

The contribution of intangible cultural heritage to the culture industry: the case of Nowruz among Iranian Turks

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The contribution of intangible cultural heritage to the culture industry: the case of Nowruz among Iranian Turks

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ABSTRACT

Nowruz, the Iranian/Persian new year festival, symbolises the new day, new beginnings, the end of winter and the arrival of spring. Having survived to the present day in various names and forms, the Nowruz tradition has been included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity due to its symbolic representation of a universal phenomenon and its importance for preservation and transmission. Although it is predominantly associated with Central Asia, the tradition's geographical spread extends across a wide region. Accordingly, while similarities exist among the communities celebrating it, Nowruz has also developed diverse variations shaped by historical, regional and local factors. The Turkic population of Iran represents one of the communities in which these adaptations are most vividly observed. Iranian Turks continue to sustain and preserve the Nowruz tradition through collective participation, supported by various cultural mechanisms that ensure its continuity. Within this context,

the culture industry constitutes a significant dimension of the socio-economic and socio-cultural relationship, encompassing processes such as the transformation of traditions into tangible outputs, their preservation and modernisation, and the creation of new employment opportunities. This study aims to explore the contributions of the Nowruz tradition, as an element of intangible cultural heritage, to the culture industry through the case of Iranian Turks. It examines Nowruz practices, analyses the relationship between tradition and the culture industry, and evaluates the practices' contributions using a cultural anthropological approach. The findings indicate that Nowruz-related practices contribute to the culture industry and economy in areas such as design, heritage branding, entertainment and the experience economy.

Keywords

Culture industry, cultural economy, Iranian Turks, Nowruz

Introduction

Nowruz is an ancient tradition whose etymological roots lie in the Persian term *no-rouz/now-ruz*, meaning 'new day'. This tradition not only symbolises a seasonal transition – namely, the end of winter and the arrival of spring – but also occupies a significant place in social memory as a metaphorical expression of new beginnings, hope and transformation. The historical depth and cultural diversity of Nowruz have rendered it a meaningful phenomenon on both local and universal levels. The

inclusion of Nowruz in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on 30 September 2009, and the declaration of 21 March as International Nowruz Day by a resolution adopted on 23 February 2010, are clear indicators of the global recognition of this cultural richness and continuity. Celebrated under various names and forms across different cultures, Nowruz today occupies a firmly rooted place in the collective memory of peoples living across a wide geographical expanse. It is celebrated in numerous countries and regions, including

Türkiye, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and even Japan (UNESCO 2010).

Although the celebration and cultural intensity of Nowruz are predominantly associated with Turkic geographies and Central Asia, the tradition has also localised and become enriched within different cultural contexts, undergoing transformation through historical, regional, ethnic and identity-based differences. Indeed, while some traditions in nation-forming geographies have maintained their national structures, others have evolved to exhibit a more universal character shaped by diverse influences. Traditions that have acquired a universal form have nevertheless retained their core structures around the elements through which they became nationalised. The presence of diverse variants across different nations within the same geography makes it difficult to determine the urform (original form) of the tradition. Nowruz, in this regard, has spread across a vast geographical area, transcending any single nation or region and evolving into a universal tradition. However, the fact that it is practised across a wide expanse has not prevented it from acquiring region-specific cultural codes; rather, it has allowed for the emergence of distinct variations. These variations include multilayered elements such as the harmonious or dissonant ritualisation of the celebration of spring, the attribution of specific beliefs and values, symbolic representation through tangible objects, and reinforcement through folk beliefs and folkloric expressions prevalent in the respective societies. Among the most distinctive examples of this diversity are the Iranian Turks, who form the sample population of this study.

The Iranian Turks perceive the Nowruz tradition not merely as a celebration but as a significant carrier of collective identity and cultural continuity. The transmission of Nowruz across generations is ensured through ceremonies organised with mass participation, along with rituals, symbols and symbolic objects, thereby reinforcing social belonging and cultural sustainability. This cultural continuity is not limited to the preservation of tradition alone; it is also linked directly to contemporary socio-economic dynamics. At this juncture, the concept of the culture industry becomes relevant, as it enables the integration of cultural values into modern economic processes. The culture industry contributes to both the preservation of traditions and the generation of economic value by participating in the representation, reproduction

and commercialisation of cultural heritage. The integration of traditional elements into fields such as music, literature, performing arts, handicrafts, gastronomy and tourism not only supports cultural sustainability but also lays the groundwork for the emergence of new employment opportunities and professional sectors.

Literature review

The relationship between creative industries and intangible cultural heritage (hereafter 'ICH') has become increasingly prominent within the frameworks of cultural economy and experience-based consumption. Creative industries integrate cultural creativity into economic production, transforming symbolic expressions into economic value (DCMS 1998; Howkins 2001; Throsby 2001; Kaufman 2013). Within this framework, ICH, defined by UNESCO (2003), has become a key resource for creative economies, particularly through its integration into tourism and festivals. The rise of the experience economy has shifted consumption towards participatory cultural experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Richards 2011; López-Guzmán and Gonzalez Santa Cruz 2016; Wang 2023). Accordingly, intangible heritage functions as cultural capital embedded in economic systems, enabling traditional practices to be recontextualised within market dynamics (Throsby 2001; Hesmondhalgh 2007). Creative industries also relate to innovation, regional development and tourism in rural contexts where cultural resources drive experiential consumption (Howkins 2001; Florida 2002; Scott 2004). Accordingly, within the scope of this research, studies on ICH can be evaluated under three thematic areas: the preservation of cultures; contributions to tourism; and local/social impacts. In line with this framework, various studies can be mentioned. For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) conceptualises cultural heritage as a 'second life' for cultures and economies that are at risk of disappearing. Blake (2009) analyses UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter 'the 2003 Convention') with a focus on community participation, linking it to human rights and international law. Meanwhile, Oğuz (2009) emphasises that the Convention has become a global instrument that integrates the folkloric-rooted concept of preservation with policies of cultural diversity. Ma and Wang (2008), who associate ICH with tourism, argue that cultural heritage can be transformed into tourist products through museums, theme parks and live performances. Timothy (2020) emphasises that this commodification

can be authenticised through cultural tourism. Focusing on applicability via musicians, Su (2018) highlights that commercialisation brings vitality to heritage, while Tan et al. (2023), supported by quantitative data, note that cultural heritage has contributed to the growth of tourism in China. When examining local and social impacts, Gonzalez (2008) demonstrates that heritage contributes to the formation of individual identity through tourism in Spain, while Keitumetse and Nthoi (2009) show that socio-cultural values reflected in handicrafts create opportunities for community heritage in Botswana. Based on these related studies, the current study delves into the local and social impact with respect to Iranian Turks; cultural preservation through its inclusion in the Convention; and the tourism–economy equation through outputs of the creative culture industry. Therefore, the study aims at presenting these three aspects collectively.

