

Christmas, Yalda, and Mithraism

Contributed by Akbar Nemati

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According to historians, Iranians who had traveled to Europe during the reign of Parthian dynasty and converting to Christianity celebrated the birth of Christ, which was not exactly known, on the birthday of Mehr, or Mithra. Is it a mere coincidence that these two celebrations are so close to each other, Christmas is celebrated on Dec. the 25th. (the longest night in Europe) and yalda is celebrated on the night of Dec. the 21th. (the longest night in Iran) the night before the first day of winter?! Yalda and its related ceremonies which are held at the night of the first day of winter, the longest night of the year. This very ancient tradition is related to Mehr Yazat (Mithra or the sun and protector of promises). Yalda is an Aryan ceremony and the followers of Mithraism have celebrated it for thousands of years in Iran. Yalda is the night of Mehr or Mithra's birth.

Yalda is also called Chelleh (Shab-e Chelleh) and as mentioned earlier is the night of birth of the unconquerable sun, or Mehr.

In the 4th century, Christianity replaced Mithraism in the Roman Empire. As the former did not have any ritual tradition of its own, it absorbed nearly all of the rituals and the symbolic dates of the Mithraists.

"Mithraism was the worship of Mithra, the Iranian god of the sun, justice, contract and war in pre-Zoroastrian Iran, known as Mithras in the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries", according to Encyclopedia Britannica, that also points to "obvious similarities between Mithraism and Christianity".

The worship of sun is also the source of many tales in Iranian mythology that includes the celebration of Yalda Night. In particular the 25th of December, Mithra's date of birth, became that of Christ. Sunday (day of the sun), holiday of the Mithraists, became the holiday of the Christians. The Christmas tree, holy bread and more other things entered, in this way, the Christian traditions. The Christian priest would furthermore be called 'my Father', following the title of the great master of the 7th degree of the Mithraists. Centuries later the Mithraism became a basic part of freemasonry.

Until that time the birthday of Jesus Christ was celebrated in January the 6th. But the religion of most of the Romans and the people of many of the European countries was still Mithraism. But when Christianity spread, the priests, since could not stop the practice of celebrating Mithra's birthday on December the 25th. Declared this day as Jesus' birthday which is still so. Since the first night of winter (21st of December) is the longest night and from that night on the days get longer and the warmth and light of the sun increases, that night was supposed to be the time for the re-birth of sun. The Aryan tribes, in India, Iran and Europe celebrated sun's birth at the beginning of winter.

Yalda is a Soriani word meaning birth. The Roman used the word natalis for birth. The Soriani Christians brought the word Yalda to Iran, which is still used. It is not just Mithra's birth time which entered Christianity.

There are so many common beliefs and customs (sometimes hidden from our notice!!) between different nations and religions. Let's know those customs and talk about them, so that we may bring friendship and peace among the people of the world.

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

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

When Mithraism spread to Roman Empire from Iran, in Rome and many European countries, the 25th of December (the longest night), was celebrated as Mithra's birthday. But in the 4th Century A.D., when the Roman Empire started to become Christians, they kept the birthday of Mithra as the birthday of Christ. for political reasons.

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The whole Mithraism rituals entered the Christianity.

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I take advantage of this opportunity, and wish all Iranians Yalda Night full of happiness and to all Christians in world a very Happy Christmas, and a New Year full of joy and happiness.