bahor muborak!</i>	شگون بهار مبارک	a traditional Nawruz wish said when entering a house or at the beginning of spring rituals
<i>Shoguni pituk</i>	شگونی پیتوک	flour patterns applied by women to the walls when decorating their homes

<i>Shogunband</i>	شگونبند	a festive stick made of a green branch with floral patterns.
<i>Shogunchir</i>	شگونچیر	a branch hung over the door as a sign of blessing.
<i>Shogun-kuni</i>	شگونکونی	a ritual of decorating and blessing a house.
<i>Shoguni-qumoch</i>	شگونی قوماچ	a ritual loaf with nut filling, baked during the days of Nawruz
<i>Sumanak</i>	سمنک	sweet porridge made from sprouted wheat
<i>Tabbaruk</i>	تبرک	sacred food shared with family members and neighbours as a symbol of grace, peace and unity
<i>Toqi</i>	طاقى	national skullcap with ornaments
<i>Tumar</i>	طومار	an amulet or a package with a prayer, worn on the body for protection
<i>Tashtob</i>	تشتوب	a leaflet with prayer texts, dissolved in water and used in healing rituals
<i>Vulusvoli</i>	ولسوالى	lit. “district”
<i>Yakhni</i>	يخنى	boiled ready meat
<i>Yashkun</i>	يشکون	shaped bread in the shape of an animal, egg or sun
<i>Yugh</i>	يوغ	wooden harness for oxen, used during the first spring plowing (<i>qulba</i>)
<i>Zardbed</i>	زردبيد	yellow willow, from which the festive <i>shogunband</i> sticks are made