Methodology

Iran stands out as a country with 26 registered and four ongoing ICH elements, and as of 2024, it is one of the 13 countries highlighted for the inclusion of Nowruz in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2024). This rich cultural content, particularly the Nowruz traditions, makes Iran a preferred destination for many domestic and international tourists (Farsani et al. 2019, 55). Due to Iran's multiethnic composition, Nowruz customs exhibit regional and identity-based variations. Although ethnic groups in the country tend to be regionally concentrated, they are also dispersed across various areas. Among these groups, the Iranian Turks constitute one of the largest populations.

Located primarily in the northern part of the country, the Iranian Turks have managed to preserve elements of their cultural heritage to the present day. Given that Nowruz is widely celebrated in regions with a shared cultural background predominantly among Turkic communities centred in Central Asia, this raises the question of which characteristics and methods are employed by Turkic groups living in Iran to sustain the tradition. In line with this core issue, we formulated two initial hypotheses in the current study: (H1) The Turkic–Iranian geography is among the regions where Nowruz is most robustly maintained; (H2) Turkic communities living in Iran perform Nowruz while exhibiting regional and identity-based variations. Among these groups, the cultural elements of Azerbaijani Turks, primarily clustered in northern Iran and closer to

Central Asia and Turkic geographies, stand out due to their population size and regional prevalence. Accordingly, this study predominantly focuses on the Iranian Azerbaijani Turks.

In line with the study purpose, we first presented the current state of the tradition from a general to specific perspective using a cultural anthropological approach. Subsequently, given that the Nowruz tradition is recognised as ICH and continues to thrive today, we formulated a third hypothesis addressing its contributions to the culture industry, which constitutes the core aim of this research: (H3) Iranian Turks, especially the Iranian Azerbaijani Turks, employ cultural elements associated with the Nowruz tradition through creative adaptations within the culture industry, thereby contributing to local development and sustaining their regional and identity-based distinctiveness in a manner compatible with the modern era and cultural economy. To achieve this goal, the study employed a mixed-methods methodology, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research. In this study, we examined Nowruz ceremonies, handicrafts and performances through participatory and non-participatory observation conducted in 2018, 2023 and 2025, and supported by visual materials gathered directly from the field and text-based sources in Turkic regions. Additionally, we used statistical data to assess the awareness and interest of tourists and local communities regarding Nowruz.

The significance of Nowruz in the culture of Iranian Turks

Nowruz

Nowruz is a deeply rooted cultural heritage whose origins date back thousands of years and which has developed in harmony with the cyclical order of nature, celebrating seasonal transitions with symbolic meanings. The term '*nowruz*', derived from Persian as a combination of *nev* and *rouz/ruz*, meaning 'new day', signifies the arrival of spring, the renewal of life, and the equalisation of day and night. This special day, coinciding with the beginning of spring, has historically been celebrated through various ceremonies as a way to comprehend both the natural cycle and humanity's ancient relationship with nature (Çay 1985, 28–42). Widely observed from South and West Asia to Central Asia and the Middle East, and from the Caucasus to the Balkans, Nowruz is not merely a New Year's festival but also embodies profound meanings associated with

rebirth, hope, peace and resurrection in the collective social memory.

The historical origins of Nowruz trace back to the seasonal celebrations of ancient societies, which gradually merged into its present form. The belief that the earth renews its vitality, seeds sprout and the cycle of life restarts significantly contributed to its traditionalisation. Its celebration across a wide geographical area with similar rituals highlights its nature as both a cultural and sociological phenomenon. Despite religious and ethnic differences, diverse peoples commemorate this day collectively, reaffirming the ancient bond between humans and nature. Particularly in agrarian societies, seasonal transitions linked to activities such as sowing, harvesting and celebrating fertility have long been associated with ceremonies held at specific calendrical periods (Çay 1985, 27–33).

In Iranian culture, Nowruz stands out as a symbol of cosmic order and balance. Within the Zoroastrian belief system, Nowruz, observed on the first day of the month of Farvardin, was sanctified as the beginning of the year and has been celebrated as a festive occasion from ancient times to the present. During the Achaemenid and Sassanid dynasties, the sun's entry into the Aries constellation marked the start of the new year, aligning with the official calendar (Çay 1985, 1). Iranian mythology contains numerous narratives regarding the origin of Nowruz. One such story recounts how Jamshid, one of Iran's legendary mythological kings, visited Azerbaijan on 21 March; the sunlight shining upon his crown was seen as a sign heralding the dawn of a new era, an event accepted by the people as the birth of Nowruz. Another tradition relates to Jamshid's discovery of fire. When encountering a snake in the forest, Jamshid's arrow struck the rocks, causing sparks that ignited a fire. The people of Iran regard this day as the beginning of Nowruz as well (see Levy 1988, 233–234; Albayrak 1993, 279–280; Faraghi 2006, 148–150; Firdevsi 2009, 12–17; Pirzadeh 2016, 102).

To celebrate Nowruz, a tradition that has maintained its historical continuity from the past to the present, rituals such as lighting fires and jumping over them, purifying oneself with water, wearing new clothes, exchanging gifts, setting festive tables and painting eggs continue to exist as vibrant expressions of folk culture. In this context, among the Turkish communities distinguished by their historical and mythological heritage, the Iranian Turks strongly

sustain the Nowruz tradition through both traditional and modern practices.

Nowruz among Iranian Turks

In ethnically diverse Iran, all ethnic groups preserve and express their traditions in ways that reflect their unique cultural and regional identities. Among these, one of the largest communities is the Iranian Turks. Although dispersed across the contemporary Iranian territory, Iranian Turks predominantly reside in cities such as Tehran, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin, Hamedan, Shiraz, Golestan and other provinces.

The Turkish communities in Iran such as Azerbaijani, Qashqai, Shahsevan, Avshar, Karapapak, Turkmen and Khorasani consider Nowruz an important festival symbolising the cosmic renewal of time. Starting on 21 March, this transitional period involves a month-long preparation followed by 13 days of celebrations, rich in rituals related to fire, water and ancestor cults. In the weeks leading up to Nowruz, homes are thoroughly cleaned and washed, carpets are laid out, walls are whitewashed and painted, and grains such as wheat, barley or lentils are sprouted to grow '*sabzeh*'. According to belief, the spirits of ancestors visit homes from the first days of the year; if they find the house clean and the '*Haftsin* table' ready, they bring happiness for the household, otherwise sorrow and hardship. Thus, cleanliness serves both material and spiritual purposes. Although Iranian Turks' Nowruz traditions share core elements with universal Nowruz customs and neighbouring cultures, they maintain unique characteristic features. These traditions can be examined under various main headings reflecting their core structure.

Ilahir-Ahir Wednesday (the last Wednesday of the year)

The winter season in the folk calendar was divided into three periods: the 'Great Çile (40 days)', the 'Gray Month (30 days)' and the 'Small Çile (20 days)'. When the retreat period ended, winter was considered driven away, and immediately afterwards the festival month would begin (Rzayeva 2021, 233). During this one-month period, nature, which is seen as a living entity, would relax, the snow would melt, and preparations for summer would commence – a situation not much different from today. According to this folk calendar, the four consecutive Wednesdays within the

Table 1

The place of the last Wednesday of the year in the folk calendar

Wednesday	Element	Folk names	Belief function
1. Wednesday	Water	'Water Wednesday'	Purification, renewal, rejuvenation. Jumping over water, washing the face.
2. Wednesday	Fire	'Fire Wednesday', 'Wednesday with Fire'	Sun-fire cult; lighting the hearth, carrying embers, jumping over fire.
3. Wednesday	Air (Wind)	'Wind Wednesday', 'Ash Wednesday'	The arrival of spring with the wind; nature's awakening, melting of the snow.
4. Wednesday	Earth and Syncretic Integration	'İlaxir Wednesday', 'Axir Wednesday', 'Earth Wednesday', 'News Wednesday'	The steaming of the earth, the completion of resurrection. The unification of all rituals.

Source: Authors' own elaboration from Şimşek (2002, 163–171); Adıgüzel (2006, 146–148); Kalafat (2009, 2–3) and Rzayeva (2021, 235–242).

festival month represent the stages of seasonal awakening (Gaffari 2008, 31–34) (Table 1).

All these stages imitate the sequential revival of the four elements that give life to humans in ancient Central Asian cosmogonies. Water stands out as a symbol of purification and resurrection. Next, fire/sun warms the body and space, cleansing them. Air announces the arrival of spring and the awakening of nature. Finally, the earth awakens under the influence of all these elements and brings forth fertility. The last Wednesday has become the day when the practices scattered across the previous three Wednesdays are performed collectively. On the basis of these explanations, one of the rituals representing the water cult is '*No(w)-usti*', celebrated to mark the arrival of spring (Figure 1). In Ardabil's 'Heft Cheshmeh' (Seven Springs) area, on the last Wednesday of the year, women perform a ritual where they sweep water. Additionally, small stones and old shoes are thrown into the water, and scissors are used in an attempt to 'cut' the water (Heydernejat and Mohammadi Irloo 2023, 42–43).



Figure 1
No(w)-usti ritual in Ardabil.
Source: Ardabil Mcth, 13 March 2024.

In this context, among the Iranian Turks, the night known as '*Axir Çərşənbə*', or the last Wednesday of the year, is celebrated with purification-themed festivities. Children cover their faces and go door-to-door in a tradition called 'spoon stealing', collecting dried nuts or gifts in their plates. Later in the night, young people hang bags from chimneys to gather presents, and wishes are made on street corners. On the last Wednesday of the year, the water cult takes centre stage. Girls go quietly to the riverbank early in the morning to carry water, wash themselves and scatter their belongings, believing this will ensure a clean start to the new year (Kafkasyalı 2010, 156–157).

Fortune-telling practices such as 'door listening', 'lock picking', 'bead dropping' and 'Hafız divination' are used to divine the fate of unmarried girls or to solve problems. In 'bead dropping', symbolic items such as rings or necklaces are placed in a water-filled jug, and verses with poems or prayers are randomly read to predict the future. 'Hafız divination' involves selecting random pages from *Fal-e Hafez* by Hafız-ı Şirazi and interpreting them; it is also practised on Şeb-i Yelda. Another tradition, 'dropping a scarf', involves someone whose fate is 'blocked' lowering a scarf from a roof; if the household places gifts on it, their fate is believed to improve. It is also used in marriage customs: a young man drops his scarf at a girl's house, and if her family places items inside, it signals acceptance of his proposal. This practice is common in cities with large Turkish populations such as Hamedan, Zanjan and Ardabil (Figure 2).

The tradition of painting eggs and knocking them together today as well as on other Nowruz days has

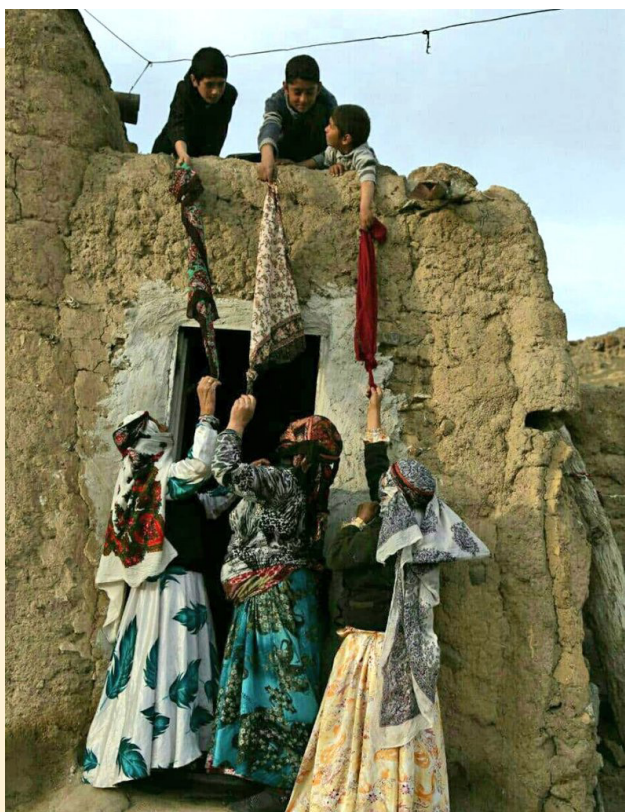


Figure 2
Scarf dropping ritual in Zanjan
Source: YJC, 28 March 2022.

become an established tradition (Gaffari 2008, 36). Large decorative eggs are displayed in city squares, while real eggs are placed on *Haftsin* tables, and the activity turns into a competitive game among children and youth. On the night of the last Wednesday, the fire cult is also observed. Among Iranian Turks, during preparations for Nowruz on 'Od, the red Wednesday', small bundles of twigs are lit outdoors after sunset. People gather around, make wishes and jump over the flames, believing this cleanses

them of illness and misfortune. This act symbolises overcoming fire, a fundamental element of life. After the fire turns to ashes, these are scattered at crossroads to keep negative energies away. Additionally, rue herb is burned as incense and carried through the rooms of the house. Thus, Nowruz morning is welcomed purified from diseases and hardships, with hope for renewal (Miri and Seyyedokht 2021, 33).

***Haftsin* and the harbingers of spring**

Haftsin is a symbolic table tradition based on the ancient belief that the universe was created in seven days. Although it dates to pre-Islamic times, it has been reshaped by Islamic influence while preserving its core function and is still practised at the beginning of spring. Iranian Turks gather around the table at the exact moment of the new year, host guests there, and keep it set until the thirteenth day of Farvardin. On Nowruz night, the eldest member offers wishes for prosperity and peace, after which family members stand, kiss elders' hands and exchange congratulations. The opening of the *haftsin* table across the country begins with a traditional, sometimes varying, prayer celebrating the new year: 'Our Lord who guides hearts and gazes, the Almighty Power who regulates night and day; You are the one who changes years and states. Transform our condition into the best condition.'

On the *haftsin* table, there are seven items whose name starts with the letter 's' (pronounced 'sin' in Arabic), which symbolise life and abundance (Behrami 2016, 58). These are: *sincid*, *sir*, *sumac*, *sirke* (vinegar), *sib*, *sebze* (greens) and *semenu* (Figure 3). *Sincid* is a tea thorn that represents the mind, symbolising respect for thought and doing what is right. *Sir*, as a garlic, symbolises being content and knowing one's limits. *Sumac* stands for patience and not



Figure 3
An example of a *haftsin* table (Hamadan).
Source: Authors' archive, 23 March 2018.



Figure 4
The characters of Ak Koyun–Kara Koyun, Nari Narek and Köse Gelin (Zanjan).
Source: Qashmi and Dehqan (2012).

giving up on what is desired despite all difficulties. Vinegar represents accepting misfortunes and standing strong. *Sib*, which means apple, symbolises health and love as well as fertility. Greens represent happiness and kindness to others, while *semenu* symbolises patience, strength and justice. Additionally, the table includes painted eggs, the Qur'an, coins, dried nuts called *açil*, fruits, candles, mirrors, fish, hyacinths and candlesticks (İbrahimpur 2000, 172–174).

The arrival of spring is not only celebrated by setting the table but is also accompanied by heralds of this good news. Among Iranian Turks, this role is taken on by ritual-based figures such as the 'Sayaçi' and 'Güle Biyabani' (ghoul) (Güldiken 2000, 135; Doğan 2011, 88–89), as well as characters like 'Ak Koyun–Kara Koyun' (White Sheep–Black Sheep), 'Nari Narek', 'Köse Gelin' and 'Tekemçi' (Qashmi and Dehqan 2012, 45–65) (Figure 4).

These herald traditions are still preserved to a limited

extent today, with 'Hacı Firuz' becoming more prominent nationwide, while 'tekemçi' rituals in East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan remain more vibrant. The *tekem* ritual was registered in 2011 on Iran's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List as 'Tekemgerdani' (YJC 2016; Sedayezanjan 2024). In this tradition, *tekemci* performers travel through villages and towns with a decorated male goat figure, singing poems about Nowruz, birth and rebirth to announce the arrival of spring. The 'teke' (male goat) is a wooden figure placed on a base, covered with black goat hair, and draped with red cloth, symbolising vitality. It is based on the mythological symbolism of the goat as an emblem of fertility and abundance. According to the folk calendar, these performances, especially between the last two Wednesdays before Nowruz, announce spring in the form of cultural theatre, and performers receive small gifts (see Qashmi and Dehqan 2012, 45–51) (Figure 5).

The character Hacı Firuz is known for dancing with a tambourine or darbuka in hand and singing poems to

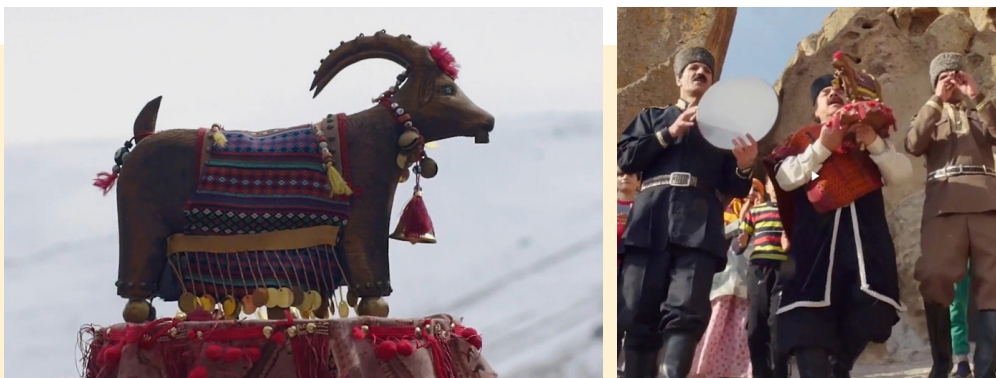


Figure 5
Tekem figure and reciters (Tabriz).
Source: Damaavand (2024).



Figure 6
Symbolic Hacı Firuz (Tehran).
Source: AA (2023).

announce the arrival of Nowruz to the public. His face is painted black, and he wears a special red costume (Figure 6). The red clothing symbolises the coming of spring, while the black face, in newer interpretations, represents winter. According to ancient cultural legends, Hacı Firuz also symbolises the old Iranian kings disguising themselves by changing clothes and mingling with the people.

Sizdeh Beder (thirteenth day, the day of nature)

The thirteenth day of Nowruz is spent outdoors to ward off bad luck, as the number 13 is considered unlucky. This tradition, known as 'throwing out the thirteen', believes that staying inside brings misfortune, so families go to nature, marking the end of the new year cycle. They gather in open spaces, share meals on the grass, and take part in activities such as tug-of-war, poetry reading, music, and egg tapping.

As one of the largest outdoor gatherings, Sizdeh Beder's main ritual involves 'sebzé', the sprouted greens from the *haftsin* table. Young, unmarried people tie the greens into two shoots with seven knots, making wishes with each knot; if the knots unite by evening, their wishes are believed to come true. Finally, the greens, thought to absorb the year's evils, are thrown into flowing water, symbolising the transfer of negativity, similar to James Frazer's 'like produces like' principle in *The golden bough* (Frazer 1984).

The thirteenth day of Farvardin is also linked to mythological origins. Celebrations and rain prayers in the fields, marking the victory of the rain god Tishter

over the drought god, are considered the basis of today's Sizdeh Beder (Hinnells 2008, 36–38). Thus, it reflects a modernised form of this mythic background. Today, families going outdoors, releasing sprouted greens into water, tying knots while making wishes, and picnicking serve both to remove the 'unlucky 13' from the home and to preserve ancient rain rituals dedicated to Tishter. While earlier practices involved gathering in fields and by rivers, this has shifted to parks and streams. Rain prayers for fertility have transformed into releasing greens into water, symbolising returning fertility to the earth, and collective rituals have been replaced by family-based activities such as games, music and shared meals.

In this context, to bring rain and prevent drought, Iranian Turks perform the 'Çömçe Gelin' (Ladle Bride) ceremony during the final days of Nowruz preparations. This ritual serves both as a dramatic performance and a communal gesture of wishing for abundance. Initiated by village elders, a fresh branch is selected, decorated with red and green ribbons symbolising spring, and personified as a 'bride'. The branch is given to a group of young performers. One shakes it rhythmically, another plays two copper spoons, and a third recites quatrains ('*mani*'). As they visit houses, residents join in, repeat the lines, and offer small treats. Afterward, a prayer is recited before the group departs (Gaffari 2008, 28).

From a cultural anthropology perspective, the Çömçe Gelin ritual symbolises the community's hopes for the seasonal cycle of production through a symbolic bride figure made from a living branch, representing the awakening of spring. The clashing of spoons serves to ward off evil spirits, while the practice of going door-to-door encourages resource sharing and renews neighbourhood ties. Thus, the ritual adds a layered social-belief dimension to the cleansing and renewal process before Nowruz, uniting collective consciousness and oral cultural memory in a shared experience.

Culture industry and its relation to the tradition of Nowruz

Culture industry

'Cultural industries' refers to forms of production and consumption with a core symbolic and expressive dimension, combining economic value with social and cultural meanings, while 'creative industries' extends

this framework to broader activities based on creativity, knowledge and innovation. In this sense, they also function as mechanisms through which ICH is produced, reproduced and transmitted (UNESCO and UNDP 2013). The concept of the culture industry was first introduced by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the section titled '*Kulturindustrie – Aufklärung als Massenbetrug*' (Culture industry – enlightenment as mass deception) in their work *Dialectic of enlightenment*. In this section, the authors argue that films, radio and magazines are organised within a single production–distribution network that standardises the cultural sphere and centralises profit motives (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 95). Thus, deliberately distinguished from mass culture, the concept emphasises that culture is produced industrially from above, rather than emerging organically from the grassroots.

In his article 'Culture industry reconsidered', Theodor Adorno elaborates on this framework, stating that the products of the culture industry are produced within predetermined templates, reducing the consumer from the outset to a 'calculated object'. Standardisation and (pseudo)individualisation operate side-by-side, with happy-ending films or three-minute pop songs repeating the same formula in different forms (Adorno 1975, 13–14). Thus, there is an apparent diversity; but in reality, an endless sameness is reproduced. This system also transforms leisure time into an extension of work. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, entertainment functions as a relief offered in exchange for suspending critical thought, operating as a mechanism where technical rationality turns into social domination (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 96). Furthermore, Adorno emphasises that the culture industry generates 'a sense of well-being that the world is already in the way it ought to be', creating 'obedient pleasure' in the audience and thereby suppressing critical judgement before it even arises (Adorno 2007, 119). The audience believes they are making choices but are actually being guided among prearranged options.

Since the 1990s, this debate has expanded from a singular 'culture industry' concept to encompass multiple 'cultural' and 'creative industries'. Justin O'Connor notes that various sectors – from publishing to digital gaming – operate under different revenue models, and that this plurality must be taken into account in both policy and theory (O'Connor 2010, 11). Similarly, Özdemir points out that the literature on cultural economics in the

European Union is divided into clusters such as 'culture industries', 'creative industries' and the 'experience economy', with distinct fields such as fine arts, cultural industries and design–advertising classified according to different copyright and production logics. Therefore, cooperation between culture and economy is a necessary interaction for the sustainable management of intangible heritage. Approaches that focus solely on preservation are insufficient to transfer ICH to future generations; rather, the integration of cultural economy–industry tools such as digital archiving, cultural tourism, creative industries and equitable revenue models is required to establish a sustainable management model (Özdemir 2009, 74–77, 80–85). However, such processes may also involve risks such as decontextualisation and commodification of cultural practices (Hafstein 2009). Indeed, production's integration with innovation to contribute to the creative cultural industries is an unavoidable aspect of the modern cultural economy understanding. In this regard, festivals, traditions and holidays offer the most suitable grounds for applying this necessity. It would be appropriate to say that the cultural industry tools implemented within the scope of the Nowruz traditions of Iranian Turks, which are the subject of this study, align with this requirement.

The contributions of Iranian Turks' Nowruz tradition to the culture industry

Heritage branding and place marketing

Nowruz's status as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage supports city branding by turning Turkish settlements such as East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin and Hamedan into 'festival destinations'. The sites associated with Haftsin, Axir Wednesday and Sizdeh Beder, including *Nowruzgahs*, festival and exhibition halls, markets and open-air venues that contribute to the cultural industry, are incorporated into cultural routes, creating a cultural economy cycle. In this context, the transformation of ritual spaces into cultural routes reflects the broader shift from goods-based economies to service- and experience-oriented economies, where cultural practices function as value-generating assets within the creative economy.

Among these, the term '*Nowruzgah*' has emerged as a general name for spaces where Nowruz-related events, rituals and sales take place. In various parts of cities, Nowruz groups called '*kervan-ı şadi*' (caravan of joy and festivity) parade through the streets, while Nowruz



Figure 7
Exhibition halls Üstat Şehriyar, Pervin İtisami and Emir Kebir in Tabriz province.
Source: Tabriz Fair (n.d.).

ceremonies, festivals and gatherings called ‘*Nowruzgah*’ are held in parks, public spaces or exhibition halls (Mostatab and Ismaili Sangari 2023, 5). *Nowruzgah* spaces not only serve as fixed locations that help transmit local traditions from generation to generation but also contribute to promoting the cultural venues and values of the cities. Thus, these spaces exemplify how ICH is embedded within creative industries as both a carrier of symbolic meaning and a driver of economic activity through tourism and place-based consumption.

Compared to outdoor venues, indoor Nowruz displays are spaces where the culture industry can be more concretely manifested. These include exhibition halls that play a crucial role in making cultural heritage visible by promoting its historical, cultural and aesthetic values, and through province-based branding of heritage, they open up both domestic and international tourism, enabling effective place marketing. Especially during seasonal transition rituals such as Nowruz, halls exhibiting handicrafts, traditional clothing, local culinary products or ritual objects not only provide informational content but also become cultural platforms where a kind of place

identity is constructed. This process corresponds to the ‘commodities’ dimension of creative industries, where traditional cultural expressions are re-presented as curated products and experiences for wider audiences. For example, the multipurpose exhibition halls within the Tabriz International Fair Center stand out as having this function. Halls such as Üstat Şehriyar (3120 m²), Pervin İtisami (6480 m²), Emir Kebir (9144 m²), Settar Han (500 m²), Sehend (1360 m²) and Azerbaijan (1080 m²), each with different sizes, architectural features and technical equipment, enable the organisation of both national and international events (Tabriz Fair n.d.).

Products offered for sale in exhibition and festival halls display a rich variety, where contemporary interpretations of traditional handicrafts merge with seasonal cultural elements. These spaces showcase authentic works from traditional arts specific to various geographical regions of Iran. Alongside handcrafted items made from natural and local raw materials such as ceramics, glass, wood, leather and textiles, craftsmanship examples such as filigree (*telkâri*), illumination (*tezhip*), miniature painting, paper marbling (*ebru*) and resin art attract attention.



Figure 8
Handicrafts at *haftsin* tables (Urmia).
Source: Urmia Fair, 11 March 2019.

Additionally, seasonal handicrafts related to Nowruz, such as plush or fabric 'year-themed toys' designed according to the year's animal symbol, decorative painted eggs, motif-decorated glass fish bowls, and the ornamental greens used in the *haftsin* table, are exhibited. Moreover, homemade sweets, nuts, decorative flowers and thematic souvenirs prepared using traditional methods are sold, reflecting the economic circulation of cultural continuity. Thus, these venues provide environments where both commercial and cultural representation are conveyed spatially. Consequently, the Tabriz fairgrounds have acquired the character of a *Nowruzgah* that reproduces and promotes the city's cultural memory. This situation demonstrates that traditional values are supported through contemporary presentation methods in Tabriz's spatial branding. Accordingly, heritage is not only preserved but also actively reproduced within market-oriented cultural systems, reinforcing both identity construction and economic sustainability.

In contrast, to attract a larger audience and generate greater cultural economic output, these venues need to be supported by design entrepreneurship and showcased not only in exhibition and festival halls but also at multiple locations. An example of this output can be seen in East Azerbaijan province, where approximately US\$1.5 million worth of handicraft sales were reported across 55 marketplace and exhibition sites established for the 2023 Nowruz events (Eachto 2023a). Similarly, in Qazvin province, around US\$4.75 million in sales were recorded during the 2025 Nowruz celebrations, which included 30 marketplaces and 50 workshops (Qazvinmcth 2025). These figures indicate that handicraft and design initiatives during the Nowruz period provide significant cash flow

to the local economy, and workshop-based experiences (such as live production and sales in workshops) notably increase sales volume. Such data further support the argument that creative industries, particularly those rooted in cultural heritage, contribute to income generation, employment and regional development, positioning festivals like Nowruz within the broader dynamics of the creative economy.

Performing arts and the entertainment industry

Performing arts and the entertainment sector, when supported by the right dynamics, constitute the strongest ground where tradition and cultural economy can meet. Indeed, trust is built through associations based on belief in and respect for tradition. Rituals embedded in collective memory, symbolic narratives and mythical figures especially reinforce the sense of trust by creating familiarity and emotional bonds with the audience through staging and enactment. This sense of trust increases participation in cultural events, turning the experience from a momentary one into sustainable cultural interaction and production. At this point, the concept of 'recyclable cultural industry' gains importance. Traditional contents are reinterpreted and blended with contemporary narratives, and circulated repeatedly in different media such as stage, digital platforms and tourism, thereby simultaneously ensuring cultural continuity and economic transformation.

In this context, the egg sculptures placed in the square during the egg-painting festival held in Hamedan province in 2018 are a good example of initiatives that support performing arts and the entertainment economy. These egg



Figure 9
Painted egg figures that are displayed in the squares (Hamadan).
Source: Authors' archive, 18 March 2018.

figures, which highlight the urban dimension of Nowruz's theme of rebirth and welcoming spring, as seen in [Figure 9](#), serve as a kind of showcase displaying local food culture through colourful motifs and mythological references. The pink-and-white flowering branches on a blue background evoke memories of fruits and flowers that come to life with spring, while the saz player figure dressed in traditional clothing refers to the *âşık* (folk minstrel) storytellers and mythological characters of spring festivals. The fruit-laden branches where a red-breasted bird is perched symbolise the cycle of abundance, while the egg decorated with fish and plant patterns visually unites the red fish and egg of the *haftsin* table, representing the main elements of Nowruz tables.

Another example supporting the culture industry by referencing tradition is the *âşık* tradition, which was included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2009 through an initiative by Türkiye (UNESCO 2009). Indeed, *âşık* performances increase the accessibility of street shows through festivals and digital content platforms. Thanks to these performances, public participation is achieved as part of the entertainment sector, adding cultural economic value. The transformation of performances into video content increases their viewership on digital platforms and generates advertising revenue through sharing. Performances that begin in public spaces reach wide audiences via digital platforms that are integrated into businesses' cultural presentations and contribute to local development. This transition from live performance to digital dissemination reflects the expansion of creative industries across media platforms, where cultural production intersects with technology, intellectual property and new market structures.

Another creative cultural industry model contributing to the cultural economy involves initiatives that directly



Figure 10
Âşık performance in Nowruz week in the East Azerbaijan Maraga.
 Source: Narmkhabar, 8 April 2025.



Figure 11
 A ritualistic-themed female-costumed mascot (Hamadan).
 Source: Authors' archive, 18 March 2018.

increase profit margins in commercial transactions. In the example shown in [Figure 11](#), a mascot dressed in traditional costume guides customers to shop at a local store. This cloth doll figure, which brings together the entertainment sector and tradition, serves as a key accessory in rain-invoking rituals in many cultures, especially among Iranian Turks. Thus, by evoking figures from traditional rain-requesting rituals such as the 'Çömçe Gelin', it makes a subconscious reference to the seasonal fertility myth and creates an emotionally charged commercial space focused on abundance. This creativity symbolises the economic transformation achieved by re-functionalising cultural heritage within the cultural industry. In this respect, traditional symbols are recontextualised as market-oriented cultural assets, demonstrating how cultural industries incorporate heritage into commercial strategies while preserving their symbolic meanings.

Digital culture and marketing

Nowruz-themed TV programs, animations and social media content nurture digital culture by generating data, while ritual accessories such as the *haftsin* table are transformed into visual and virtual packages on e-commerce sites and incorporated into marketing strategies. Ritual objects thus shift from embedded cultural signifiers towards components of creative value chains, where symbolic meaning becomes a source of exchange value through processes of digital reproduction,

circulation and commercialisation. Among the areas where media, digital culture and marketing objectives intersect most prominently are the widely used posters in Iran. The prominence of posters in this context reflects the persistence of visual communication as a key interface between traditional symbolism and contemporary marketing practices, enabling cultural motifs to be rearticulated within modern promotional economies. Promotional posters prepared for Nowruz festivals serve the function of merging the visual economy of the digital age. When combined with websites and social media platforms like Telegram, it becomes clear that these events represent a new media-based cultural industry practice. Digital environments operate here as structuring systems that organise attention, visibility and circulation, allowing cultural content to gain economic relevance through networked dissemination and platform-based engagement.

The posters are designed with a simple and recognisable aesthetic that appeals to visual memory and is suitable for digital circulation. Such design strategies enhance memorability and shareability, key conditions for the circulation of cultural content within digital economies structured by visual recognition and rapid consumption. Looking at the poster design prepared for the 2024 Nowruz festival in Urmia (Figure 12), one can see objects used on the *haftsin* table such as eggs, goldfish, sprouts, sugar, sweets, apples, pomegranates, flowers,



Figure 12
Nowruz festival poster in Urmia.
Source: Urmia Fair (n.d.). Seasonal holiday economy and experience market

butterflies, birds, vinegar, garlic and sumac. The selection and arrangement of these elements reflect a deliberate encoding of cultural symbols into visual language, allowing complex ritual meanings to be condensed into accessible and reproducible design forms. This clearly demonstrates that the symbolic codes of Nowruz can be transformed into design, allowing creative craftsmanship to be commercialised. Symbolic repertoires undergo abstraction and recomposition as visual units, enabling their circulation across platforms and their incorporation into branding logics in which cultural meaning and market value become structurally intertwined.

The two-week period created by the thirteen-day holiday directly affects domestic travel, accommodation, and food and beverage expenditures. The temporal concentration of consumption within a limited festive period intensifies economic activity, positioning seasonal rituals as catalysts for short-term but high-density market dynamics. In particular, the practice of collective outings on the thirteenth day supports daily income models. Such practices embed economic exchange within ritualised social behaviour, allowing everyday consumption to be reconfigured as culturally meaningful participation. In this regard, as seen in Table 2, the statistical data for the provinces of Golestan, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan and Hamedan is strong during the Nowruz periods. According to official records for 2023 in East Azerbaijan, 312,000 people stayed in hotels and guesthouses, and a total of 1.3 million people stayed in all types of accommodation across the province (Eachto 2023b). In 2025, the number of visitors reached 3.2 million (Eachto 2025). When it comes to Ardabil, the

Table 2
Number of visitors during Nowruz, 2025 (millions)

Some provinces inhabited by Turks	Number of visitors
Golestan	9
West Azerbaijan	3,3
East Azerbaijan	3,2
Ardabil	2,6
Zanjan	1,25
Hamadan	1,23

Source: Authors' own compilation from Golestan Mcth (2025), Irna (2025a), Eachto (2025), Ardabil Mcth 2025, Irna (2025b) and Isna (2025).

number of visitors reached 2.6 million in 2025 with visits to various sites such as the Sheikh Safi Complex (Ardabil MctH 2025). These data show that, although short-term, Nowruz improves the service rating and economy of the two provinces, creating a significant flow of income in the local transportation, accommodation and guiding sectors. Tourism mobility during this period reveals how cultural calendars function as structuring mechanisms for regional economies, synchronising demand across multiple service sectors.

However, these constitute direct economic inputs. The gains and contributions obtained through the cultural industry become apparent in experience-based applications. At this level, value creation extends beyond material transactions towards staged and curated experiences that transform participation into an economic resource. Since the 1990s, festivals have created a new market that has grown by turning regular cultural production into a 'special event'. This market has been termed 'festivalisation' or 'festivalism' (see Jordan 2016, 44–50). Festivalisation reframes recurring cultural practices as temporally bounded and thematically intensified events, increasing their capacity to attract audiences and generate revenue through experiential differentiation. The logic of the experience economy in festivals, which encourages audience participation through thematic activities, directly overlaps with the Nowruz traditions of Iranian Turks. Here, participation is not limited to observation but evolves into embodied engagement, where visitors actively consume atmosphere, performance and cultural interaction as part of an integrated experience economy.

For example, in Tehran, the capital where a large portion of the Turkish population in Iran resides, a study was conducted on one of the busiest shopping centres that featured a festival. The main theme of the festival was the Nowruz shopping that takes place between the 15th of Esfand and the 15th of Farvardin, with discount campaigns in stores and restaurants generating economic activity. Accompanying this were Haji Firuz performances, the Bahr Tavil theatre play, music concerts, traditional puppet shows and live music performances, which added an experiential dimension to the festival (Zandiyeh et al. 2024, 47–50). When all these elements are considered together, this Nowruz celebration stands out as a strong example of new-generation urban festivals where services, tourism and cultural content are intertwined. A multicultural environment was created in which different social groups,



Figure 13
The Kajaveh tradition of the Turkmens (Golestan).
Source: Golestan, 28 March 2022.

including Turks living in Tehran, were both represented and interacted in a single space; the seasonal holiday was transformed into an experiential market.

Another example can be seen in the 2022 Nowruz events held in Golestan, a region inhabited by Turkmen groups in Iran. These events took place at various locations within the Gonbad-e Kavus district. By aligning the events with the official 13-day Nowruz holiday period, the aim was to stimulate domestic tourism. The synchronisation of local cultural programming with national holiday timing reflects strategic alignment between cultural scheduling and tourism-driven economic planning. The events featured traditions such as the *kajavah*, a decorated palanquin used to carry the bride on a horse or camel in Turkmen weddings, handicrafts such as embroidery by women from the Sistani ethnic group, and local sports activities such as wrestling. In this way, visitors were offered content they could not only observe but 'directly experience'. Additionally, the open preparation and serving of local culinary products promoted the region's gastronomic heritage while strengthening sensory experience marketing alongside other elements. Furthermore, the fact that these events took place in a village-level settlement like Sarjeh Kor highlighted the potential of rural tourism in the context of seasonal holidays. The localisation of experiential production in rural settings expands the spatial scope of the cultural economy, integrating peripheral areas into broader tourism and cultural industry networks. In this regard, it is possible to state that the festival in the Turkmen village has become not just a holiday celebration

but a qualified experiential centre adding cultural content to seasonal tourism (Golestan 2022).

Conclusion

This study, which reveals the contributions of the culture industry to intangible cultural heritage through fieldwork and literature reviews based on the example of Nowruz among Iranian Turks, shows that Nowruz is not merely a traditional calendar milestone within Iranian Turkic communities; rather, it has become a creative-cultural economy that nurtures design, tourism, digital media and performing arts. Therefore, the findings related to Nowruz among Iranian Turks demonstrate how traditional elements are re-functionalised within the logic of the culture industry. As seen in the examined examples, historical-cultural symbols have ceased to be mere folkloric representations and have been reinterpreted through creative additions in urban squares, digital platforms, commercial spaces and thematic venues.

A ritual-based plant like *semenu* moves beyond being merely a table decoration on the *haftsin* spread to become an aesthetic exhibition object inside a glass aquarium, thereby finding new market opportunities in festival and exhibition halls as well as online gift platforms. In this way, an intangible tradition, holiday and festival symbol evolves into a design-focused product, opening up to both spatial and digital markets. Similarly, painted Nowruz

eggs are enlarged in scale using lighting and sculptural techniques, transformed through the art of placement in urban squares (installation art), turning into objects that support the festival economy.

The *Çömçe Gelin* figure, which stands out more for its cultural heritage value than as a mere object, transcends its symbolic role in rain-requesting rituals and becomes part of experience-based marketing strategies as a costumed mascot in hotel lobbies and shopping centres, thus combining traditional belief with a touristic brand identity.

The performers of the *âşık* (folk minstrel) tradition, a living ICH made more tangible through its living human treasures, have been incorporated into institutionalised festival programs beyond the '*şadlık*' (merriment/rejoicing) rituals. Thus, culture bearers participate in the creative industry cycle by adhering to program schedules, costumes and accessories according to contracts that provide them income for their performances.

All these findings show that traditional products/productions or the tradition itself are transferred to the experience economy through creative additions/industry; that culture can be transformed into sustainable sources of income thanks to its spatial, digital and thematic diversity; and that this has gained wide application among Iranian Turks. 🇮🇷

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